

Firestorm - A Karin Roland Mystery

Chapter One

Colonel James Perrison, USA, (Retired) was enjoying a quiet evening in his Cascade Mountain get-away 'cabin' when a special news bulletin interrupted Mark Harmon relating one of his 'rules' on NCIS. James stared at the TV screen with horror as the latest news from Afghanistan was being broadcast. The camera panned on a long line of Taliban holding up the US made rifles and cheering as a confiscated helicopter attempted to take off from the tarmac in the background. There were buildings burning beyond the tarmac.

But it wasn't the sight of the fires, helicopter, rifles or other equipment that caused the retired Army officer to panic, it was the fact that this ruffraff were all shod in the latest in military desert footwear. James jumped up from the leather love seat and picked up his phone off the kitchen island.

Quickly scrolling through his contact list and finding the number, he hit the green button, all the while quietly swearing and whispering, "pick up, pick up".

"Clayton Industries, Kyle Turner speaking."

James almost shouted in response. "Kyle, thank god you're still in. I'm watching the news. Tell me we got paid for that last shipment of boots to the Afghans."

"Colonel Perrison? I'm certain we did but let me check." Kyle Turner hated that he had to address Perrison by his Army rank. It seemed so damn pretentious on Perrison's part, but that's the way his boss required everyone to address him; as if you couldn't swing a dead cat and hit a thousand retired colonels, generals, admirals, and other assorted brass here in the Beltway. All of them using their former rank and connections to sell the military and our allies with all the gear and weapons needed and not needed. "Oh well," Kyle thought to himself, "it pays my bills."

Turner finished typing the query on his computer and within seconds the answer came back.

"Yes, Colonel, that's confirmed. Payment was received Tuesday via wire transfer. We're good as gold."

James sighed out loud. He didn't know how he would have explained to the Clayton Industries Board of Directors if the two million dollars never showed up.

"That's great. G'night" He pressed the red 'End' button before Kyle had a chance to reply. On the other end of the call, when Kyle realized that his boss had hung up, the Colonel didn't hear Kyle mumble, "What a rude piece of shit."

James Perrison went back to the love seat and continued watching as the scene switched to the chaos as thousands of people tried to climb the fence before the last American plane left the airport.

Meanwhile, approximately two hundred and fifty miles south-south-west of where James Perrison watched the cluster-fuck in Afghanistan unfold, Karin Roland watched the same scenes but with an entirely different perspective. The last time the Taliban controlled that country two planes crashed into the Twin Towers, killing a few thousand civilians and four of her friends - two police officers and two fire fighters. Five years later, as Karin led a raid on a New York based terrorist cell, she lost a leg in the ensuing exchange of gunfire.

Karin shook her head thinking about all the strides Afghan women have made over the past two decades, allowed to be educated and given some semblance of basic rights; now those gains were in jeopardy. Karin moved closer to her husband Bill and felt a little better as his arm went over her shoulder and he squeezed her tight to his breast.

James Perrison rarely thought of anyone other than himself and watched, thinking the fall of Kabul as a ‘good news – bad news’ scenario, at least from his perspective. The good news? He wouldn’t have to spend another day in that hellhole trying to sell them more gear. The bad news? The cash spigot will turn off, at least from that country. For the last five years, Afghanistan has been Clayton Industries’ best customer and James Perrison the exclusive Clayton representative in that part of the world; trading on the contacts he made while he served in the Army. Now what?

Or rather, now where? Which third world country has the capacity to make up the difference in sales? He had already made some contacts in Southeast Asia that may pan out. But maybe it was time to retire a second time and concentrate on his land development project. There wasn’t a better time to finish subdividing his grandfather’s land and making some real money – enough to buy a decent yacht and go sailing for the rest of his life. Not bad for a guy just shy of fifty.

The whole thing got him thinking; Perrison turned the TV off and walked down the hall, unlocked the door to his home office, poured himself an eighteen-year-old Scotch, and leaned over the map on his desk one more time. Four hundred-sixty acres in the Mitalkwi Valley originally settled by his grandfather, passed down to his mother and now inherited by James with the passing of his mother. Four hundred-sixty acres ready to be divided into twenty-acre exclusive parcels, each priced at least at a mil-two. Even after taxes and paying off all the bribes, enough to tell anyone and everyone to ‘kiss-my-ass’.

(The name ‘Mitalkwi’ has an interesting origin. It’s the Yakima Nation word for ‘Wednesday’. When the first white settlers hired Yakima scouts to help guide them, their party came to the confluence of the Columbia and this river. As they passed the river heading north, the lead scout pointed to the river valley and said they would return on Wednesday to explore the valley after proceeding up the Columbia. As they pointed, the lead scout said, “Mitalkwi” meaning the day they planned to return, the white settlers assumed the scout was giving them the name of the river – the name stuck.)

The town of Wolford’s earliest white settlers were trappers, loggers and miners. Most logging has been shut down and the gold mines played out. There’s copper in the mountains, but little sentiment among the new, wealthy valley residents to tear up the countryside to get to it. Any hunting done now is almost exclusively deer hunters chasing the ubiquitous white tails that haven’t already ended up stuck to the front bumpers of the SUVs charging up and down the highway.

As wealthy Seattleites moved in, built resorts and second homes, the price of land skyrocketed. It’s always difficult to predict when any land values have peaked, but Perrison considered all the current indicators and he thought prices were, if not at the peak, at least within ninety percent of it; good enough for him to sell out and vanish. The Covid crisis was drawing more people from the westside of the Cascade Mountains to consider living here on the eastside, especially now that so many techies can work remotely from home.

The local Citizens’ Council was doing its best to contribute to the scarcity of available plots through their lobbying efforts. The current minimum lot in the Valley is five acres and it would soon be twenty if the Council has its way. Before you know it, there won’t be many working-class people left in the Valley. Just as in Aspen, Telluride and

Park City, the maids, waiters and other workers will need to be bussed in from miles away because they won't be able to afford living here.

The wildfires this summer almost threw all his plans into disarray, but Providence once again shined down on the Colonel. Although thousands of acres were consumed by the fires and portions of both sides of the valley were evacuated, no homes were lost in the fires – the firefighters did a tremendous job holding the lines – and people's memories were short. The fires of 2014 and 2015 were already distant memories and soon, so would the fires of 2021.

If anything, the summer's fires increased the value of his four hundred plus acres because not a single Perrison tree was lost to the fires.

All the lifelong privileges bestowed on James Perrison did not make him a good man. His grandfather was only half joking when he claimed his grandson was born under a bad sign. Sally Perrison, nee Miller, gave birth to Daniel Perrison's only son while Daniel was still stationed in Korea on August 6, 1974, the very day Richard Nixon resigned the Presidency to avoid the embarrassment of being impeached.

Grandpa Miller insisted on one thing as the boy grew up – young James would attend West Point and serve for at least the minimum years required of a West Point graduate. It was either that or the boy could kiss any inheritance away. That's how James, a self-centered, entitled bastard, found his eighteen-year-old ass on the train platform kissing his mother good-bye one late June morning on his way to Cadet Basic Training. Few, if any, of James' high school classmates were sorry to see him leave town.

James found his niche in the Army, although not without a few controversies. In 2000, feeling full of himself after his promotion to Captain and following in the footsteps of the then-current Commander-in-Chief, James was reprimanded for convincing one of the female civilians working on base to perform oral sex in his office. James was lucky to escape with only a verbal tongue lashing from his superior officer. Unfortunately, his wife Laurie, pregnant with their first child, didn't accept the transgression with the same 'stand-by-your-man' attitude as the First Lady. Laurie divorced him and moved back to Philadelphia to give birth to their daughter, Geena, and raise her as a single mother.

James, in all probability, would have ignored the birth of his daughter if not for his mother Sally Perrison - "I WILL be part of my granddaughter's life – no ifs, ands, or buts". His mother's insistence guaranteed James Perrison would be eternally tied to his ex-wife, the woman who dumped him because of one lousy blowjob (well, at least the only time he was caught!), so that his mother could be a part of Geena's life.

In 2003, eleven years after stepping onto that train that took him to West Point, Major James Perrison stepped off a C-17 onto the tarmac at one of the base camps in the Northern Zone in Iraq; ready to assume his duties as camp supply officer.

Iraq is where James Perrison met Sgt. Alexander Crawford. If James merely skirted the fringes of immorality prior to this meeting, Alexander Crawford held the pen for James to sign the Faustian bargain and complete his descent into hell.

Prior to James' arrival, Crawford was skimming small quantities of supplies and selling whatever he could to locals willing to pay for American rifles, footwear, and other gear. It was a low-key operation until the new officer in charge of supplies came through the door. It took the Major less than a week to understand there were unaccounted shortages and when he dug deeper, concluded Sgt. Crawford was responsible for the thefts.

Perrison was leery when approaching Alex Crawford with his suspicions. He had no definite proof and Crawford was a 6'3" 240-pound mountain of a man who had a reputation as a mean son of a bitch with whom even most base MPs were afraid to tangle. Some suspected that it was Crawford who was responsible for the last supply officer's untimely death, the man Perrison was replacing. One brave MP took it upon himself to search Sgt. Crawford's locker in hope of finding the officer's onyx handled Colt .45, a gift from the officer's grandfather. But the search proved fruitless, the .45 was never found.

As Perrison and Crawford sat sizing each other up, Crawford came to the realization that his new commanding officer was no 'boy scout' like the last one. No, Perrison wasn't a hero and showed every sign of being corruptible. Crawford came right out with it. "How would you like to supplement your pay by a few thousand a month?"

Perrison was surprised by the question, but as Crawford outlined his current operation and how he could expand, given the right commanding officer, Perrison grew intrigued. Crawford had more trouble negotiating the split of the proceeds than convincing Perrison to take part in the larceny.

For the next two years materials flowed out of the supply room and money flowed into the two men's pockets. Everyone expects a certain amount of 'shrinkage' in any such military operation, Sgt. Crawford had somehow worked out how to exceed anyone's expectations without being caught. The operation wasn't without its dangers, not only the danger of being caught and ending up in Fort Leavenworth, but each exchange of materials for cash carried its own danger. A good percentage of each transaction was syphoned off paying the soldiers guarding the exchange from going sideways. Despite the extraordinary expenses of larceny in the war zone, both Perrison and Crawford left Iraq with a couple hundred thousand in their offshore accounts.

Ten years later, the two men retired within a year of each other. When Perrison began working for the defense contractor, Clayton Industries, he contacted Alex Crawford and offered him a job in their Security Department. Crawford traveled with Perrison as his bodyguard and wasn't above extraneous tasks when the rewards outweighed the risks.

Chapter Two

"Are you seeing Geena tonight?" Anthony Roland hoped his voice disguised the envy he felt as he asked the question.

Ted Harris looked up from packing his day pack to answer Anthony's question. "Yeah, her father's out of town; so don't expect me back tonight. I'll see you at work in the morning."

"Don't be late." Anthony tried to sound threatening. "We're supposed to head up Four-Mile Creek to check out that report of an illegal campsite first thing in the morning. If you don't show I'll have to take Morgan; I'll never forgive you if you stick me with spending a full day with that blowhard."

Ted almost laughed at the thought of Anthony and Morgan spending the day together, but decided it was best not to piss off his roommate. Morgan was one of the full-timers, a complete jerk and know-it-all. There wasn't one forest ranger, summer help or full-timer, who could spend more than a few hours with Morgan. How he kept his job was a miracle of public employment. For every nine hard working, dedicated Forest Service employees, there was one lazy, inept Morgan who was almost impossible to get rid of.

"I'll be there, don't worry. But you'll have to drive to the trail head; I plan to be up late tonight." Ted grinned, as he teased Anthony with the inference that he'd be busy with Geena until late. He knew it was mean, he just couldn't help himself.

Looking down on his roommate, Ted asked, “So, what are you up to tonight? Another book?” Ted never knew a guy who read as many books as Anthony. The kid must read two or three books a week. And not just trashy paperbacks, this guy reads Tolstoy, Conrad, even Faulkner. Who does that?

“My dad sent me this draft of my mom’s detective novel. I’m supposed to read it and give her some feedback.”

Ted knew Anthony’s mother was some kind of detective. One night last month Anthony started bragging how his mom had helped break up a terrorist cell in New York years ago and how she helped catch a wife and her lover after they murdered the husband. It was an interesting story; Ted wasn’t certain it was true until he Googled the story and read about a Karin Roland in an online news article covering the trial of the two murderers.

“So, is this about that guy that got murdered down in Portland?” Ted asked.

“No, Mom’s trying to write a novel, it’s fiction.”

“Well, don’t stay up too late. Remember, you’re driving in the morning.” Ted picked up his backpack and headed out the door with a happy, “See ya” without sticking around to hear his roommate’s angry response.

Anthony laughed at himself, recognizing the futility of swearing at a closed door. But, hell, it felt good to let it out. He also knew that it wasn’t Ted’s fault that Anthony would be sitting home alone without his girlfriend.

As he sat, staring into space, Anthony resisted the urge to call Lisa. “Talk about acting like a desperate, broken, heart-sick boy!” he thought to himself. He put the phone down, instead he picked up a red pen and the three-hundred loose leaf printed pages of his mother’s novel and began to read.

Their first college year apart was difficult for the two, Lisa attended Stanford while Anthony was studying Forest Management at Eastern Oregon University. Both had counted on spending this summer reconnecting; until two things disrupted their plans.

First, the opportunity of a lifetime presented itself; Anthony was offered a paid summer internship with the U.S. Forest Service. When Anthony was directed to report to the Forest Service office in North Central Washington, near the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, he found a waitressing job for Lisa in the little tourist town of Wolford.

Lisa seemed excited to join Anthony, until Lisa’s father came through with a job offer at his Portland law firm which paid double what Lisa could expect as a waitress. Add that to the work experience she’d gain and the guilt trip ‘Daddy’ laid on Lisa regarding the cost of tuition at Stanford; and voila – here’s to Anthony’s summer of loneliness.

Mr. Collin’s intervention of their summer plans to reconnect wasn’t the first time he disrupted their youthful romance. Midway through their freshman year, when they were both home for the Christmas break, Daddy Collins made it clear he felt they should date others while attending their respective schools.

“I know you two are in love, but you’re both too young to make a lifelong commitment. You both need to see other people while you’re at school. You need to experience everything college life has to offer – and that includes dating other people. You’re missing out on half of what college has to offer.”

Mr. Collins didn’t understand the damage he did with this statement and his subsequent interruption of their summer plans. If Lisa and Anthony ever made it past his roadblocks and eventually married, he just made a lifetime enemy of his future son-in-law.

Anthony was initially puzzled by Lisa's acquiescence to her father's demands, but his father said it best. "Son, you can't ask a nineteen-year-old girl to sever ties to her family. It's not fair to her; the best you can do is show her you understand her position in this and support her. No one knows what will happen; I'm not going to trivialize your heartbreak and tell you that you'll find someone else, or that it's for the best; but I am going to demand that you not fall apart. Don't go back to school and start drinking, smoking weed or whatever. You're too strong a person to let this turn you into something you're not."

Anthony and Lisa spent New Year's Eve together; but something had changed, there was a disconnect between the two high school lovers that hadn't been there before. Anthony couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't misinterpreting what Lisa expected of him. Was he supposed to fight for her, tell her father his ultimatum was unacceptable? In the end, they kissed while wishing each other a Happy New Year before Anthony drove home.

Back at school, Anthony dated a few girls, friendly dates getting pizza or going to a movie, nothing romantic. Lisa and Anthony exchanged emails during the Spring term, but neither mentioned activities with the opposite sex, so Anthony had no idea if Lisa was obeying her father by dating. He was especially pleased when Lisa agreed to spend the summer with him – until 'Daddy' nixed that plan. Twice this summer he drove to Portland to visit her; both weekends were strained. Now, with less than a month before they would be heading back to their respective schools to start their sophomore years, they planned one last weekend together before the Fall term, Anthony would use that weekend to settle most of the questions swirling around his head.

Chapter Three

Ted sat up against the bolster of Geena's bed, waiting for his heart rate to return to normal. "Damn!" was about all he could get out as he looked at the naked vision lying on her stomach. Never had Ted been lucky enough to bed a woman who combined such physical beauty with uninhibited sexual gusto. What's the saying? She gives as good as she gets? She certainly gave it to Ted this evening. They spent the past two hours making love, ending the last session with Geena begging Ted to stop.

It was time to take a break. What a treat to have this 'cabin' to themselves all night. It was at least ten-thousand square feet with six bedrooms, each with its own en-suite bath. That didn't include the huge game room and Mr. Perrison's private office. Ted took great pleasure in walking around the house wearing only his jeans. It made him feel as if he almost belonged here.

As Ted leaned over, trying to find a decent ale in the giant refrigerator, Geena snuck up and goosed him. Ted wheeled around, ready to bitch her out, but held his tongue when he saw she hadn't bothered to put anything over that bodacious body.

Geena laughed as she watched Ted's eyes devour her nakedness. "That's for the spanking you gave me; my ass is bright red. Lucky you're the only one to see how you've abused me." The pout in her voice was so damn cute that Ted thought he'd get hard just hearing it.

"How come your father never has any decent beer in the house?"

"Because he only drinks Scotch." Geena answered.

"I never acquired a taste for Scotch."

"That's because you never had the good stuff. Dad only drinks the eighteen-year-old and older."

"It almost sounds sexual when you put it like that. Where does he keep it?"

"Dad keeps the good stuff in his office; but the door is always locked."

Ted walked over to the office door and examined the doorknob. "This should be a cinch to open."

Geena was right behind him, drinking a glass of Merlot. "Well, don't get caught. Don't drink more than a few fingers, otherwise he'll know you were in there and I'll be the one who hears about it. Even the housekeeper isn't allowed in there unless Dad's in the room."

Ted pulled the Swiss army knife out of his pants' pocket and the long pick made short work of the door lock. Ted found the light switch and looked at the room. "Damn, what I wouldn't give to have a room like this someday!"

"Remember what I said, no more than a couple fingers of his Scotch. I'm going up to fill the tub. Why don't you join me?"

Ted found the liquor cabinet. "I'll be up in a few minutes."

After pouring a small taste of the liquor and deciding it was much better than the cheap Scotch he once had at a frat party, Ted poured three fingers into the glass and began to survey the room. Photos of Geena's father in uniform with other servicemen sat on the fireplace mantle. There were two elk heads with huge antlers on the wall one on either side of the fireplace. Even to Ted's unsophisticated eyes, the leather sofa, matching chairs and ottoman all reeked of money, these were no cheap Chinese pieces.

On the wall opposite the fireplace stood a beautiful gun cabinet. A switch was on the side and when Ted turned on the light he saw the shotguns and rifles through the glass in the door. To his surprise the door opened, but the guns were locked in place with a steel bar held by a biometric fingerprint scanner. Like everything else in the room, the guns were obviously expensive.

This would always be the tough part of Ted's decision to pursue a career in the Forest Service – he'd never be rich enough to afford the finer things in life. He was twenty-four years old and although he owned a nice Jeep, he rented a small cabin that required him to share the space with a series of roommates; currently Anthony, the twenty-year-old college kid interning here for the summer. Most of his roommates, including Anthony, were decent people, but still, he'd never own all this.

"Oh well" he said it out loud before taking another sip of the excellent liquid gold. He walked over to Mr. Perrison's desk and ran his hand along the edge. The desk was at least eight feet wide and five feet deep, the top of the desk was covered with maps and folders.

Ted took a quick look at the top map and recognized it as a surveyor's map of the private lands that abutted the National Forest, including the area where the Perrison's cabin sat. He knew the land was privately owned, but never knew until now that the land was all owned by the Perrison family. Ted had little doubt what he was looking at, Perrison was planning to subdivide the land into almost twenty parcels. Ted pulled his phone out of his pocket and took a picture of the maps.

The folder held more interesting information. He didn't have time to read each page, but it was obvious Mr. Perrison was paying off local politicians and citizens' groups to help him with his plans. Ted continued to take photos of the documents until Geena rushed into the room wearing a bath robe.

"Ted, get out of here! Dad just called to tell me he's five minutes from coming home. He didn't want me to be scared when he came in the door. You have to get dressed!"

Geena ran out of the room just as fast as she entered it. Ted did his best to put the maps and papers back on the desk the way he found them. He looked around the room – was there anything else he moved? Was the liquor

cabinet door closed? He turned out the light, locked and closed the office door and ran up the stairs to get dressed. As he entered Geena's room, he had to ask, "I thought your father was out of town, what happened?"

Putting on a sundress, Geena answered, "Hell if I know, I didn't ask. I was too busy trying to get off the phone so I could warn you. What were you doing down there, anyway? I told you to join me in the bathtub! And what are you going to do with that glass?"

"Shit, I don't know. Maybe I can sneak it out of here in my daypack."

The two of them finished dressing and made it downstairs and turned on the television just before they heard the garage door open, then close. One minute later, James Perrison walked into the house carrying his suitcase and a briefcase. Geena got up from the sofa and gave her father a hug.

"Daddy, I thought you were staying overnight in Seattle."

James looked at his daughter's boyfriend who was rising from the sofa. "Obviously" was all he said before Ted reached out his hand.

"Good evening Mr. Perrison."

"Hello Todd." Whether James called him 'Todd' on purpose or if he just didn't know would never be answered.

"Daddy, this is Ted, not Todd."

James Perrison did not apologize. "I need a drink." Is all he said before walking to his office and unlocking the door. Ted held his breath as his girlfriend's father left the den.

The first thing Perrison noticed was the missing glass. There were always eight glasses on the shelf above the cabinet. He checked the small dishwasher below the wet bar and it was empty. He looked around the room and cursed himself. How could he be so damn stupid? How could he have left the maps and that file out? "Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Perrison stood looking at the items on the desk. Had anyone been snooping? If so, who? Now he had to decide how to play this. Confront Geena and that boy ranger? Or keep it close to the vest and try to find out who knew what? There was no doubt someone rifled through the papers, but who?

Perrison grabbed his drink and headed back to the den, sitting across from the two. He grabbed the remote and turned the television off.

"How was your day Geena?"

Geena's reply was full of bubble, her typical reaction anytime her father paid any attention to her. "I spent the afternoon with Maria. She taught me how to make those enchiladas you love. They're in the refrigerator. I was going to serve them when you came home tomorrow."

Geena's reply told him what he needed to know. Geena was not the one who went through his papers.

"I'm going to get a refill. Ted, would you like a drink?"

Ted was shocked by the question, but was able to reply, "No sir, maybe I should get going."

"Nonsense Ted. Please stay. It would be nice to get to know Geena's friend." Perrison stood and went back into his office. He poured another Scotch and made a phone call.

Perrison returned to the den with two glasses in his hand.

"I know you said 'no' to a drink, but you really should try this Scotch, Ted." He handed the drink to Ted and moved his glass forward to a toast. Ted's shaking hand did not escape his attention. The conversation that followed was truly bizarre. Mr. Perrison, who never exchanged ten words with Ted in the past, asked him questions about his work, his past studies and his home life, all the time pretending to be interested in what Ted had to say.

After an hour and a half, Mr. Perrison's phone made a quiet buzz, he checked his phone and within five minutes excused himself.

"Well, I've had a long day with too many miles driven. I was two-thirds the way to my meeting when I received the call that the meeting was cancelled. If Seattle wasn't such a hellhole with all the homeless downtown I would have gone anyway. But no way I'm spending an evening walking around downtown trying to avoid human waste on the sidewalks." Geena had heard the speech a hundred times, ever since the 'summer of love' last year but didn't let Daddy see her eyes roll.

"Goodnight Geena" he said as he bent over to kiss her forehead. "Goodnight Ted. Drive careful on the way home tonight." Making it clear that Ted would not be spending the night with Geena as planned. And Ted would have to wait until tomorrow to tell her what he found in her father's office. Maybe she already knew, but he doubted it.

Geena held Ted's arm as she walked him to the front door. "Sorry, Ted." She kissed him on the lips, he wanted to wrap his arms around her waist and squeeze her perfect body, but her father was still hovering nearby. He reluctantly moved away from her, down the walk and into his Jeep. Geena stood at the open door, the light from inside the house behind her, Ted thought he could see her shape beneath the thin fabric of the sun dress she wore. He knew she hadn't had time to put on underwear when they were dressing earlier and the thought of her body almost made him stop the Jeep and give her one last kiss.

The dirt road to the county road was almost a half mile and Ted now knew all this land along the road was owned by the Perrisons. Which made it especially odd when, within a third of a mile from the Perrison cabin, Ted came across a large man standing in the road, his vehicle sitting on the edge of the road with the hood up. The man was signaling Ted to stop.

Ted stopped his Jeep and lowered his window. "Can I help you?"

As the man approached the Jeep, Ted thought to himself, "Why does he look familiar? Where have I seen that face before?"

"Thanks for stopping." said the man, not acknowledging that Ted had no choice but to stop or would have run the man over. "My truck just quit on me. Any chance you have a flashlight I could use?"

Ted's first thought was this guy was a poacher, since he was out here late at night on a deserted road, but any poacher would have a flashlight. Ted was on alert and checked to see if he could spot any weapons before reaching into his glovebox to retrieve the flashlight he always carried in the Jeep. He handed his Maglite Mini to the guy but stayed in his vehicle.

The guy walked over to his truck and checked the inside of the engine compartment. "That's it!" He opened the back of the truck and pulled out a wrench. "Hey buddy, could you hold the flashlight a second? I have a loose connection on the battery terminal."

Ted got out of his Jeep and grabbed the flashlight from the man. As he shined the light on the battery, the man quickly moved behind Ted, grabbed his head, and snapped his neck. Ted dropped the flashlight, his last thoughts would remain unknown.

Alexander Crawford closed the hood of his truck, picked up the flashlight and put it in his pocket, then grabbed Ted Harris' body and shoved it into the back seat of the Jeep. If Ted had more time to look at the man he would have realized where he had seen his face - in one of the photographs on Mr. Perrison's mantle, a photograph of the Vice-President and two soldiers, Major Perrison and Sergeant Crawford, somewhere in a desert setting.

Crawford went back to the truck, pulled out some hiking gear and threw everything on top of the body. Crawford found the kid's phone in the center cup holder and when he turned it on, was pleased the phone needed a thumb print and not a password to open. Easy enough as he reached back and pulled Ted's lifeless arm forward.

It took him less than a minute to find and delete all the photos Ted had of the maps and papers. Next he found the name of Ted's roommate in the contact listing. He sent off a quick text message to Anthony Roland, *'Need some time alone, heading out to take a hike'*. It may not have been perfect but was good enough to cause people to wonder and question any suspicion of foul play.

Crawford turned off the phone and placed it in Ted's coat pocket. It would soon be out of any cell tower's service area and untraceable. Crawford took out his own phone and tapped a quick text to Perrison letting him know everything went as planned on their earlier call and to move his truck.

Crawford started the Jeep and drove west after pulling onto the county road. Although Alex Crawford spent most his adult life as a criminal he never spent a day in prison because Alex firmly believed in being prepared. That's why Alex had already run background checks on Geena's boyfriend and her local friends - he knew where Ted worked, lived, who he hung with and the name of his roommate. Crawford also knew exactly what he would do with Ted's body and the Jeep. One advantage to living in the middle of nowhere is the almost infinite availability of places a dead body could be hidden.

Within an hour of the murder Alex parked Ted's Jeep at a desolate trailhead and pulled the young man's body out of the back. Ted's body weighed one hundred-sixty pounds and it wasn't much of a struggle for Alex to heave the dead weight onto his shoulders and hike the nearly half mile to where a cliff dropped down into a steep ravine. Even in the remote chance the body was ever found, no one would ever trace it back to him.

With the body gone Alex drove the Jeep to a second remote trailhead parking area deep in the National Forest. Hikers rarely used the trail this late in the season and it would be three weeks before any hunters travelled up here. Finding the abandoned Jeep up here would only confound and confuse any would-be searchers.

Alex grabbed his gear from the Jeep and began the long thirty-mile hike back to town. It would take him until the late the following night to make the hike, but all in all, getting paid twenty thousand dollars - the agreed upon amount for Crawford to get rid of Ted Harris - for twenty-four hours labor worked out to nearly a thousand dollars an hour.

After receiving Crawford's text, Perrison waited in the den until he was certain Geena was asleep. He grabbed his flashlight and 1911 Colt .45 before heading out to retrieve Crawford's truck. Although the road was marked 'private', it wouldn't do to have someone come across the vehicle.

The night was black as ink since the moon had set an hour ago, it was difficult to see fifty feet without the flashlight. Perrison kept the .45 in his hand and made certain there was a round in the chamber. The woods were

full of predators – coyotes, black bears, cougars and the wolves that had recently been reintroduced to the Valley. Some nature outfit was even recommending importing grizzly bears from Canada and releasing them into the North Cascades. Perrison kept swinging the flashlight in an arc to make certain nothing was creeping up on him. If he wasn't so frightened by what could be out in the woods, he may have turned off the flashlight and looked into the night sky; the Milky Way held a billion stars, the constellations as clear as when our ancestors named them thousands of years ago.

But the only thing on Perrison's mind as he walked down the dark road, besides any wild animals lurking about, was his own idiocy in leaving those maps and papers out on his desk. He was so busy talking to a potential Clayton client in Myanmar that he failed to lock them in the desk. He knew he locked the office door, and everyone in the household knew better than to invade the sanctity of his office, so it shouldn't have been an issue.

That damn kid not only thought he could get away with screwing his daughter; he thought nothing of breaking into his office, stealing his liquor and reading his papers. The kid only had himself to blame for his early demise. On top of everything else, killing the kid cost him another twenty grand, twenty thousand that couldn't be charged off as legitimate business expenses.

And what to do about Geena? She liked this Ted and will be devastated when the kid doesn't turn up from his 'hike'. Perrison decided to call Geena's mother in the morning and arrange to ship their daughter back to Philadelphia to recover from the trauma. Let her mother deal with the hysterics.

Probably be best to let that moron Town Marshall interview her before she goes though; if only to make certain everyone understands the kid left their cabin in one piece without any threats to his safety.

Perrison reached the truck, found the key and drove back to the cabin. With the truck hidden in the third stall of the garage, Perrison checked to make certain Geena was still sound asleep and went to bed. It had been a long, tiring day.

Chapter Four

Anthony woke up at six a.m. just as the sun came streaming through the window. Living on the east side of the Cascade Mountains was so different from the west side. During his two years living in Portland, every sunny day was like a gift from God. Here on the dry east side, everyone prayed for rain.

Especially this year. The drought made for an intense summer. Two wildfires, each covering over fifty-thousand acres, had left giant scars on the forest. The local populace had only just removed their masks from the Covid-induced protocols when people began wearing them again as the smoke from the two fires filled the valley to dangerous levels. The fires were mostly extinguished now, but everyone kept praying for a decent rainstorm to wet the ground before a lightning bolt or a careless camper started another fire. It wouldn't take much with the dry conditions.

Anthony pulled into the Forest Service parking lot and noticed that Ted's Jeep wasn't here. "You son-of-a-bitch; you'd better just be late this morning." Anthony called Ted's cell and got his voicemail. "Ted, you bum, wake up and get your ass down here now!" Anthony ended the call before noticing he missed Ted's Message from late last night. *'Need some alone time, heading out to take a hike'*. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Did Ted have another argument with Geena? Ted was a bit of a flake, but he normally had more sense than to start out hiking in the middle of the night.

Anthony was still fuming as he watched Frank Morgan's truck roll into the lot.

Because of Ted's absence and Morgan's priorities, it was mid-afternoon when Anthony and Morgan left to check the campsite and it was just after seven when they returned to town. The sun was just setting behind the Cascades Range, so there was still some ambient light in the sky. Anthony has been calling Ted's phone every few hours and getting his voice mail.

It turned out the camp on Four-Mile Creek was a family who had lost their home in Seattle and were on their way to Spokane where the father was scheduled to start a new job the following week. Unfortunately, their new apartment wouldn't be available for two weeks and the family couldn't afford a motel for two full weeks. The family, which consisted of the two parents and two grade school children, chose to rough it in the woods for the first week.

It reminded Anthony of the Joad family saga in Steinbeck's 'The Grapes of Wrath'. Despite the apparent hardship, the cheeriness and optimism displayed by the young mother almost overwhelmed Anthony. The parents were treating the entire event like a holiday for their children's amusement and education.

Still, it was a difficult situation for the two Rangers. On the one hand, camping in the National Forest was allowed, the family's error was in having an open campfire, which because of the recent fires, was strictly forbidden throughout the county. Frank Morgan surprised the hell out of Anthony by telling the father to follow him into town. On the way, Frank called his wife and had her meet them at the Ranger Station with the Morgan's camp stove and a few other camping essentials.

As Frank handed the stove over to the father he cautioned him. "Use the stove for cooking, no more fires out there or we'll have to issue a citation and remove you next time. Bring the stove and the rest back when you're leaving."

The father shook Frank's hand, then Anthony's. His eyes were misting as he said, "thank you" and headed back toward his car. Frank gave his wife a kiss. "I'll be home in a half hour." before heading into the station. Anthony stood in wonder, thinking. "Yeah, the guy can be the biggest pain in the ass, then he pulls a stunt like this." Anthony gave a wave to Mrs. Morgan and drove home.

As Anthony pulled into his drive, he was surprised that Ted's Jeep wasn't in the drive. He tried Ted's cell phone once again but got Ted's voice mail for the fourth time. He turned around and headed out to Geena's house.

Mr. Perrison answered the door, not recognizing the young man who stood on the deck, but it wasn't unusual for friends of Geena's to stop by, even this late at night, so he welcomed him in.

"Geena," he called upstairs, "there's a young man here to see you."

Geena came downstairs, surprised to see Ted's young roommate Anthony waiting by the door. After greetings, Anthony asked. "Geena, Ted didn't show up for work today and I can't raise him on his cell. Do you have any idea where he's at?"

"No," she answered, "he hasn't taken my calls either. I assumed he was working out of cell range. It's happened before."

Anthony showed Geena the text he received at two in the morning. They both agreed it was odd, especially after Geena told Anthony that Ted had left her a half hour before then and didn't seem upset. With the entire episode clear as mud, Anthony said goodbye and drove home; he decided to stop by the Marshall's office on his way to work in the morning.

Anthony spent a good half hour with the Marshall the following day. It took that long to convince Marshall Stephens that Ted wasn't a flake who would just up and disappear in the middle of the night to go hiking. Anthony couldn't blame the Marshall, the Ranger Station received at least one call a week from some parent asking the Rangers to chase some young person who hadn't called in for a week. Ninety-nine out of a hundred of these wild goose chases ended up with the missing youngster returning to town after spending the week having a great time in the woods 'finding themselves' or in bed with a new 'friend'.

But then there's always that one percent, like the young female Pacific Coast Trail (PCT) hiker last seen three weeks ago hitching into town and getting into a truck. Whether she returned to the PCT without anyone taking note of her in town, which seemed unlikely, or did she meet up with someone who did her harm – right now it was anyone's guess.

To his credit, Marshall Stephens took Anthony's concerns seriously, promised to ride out to the Perrison's cabin to follow up and if he thought there was reason to be concerned, to start an investigation. Anthony made his way to work wondering what else he could do.

At the same time Anthony was with the Marshall, Crawford finished his hike and was picking up his truck from Perrison's garage. The damn hike took a lot longer than he anticipated and he was bushed. Crawford drove to his cabin and fell asleep as his head hit the pillow. The brutal murder of the young man troubled him as little as if he had squashed a bug.

Chapter Five

Ted was missing for three days now. There wasn't a sign of him or his Jeep, no one could raise him on his cell phone. According to Marshall Stephens, the last time Anthony called and checked, there hadn't been any activity on Ted's credit card. Where could he be? Anthony knew he was being a pest and he was putting pressure on the Marshall to get the State Police involved.

Anthony tried calling Geena, but once again only reached her voice mail. The Marshall said when he talked to Geena, she confirmed they hadn't had a fight, he left that night with the promise to see her the next evening, and she couldn't think of one reason why he decided to 'take a hike'.

On an impulse, Anthony drove back to the Perrison's, but the maid who answered the door told him Geena had left yesterday, returning to her mother's home in Philadelphia. The poor girl was distraught over her missing boyfriend and Mr. Perrison thought it best she stays with her mother.

When Anthony finally made it into work, Carol Bates was working the switchboard. There was a message from Larry Page, the District Ranger, telling him to drive out to Lower Keller Lake because of an anonymous call reporting seeing a tent where it was posted 'no camping' off the back trail to the lake. The caller also reported that there were some turkey buzzards circling the area. Why the caller didn't want to be identified was anybody's guess, but the call couldn't be ignored and Page thought it should be checked out.

With Ted's disappearance on his mind, Anthony wasn't paying attention as he pulled out of the Ranger Station parking lot and almost pulled in front of a bicyclist. Anthony slammed on the brakes just in time and came to a stop ten feet from the woman. Anthony waved and mouthed an apology; the bicyclist returned his wave with a middle finger and shouted for Anthony to perform an impossible act.

Anthony took a few moments to breathe and bring his heart rate back to normal. He put the truck's transmission back into 'Drive' and turned left onto the road, heading west toward the Lower Keller trailhead.

As Anthony pulled into the trail head parking area, he could see it wouldn't be difficult to locate whatever was out there; the turkey buzzards were still circling. Anthony grabbed his backpack and started to jog up the trail. At this time of year the trail wasn't very crowded with hikers, Anthony didn't come across anyone on the trail as he made his way.

It took him less than fifteen minutes to reach the spot where the back trail cut off from the main trail; an old deer trail that many locals used as an alternative into Keller Lake. It was only another quarter mile where Anthony saw a tent back in the trees. He shooed away two buzzards that were near the open tent and looked in. A man lay still inside the tent and there was an awful smell. Doing his best not to disturb anything, Anthony held his breath and took a step inside the tent, momentarily relieved it wasn't his friend inside. A pistol was in the man's right hand and when Anthony reached to feel for a pulse, he now saw in the dim light that the back of the man's head had a hole and where the blood seeped into the sleeping bag. That's when he also noticed the ray of light shining through a small hole in the back of tent.

Anthony recognized him, he only knew the man's first name, Gus. One of the old-timers that used to sit and drink beer most weekday afternoons on the pizza parlor's outdoor deck. Anthony backed out of the tent, took two deep breaths and used the satellite phone to call the base.

Carol Bates answered the call. "North Central Ranger Station, Carol Bates speaking."

"Carol, it's Anthony. I found the body, a quarter mile up the old deer trail there's a tent with a dead man inside. It looks like a self-inflicted gunshot wound." Anthony looked up to see the buzzards still circling. "Listen Carol, I'm just going to hang out here and keep the buzzards away until you or Larry tell me what to do."

Carol knew Anthony was trying to hold it together; hell, the kid was only a summer intern and he finds a dead man when he's on his own. Most rangers spend a lifetime on the job without experiencing a dead body. "You OK Roland?"

"I'll be OK, just tell me what I need to do."

"I'll have Larry call you in a couple minutes; he's out by the barn."

The District Ranger called a minute later, told Anthony to stay where he's at, not to touch a thing and he'd be relieved within the hour.

Things moved fast. Less than hour later, Frank Morgan came jogging up the trail and relieved Anthony. Turns out the old man, Gus Smythe, recently received a diagnosis of dementia. Not willing to spend the end of his life as a vegetable in a nursing home, Gus decided to go out his own way, in the woods where he had spent his entire life.

Gus didn't have much in the way of material goods or assets; but what he did have was left to Ingrid, the thirty-year-old waitress at the pizza parlor. Ingrid used the money to make a down payment on a nice double-wide. She also went down to the pound at the County seat and brought home a mutt she named Gus. The mutt named Gus became a favorite of the regulars who sit every afternoon on the pizza parlor deck.

It was early Friday morning, a full week since Ted's disappearance. Anthony was scheduled to work four hours, then have the rest of the weekend off. If he left at eleven, he'd be in Portland in time to have dinner with Lisa. Instead he found a note taped to his locker asking him to stop into Larry Page's office ASAP. The District Ranger was a nice guy and sounded sincere as he explained the problem. "I can't give you the weekend off. I'm sorry because I know you were promised, but we're short staffed without Harris and I need you here this weekend. Look

Anthony, I sympathize with your need to see your girl, but I have a National Forest to manage and I can't manage it without your help right now. Sorry."

Anthony didn't say a word. He held it in as he walked out of the office, down the hall and out the door. He sat on the old smoking bench, leaned back and stared into space, silently swearing to himself. He was tempted to walk back into the District Ranger office and quit right on the spot. Quit and head home to Portland so he could at least spend one lousy weekend with Lisa before she leaves for school. Their plan was to spend a long weekend together before she left.

Anthony knew that if he walked off the job this weekend he could kiss any future with the Forest Service good-bye. It just wasn't fair!

He took his phone out of his pocket and called Lisa, gave her the bad news and went in to get today's assignment. To add to his frustration, Lisa didn't sound nearly as put out about the cancellation as he was. She took the news with a slight, 'oh well' cavalier attitude – or was that just because she couldn't talk while she was at work? He and Lisa used to be in sync, almost able to read each other's minds. Ever since December, that synchronization was slowly fading.

Seven hours later, mid-afternoon on an unusually hot September day filled with sunshine, Anthony returned to the Ranger Station, tired and sweaty from five hours spent removing the illegal campfire circles, beer cans and other trash left by a group, probably kids celebrating the end of summer. What made the task especially disgusting was the knowledge he'd spend this evening alone again instead of with Lisa in Portland, the Friday morning filling giant trash bags with someone else's good times.

As Anthony walked in the door, Carol called out to him. "Roland, call it a day. Go home and shower – you stink. Be back tomorrow at eight, you have to go up to Keller Peak to close the upper trail for the season." Anthony let out an expletive, grabbed his truck keys from the desk he once shared with Ted and headed out the door.

Anthony drove to the cabin that would be his home for only another two weeks. The cabin's driveway was a winding two-hundred-yard gravel path. As he wound around the big fir tree he had to blink twice. There, standing in front of her Honda CRV, was the most beautiful sight in the world – Lisa with a smile on her face. Anthony slammed on the brakes and was out of his pickup before it barely stopped.

Anthony was wide eyed as he asked, "What are you doing here?"

Chapter Six

Lisa grabbed Anthony by the shoulders to pull him in for a kiss. "We needed this weekend. Since you couldn't make it home, I decided to take the day off to come up here. I left as soon as we hung up the phone." She teased him with, "I hope you're not disappointed. You didn't have plans, did you?"

Anthony showed his 'disappointment' by squeezing Lisa tight and giving her another kiss. After the kiss, he needed to let her know his only plans. "I have to work tomorrow and maybe Sunday."

"I know. Your boss has already approved me accompanying you up to Keller Peak tomorrow. We'll be hiking together. Your co-workers have been very helpful, the lady named Carol made certain you came right home this afternoon. Your boss thought a civilian 'observer' was an excellent idea. Like a ride-a-long that the police department has."

Anthony had to ask, "What about your father? How accommodating was he?"

"Dad started to say something, but I told him this was non-negotiable. A word Dad can understand. I told Dad I spent the last half school year and all summer playing by his rules. This weekend was mine."

"Why doesn't your father like me?"

"Because you've stolen his little girl's heart. I also think he gets all wound up when he thinks of us having sex."

"He doesn't have to worry there, it's been what – ten months?"

"Almost, but I was hoping we could put an end to that this weekend. Think you can make it happen?"

Before Anthony could answer, Lisa cut him off. "We have to use condoms; I went off the pill. Sorry"

"I don't have any."

Lisa blushed and smiled. "I stopped on the way here and bought some. I hope they fit. I was so embarrassed asking the pharmacist about the size, trying to describe this." Lisa squeezed Anthony's crotch.

They'd probably get around to discussing the elephant in the room, but not now. There was some satisfaction in each lover's mind until they had that discussion. Lisa happy that Anthony didn't have any condoms in his house, Anthony happy Lisa went off the pill when they broke up and didn't know what size condom to buy.

An hour later Lisa was resting on Anthony's shoulder with her arm wrapped around his bare chest. She liked his chest – almost as much as he liked hers. "I missed that; I missed you."

Anthony couldn't take it, he turned to look Lisa in the eyes and had to ask. "Have you been with anyone else since we broke up? Your father was adamant about you having 'college experiences'."

Lisa almost seemed hurt that Anthony had to ask. "No Anthony, I haven't. I even stopped taking the pill in January, knowing I wouldn't need them. My 'experiences' have consisted of attending a few concerts and other events with a couple guys that I consider friends. But nothing romantic."

Lisa held her breath. "What about you? Any women chasing my guy?"

Damn, he just loved it when she said, 'my guy'. "Sounds about the same. There are a few girls at school who have been friends. And not friends-with-benefits."

Lisa wasn't aware she was holding her breath until she let the air out, then turned to get her nude body on top of Anthony. Looking down on him, feeling skin on skin, it felt so intimate. "I love you."

Anthony grabbed the cheeks of her ass and squeezed. "I love you too, babe. These last ten months have been hell. How are we going to make it another three years?"

"Let's not try and answer that right now. Right now I want you to make love to me again."

And that's what they did.

It was seven o'clock, Lisa and Anthony were hungry and there was little in the way of food besides cereal and canned soup in the cabin. They got dressed and headed into town to the Burger Barn and Brew. The BB&B as it was known followed the silly Washington State liquor laws by having a single brass railing that separates the 'bar' area, which consisted of eight stools at the bar, from the rest of the establishment, which consisted of six tables,

four booths, a pool table, and a postage sized dance area. Liquor could be served throughout the entire establishment, but minors were not allowed in the narrow bar area.

Being under twenty-one, Lisa and Anthony found an empty booth at the back of the place. Neither paid attention to the large man sitting at the end of the bar; they were too caught up in the glow of the past two hours.

Alex Crawford saw the two lovebirds walk in and impulsively decided to improvise from his original plan. When fate hands you a brass ring, you grab it. It was an unusual move on his part and maybe his first two Boilermakers affected his reasoning or maybe he was feeling cocky and invincible. Although he hadn't had time to finish his research, he had been on the Roland kid's Facebook page and knew the girl sitting next to him was the kid's high school sweetheart. Crawford ordered a third beer, paid cash as he always did in this small town where no one knew his name and sat back to wait.

Opportunity knocked when the Roland kid got up and headed to the bathroom. Acting on impulse Crawford left the bar area and went in after the boy.

Anthony stood at the urinal, facing the tile wall, wondering how life could get any better, Lisa was back in his life. Then, without warning, the man who just walked in the room slammed his head forward, breaking his nose on the wall, Anthony didn't black out, but was too woozy to resist as the man grabbed the back of his neck.

Crawford grabbed some paper towels to place under the kid's bloody nose to prevent blood falling on the floor. He grasped the kid by the belt and dragged him into a stall, leaning him face down on the toilet so it looked like a person drank too much and was praying to the porcelain god. Crawford stepped out and slid into the booth across from the girl.

Lisa stared at the intruder, he was a large man and looked dangerous, especially with the sneer on his face. Lisa did her best to remain polite as she said, "I'm with someone."

"Yeah, I know, but he's indisposed at the moment. Before he comes out, I want you to listen to what I'm going to say." The man moved the glass on the table and grabbed Lisa's hand, squeezing it tight. "You need to make him understand that if he continues to make a stink about his roommate's disappearance, that things will get a lot uglier. He needs to shut up about the text message he received. As far as Anthony is concerned, Ted Harris is a flaky kid who decided to get lost. Anthony needs to make certain he retracts his statement to the Marshall. He needs to finish his little summer tour here and go back to college. He needs to do this to protect himself and you, Miss Lisa Collins. Palo Alto isn't too far to make a visit. Understand?"

In his peripheral vision, Crawford caught the sight of Anthony staggering out the restroom. He knew the kid hadn't seen his face, but it was still silly to take a chance getting caught in the place. Never know who's carrying a gun in these small towns. Crawford headed out the back door.

Lisa saw Anthony and stood up to help him into the booth. "Anthony, baby, are you OK?"

Anthony removed his handkerchief from his nose, Lisa recoiled from the sight of his beautiful nose bent so far to be nearly touching his cheek. "Some son of a bitch pushed me into the wall, then dragged me into the stall."

"We have to get you to hospital."

"The nearest hospital is over forty-five miles away. It's just a broken nose."

"And maybe a concussion."

"I'm feeling better already. Let's get the bill and get out of here."

Lisa decided she couldn't wait to tell Anthony about the threatening message. "You need to hear this first. The man who attacked you sat right there and threatened our lives if you continue to say Ted's disappearance wasn't an accident."

"What?"

"He sat right there," she pointed across the booth, "and told me he knew you told the Marshall that Ted's message couldn't have come from Ted. He said if you don't forget about it, he'll come after you and me. He knew our names and even knew I went to school at Stanford."

"Let's get out of here. I'll call my mother."

"What are you going to do about your nose?"

"Dad told me when he wrestled at Penn State that one of his teammates broke his nose during an important meet. The guy had Dad bend his nose back, put a cotton ball in each nostril, then went out and finished the match. Dad said the guy still won." Anthony got up and headed back to the restroom.

Lisa gave him a look before talking to his back, "You macho men are all crazy!" But deep down, she was glad to have a guy who could take a punch without whining.

While Anthony was in the restroom Lisa paid the bill and asked the waitress for a takeout bag. Anthony returned to the table in time to see Lisa place one of the glasses in the takeout bag.

"What are you doing?"

Lisa almost laughed when she saw Anthony standing there with a wad of toilet paper shoved up each nostril, but she held it in. "The guy moved your water glass when he sat down. Maybe he left a fingerprint so the Marshall can find out who he is."

Anthony shook his head in wonder. "How come everyone I love is a detective? Damn, you are smart." Lisa smiled at the compliment. Before leaving, Anthony asked the waitress and the bartender if they knew the name of the man who had sat at their table. Both claimed to have seen him before, but he wasn't a regular and never struck up a conversation with anyone else. He would have a few drinks, sometimes a burger, but always paid cash.

As they walked out of the BB&B, they stopped to look both ways and kept their eyes open as they approached the pickup. "You know, this is going to give your father one more reason why you shouldn't be with me."

Lisa looked worried. "I thought of that. Let's see what your mother has to say before we get my dad involved."

Anthony wasn't certain this was the smartest move but decided this wasn't the time to argue the point. They kept alert on the way back to cabin.

"Why aren't we going to the Marshall?"

Anthony answered, "Because right now I don't trust him. How did this man know what I told the Marshall about Ted's text? Let's wait and see what Mom thinks."

As they pulled into his driveway, Anthony had a funny feeling. He stopped the truck, put it in reverse and started back toward town.

"What are you doing? Where are we going?" Lisa asked with some alarm in her voice.

"We'll get a room in town. The cabin is too isolated. This guy must know where I live if he knows so much about us. It's less likely he'll break into a motel room in town."

"You're scaring me Anthony."

"Let's get to a safe space and call my folks. They'll know what to do."

Since it was the start of the off season and hunting season was still a few weeks away, they didn't have any trouble getting a room at the motel in the center of town. On the way to the motel, Anthony stopped by the Ranger Station and grabbed two cans of bear spray. Back in the car he showed Lisa how to use the spray.

"Now you're really scaring me." Is all she said on the way to the motel.

As soon as they checked into their room, they called Karin. Karin put her phone on 'speaker' to let Bill listen in. Anthony explained to his parents what happened at the BB&B, including the shove into the bathroom wall that resulted in his broken nose and their reason for not calling the Marshall.

"Where are you right now?" Karin asked.

"We got a room in town. I thought the cabin was too isolated."

Bill and Karin exchanged a brief smile before Bill spoke for the first time. "Good thinking son. We're on our way. You and Lisa stay in the room until we get there. It shouldn't be more than eight hours. Are your phones charged?"

"Yeah, Dad. Are you sure you want to drive tonight?"

"Don't worry about us. You just stay safe 'til we're there."

Everyone including Lisa exchanged, "I love you" and the call ended. Lisa watched Anthony wedge the desk chair under the doorknob. She was still scared, but happy she was with Anthony. Just like that night in downtown Portland last year when they were approached by a couple of street toughs, Anthony kept his cool and seemed to know what to do. The young man was mature beyond his years and it was one more reason why she loved him.

After the call ended, Bill asked Karin to pack an overnight bag for each of them while he put what they'd need in the SUV for the journey – water, snack bars and a thermos of coffee. The SUV was ready by the time Karin came down with the two bags.

Bill took the bags and set them on the back seat. "Are you bringing the nine-millimeter?"

"Yes, better safe than sorry until we know what we're up against here."

"Let's go then. I'll drive and you sleep. One of us needs to be fresh in the morning."

Karin didn't argue, Bill made sense. With Karin strapped in, Bill pulled out of the garage and headed to I-5 for the long trip up north. By the time they reached the freeway, Karin had the seat back reclined and was asleep.

As much as they wanted to sleep naked in each other's arms, Anthony and Lisa kept their underwear on as they laid in bed. They talked for a while until Anthony saw it was eleven. Anthony noticed Lisa was about to nod off, he whispered in her ear. "Sorry for how tonight turned out."

Half asleep, Lisa answered in a low tone. "Don't ever apologize to me unless you do something wrong, Mr. Roland. You have nothing to apologize for."

Anthony kissed her forehead. "Thanks – now go to sleep. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a long day."

It was two-thirty when Lisa opened her eyes. The room was pitch black and she was alone in the bed. Something had woken her up. "Anthony?"

"Shh"

Lisa's reached for her glasses on the nightstand and focused. Anthony was sitting by the window with the curtains cracked only an inch or two. Lisa crept over to where he was sitting and looked through the crack into the ink black night.

"Did you hear something?" she whispered. She noticed he held one of the canisters of bear spray in his right hand.

"I thought I did. Now I'm not so sure." Just as the words left his lips, a shadow crossed his field of vision, followed by a second shadow.

"Son of a bitch!" He almost laughed as he said it. Two deer, a doe and a fawn, walked past the window, on their way to the river. Anthony rose from the chair and gave Lisa a tight hug. "Let's go back to sleep."

Lisa face snuggled into his chest, then she looked into his eyes. "Fat chance of that for a while! My heart is beating like a rabbit's."

"Okay, we'll lie in bed, try to relax." Within fifteen minutes, an exhausted Anthony fell asleep. Lisa quietly rose out of bed and sat by the window, watching and waiting. That's how Anthony found his sleeping girlfriend the next morning when he woke to his cellphone alarm at six.

Chapter Seven

Less than an hour later Bill pulled into the tourist town just as the sun was coming up. The GPS led him straight to the motel. Karin had been awake since six, was on her second cup of coffee from the thermos and had already texted Anthony to make certain the kids were safe. Karin felt rested, having slept most of the trip, only waking up at three when Bill pulled into a truck stop to stretch, relieve himself and fill the tank and thermos. They already discussed what their plans for the day would be.

While Bill grabbed an hour nap in the hotel room, Karin took the kids to Anthony's boss to explain why he wouldn't be able to finish out the season. Between the broken nose, the possible concussion - Anthony was still playing down how bad he was stunned by the blow to his head - and the implied death threat, Bill and Karin thought it best Anthony leave town immediately. On the way to Larry Page's house, Anthony called his landlord to arrange to meet her at the cabin later that morning.

Karin and Lisa waited out in the car while Anthony knocked on Larry's door. Larry answered the door in his robe and his eyes registered the surprise at seeing the young man with two black eyes and a bruised nose standing in front of him.

"Anthony, what happened?"

Anthony gave Larry the rundown on everything that happened the previous evening – the assault in the bathroom, the threat on Lisa's life, including the man's knowledge of where she went to school, that the man knew

everything he told the Marshall. Anthony told Larry that his parents were advising him to leave town immediately considering no one in the bar knew the name of the man.

Larry was initially upset until he gave it some thought, he had to agree that Anthony's life may be in danger. Despite the adverse effect it would have on what needed to be accomplished over the next two weeks, Larry wished Anthony goodbye and good luck, telling him to be careful and offering him another internship next summer.

After picking up Bill at the motel, all four drove out to Anthony's place to load up the few belongings he had there – some books, clothes and outdoor gear. It didn't take more than an hour to get it all packed in the back of Anthony's truck. The landlord came by and Anthony explained the situation. The landlord was already aware Ted was missing and agreed to leave everything until the end of the month or until someone from his family came to collect it.

As they finished loading, Karin asked Anthony again, "What about the Marshall? Do we stop at his office and tell him what happened last night?"

Anthony answered, pleased his mother was asking his opinion. "I'd rather not. Like I said last night, there's always been whisperings at the ranger station that something's wrong at the Marshall's office. Then last night, this guy knew everything I told the Marshall when he threatened Lisa. Something is definitely wrong there."

Karin nodded in agreement. "Okay, I'll hold off until we get more information. Hopefully the prints on the bottle will give me a place to start."

Karin's statement caught everyone's attention. "What are you thinking Mom?"

Karin's voice was grim. "Nobody threatens my babies." Karin hugged Lisa as she said it, Lisa nearly broke out in tears at the gesture. Karin had always been kind to her, but this was the first time she referred to her as one of her children.

The three-vehicle caravan made its way south to Portland, Lisa riding in Anthony's truck while Bill drove her car. They decided to wait until the next day before Lisa returned home, her parents weren't expecting her until Sunday evening. Karin spent Sunday afternoon lifting the prints from the bottle and contacting her former partner in the New York investigators' office, Hank Price. Hank would use his contacts to run the prints. Her former partner was upset when he heard that his godson's life had been threatened; he'd do all he could to assist.

No one could have predicted the fallout when the Roland family accompanied Lisa to her home and explained the events of Friday evening. Lisa's father began berating Anthony for putting his daughter in danger.

It was too much for Bill Roland. The usually mild-mannered six foot-five man stood toe to toe with Mr. Collins and, looking down on the man, he let him have it.

"Listen asshole; I don't know what your problem is with my son, but he's a good man and he's always treated your daughter with respect – which is more than I can say about how you've treated him. Anthony went to the police because he thought it was the right thing to do and if you disagree with that, then you're a bigger coward than I thought."

Collins stood there, his mouth practically open. No one had ever talked to the high-priced lawyer in this way. He had to admit to himself that he was more than a little intimidated by the huge man standing in front of him. Before he knew what to say, Bill continued. "I'll tell you this – nobody threatens my family. Karin and I have already discussed it. She's heading back to Welford and she'll find out what going on."

Karin, Anthony and Bill turned to leave. Both Karin and Anthony did their best to hide the smiles on their faces, having witnessed one of the rare moments when Bill lost his cool. Mrs. Collins walked the Rolands to the front door and apologized for her husband's behavior.

After the Rolands left, Lisa's parents began to argue. Gary Collins was livid. "Can you believe that? He comes into my house and insults me?"

Beth Collins had enough and couldn't hold it in any longer. "What did you expect? Did you think Bill and Karin were a couple of peons like your staff at the law firm? That they'd let you insult their son and get away with it?"

Gary stood there, he couldn't believe his ears. Who was this woman? "What are you talking about, Beth? Whose side are you on?"

"Lisa's. I made the mistake of backing you up when you made them break up last Christmas. Lisa loves Anthony and Anthony loves Lisa. There are a lot of frogs out there; Lisa is one of the rare lucky ones because she picked a prince without kissing all the damn frogs to find him."

"They're too young to know what love is."

Beth wasn't about to back down, she was on a roll. "Love? What do you know about love? Were you in love when you were screwing your admin the first four years of Lisa's life? I don't know how many bimbos there were since then, but I'd bet money there were quite a few because I know there was more than one. I only stuck around because I had a toddler and knew you'd leave us high and dry if I divorced you. Just like your partner Hap did when he divorced Lucy.

"I stuck around because I thought it was the best option for Lisa. What a fool I was to waste my life waiting for you to realize what you had at home. I almost had an affair with a guy at work but decided two wrongs don't make a right."

"Are you saying I was a bad father? I gave that girl everything!"

Beth wasn't buying the Kool-Aid. "Everything but spend time with her. Should I call Lisa downstairs and ask how many of her soccer and softball games you made it to when she was in high school? Maybe twenty?"

"I was busy making a living!"

"Bullshit. If you spent a tenth of the time with your daughter as you do with your bimbos, I'd be amazed."

Gary was stunned. How much did she know?

Before the week was out, Beth had Gary served with divorce papers. It seemed Gary's attack on Anthony was the straw that broke the camel's back. Six months later, Beth was forty-four, single and happy. She was a beautiful woman with many years of life ahead. She wouldn't be lonely nor broke since her attorney was able to squeeze a nice settlement out of Gary's attorney. Half their assets, maintenance for six years and Lisa's college tuition through grad school. Gary got to keep his bimbos and Beth kept a little of her dignity after years of trying to make a bad marriage better.

Chapter Eight

Karin pulled up to the PDX airport terminal just as April Coons walked out the doors. Karin stepped out of the Expedition and waved April over. They gave each other a quick hug, placed April's bag in the back and started the journey north.

Karin was finally able to ask the question that had been bugging her for the past twelve hours. "I don't understand why Hank insisted you come with me, what's this all about?"

April looked at the woman she considered her chief rival for Hank's affection. "Hank has been worried about you ever since the incident in your office with Jesse Clarke. He thinks you take too many chances."

"Who is he to talk? Or you for that matter?"

April smiled at Karin's retort. It was true, all three of them spent too many of their nine lives already. She decided to come right out with it. "Hank asked me to marry him. We both want children before I'm too old."

Karin took her eyes off the road and stared at April, who was waiting to hear Karin's reaction. Karin squeezed April's left hand and noticed there wasn't a ring on it. "That's wonderful, and it's about time, you two."

"I haven't said yes - yet."

This surprised Karin, Hank and April have been living together for almost three years and seemed to be in love and compatible. "Why not?"

"Because I've always worried that if your husband wasn't around, that Hank would leave me for you in a second."

Karin was beside herself, April Coons was one of the toughest women she knew. Karin held back from telling April she was being ridiculous, the male part of Karin's persona, telling a woman how she should feel. Instead, she answered April as a woman and a friend.

"Hank does love me, it's true, but as a friend, like a sister even, but not a lover." She squeezed April's hand tighter, keeping her eyes on the highway. "We had a short affair twenty-some years ago when we were both single, but even during those five months of intimacy, we never fooled ourselves, we never exchanged words of love. Yes, we had a child together because the diaphragm slipped and we've been close because of Hannah. I can honestly say we've never crossed a line since I married Bill, even during the years we partnered in our detective agency. The love Hank feels for you is how Bill loves me. Tell Hank 'Yes' April and you'll never regret it."

April felt comfort in Karin's words. Deep down she felt it was true and it helped to hear Karin confirm it.

"There's one more thing that I'm worried about, it's irrational I know." she paused before continuing and Karin sat in silence waiting for what's next.

April took a breath before continuing, "I've killed a half dozen men and now I wonder if there's some crazy karma that will prevent me from having a healthy, happy, sane child."

"You're right, that is irrational, but I understand it, it comes with the territory in our profession. I dealt with the same thing when Bill was fighting cancer – was Bill being taken from me because of the men I've killed? But I got help. I'll give you Dr. Larsen's number later, she helped me through it. I'm certain she can help with your fears. You and Hank deserve this, don't let it pass you by."

April held Karin's right hand with both her hands. "Thank you."

Another half hour passed with neither woman talking. Karin broke the silence. "Now, tell me why Hank's concerned enough to send his fiancée out west."

"The prints off the glass came back. The man who attacked Anthony and threatened his girlfriend is Alex Crawford, a retired Army NCO who currently works for Clayton Industries, specifically as James Perrison's personal security. He has a nasty reputation for violence."

"That doesn't explain Ted Harris' disappearance."

"Then maybe this will. Hank had Singh hack Harris' cloud account. There were photos of some incriminating documents taken on the night he disappeared."

Karin heard the name 'Singh' before, the Price Investigations' 'Resident Einstein'. Jefferson Singh is half Black-half Sikh; his parents' marriage didn't make either family happy, even after they named their first-born son after his maternal grandfather.

"Any chance Ted went into hiding?" Karin asked, knowing it was a long shot, but she had to ask anyway.

April busted that bubble. "Unlikely. Harris doesn't have the knowledge or resources to fall off the grid. There hasn't been any activity on his financial accounts or his cloud account since the night he disappeared. Hank figures Crawford got to him at Perrison's request."

With that April reached behind her seat and pulled out the locked case that held her firearm. Removing the TSA tag, she opened the case, made certain both magazines held fifteen rounds before tapping the spine against her palm and slapping one of the magazines into the Sig Sauer.

Karin looked over. "Still prefer the Sig Sauer?"

April smiled, two chicks cruising down the road, talking firearms. "Yeah, everybody has their favorites. This became mine when I was working with the military down in Central America. It just feels right in my hands." April looked at Karin's right hip. "I see you still carry the Smith and Wesson."

Karin chuckled. "Yeah, it just feels right."

April grabbed her carry on and found the shoulder holster, slipping it on. With the gun in its proper place, April leaned back in the seat and relaxed.

It was quiet in the car for a while. April broke the silence. "What do you say we run out to Perrison's place in the morning and shake him up a bit?"

Karin gave it some thought. "I was thinking the same thing. But maybe we'll have an advantage and have more flexibility if we keep your involvement a secret from everyone. And I thought I'd stop in to have a chat with Marshall Stephens before going out to the Perrison home. Anthony told Stephens things that shouldn't have become public knowledge, except Crawford knew it all. I'd like to find out if Stephens or someone in his office is dirty. It's hard to believe it's Stephens – I talked to a friend of mine, a Captain in the Portland PD. He said Stephens retired from the King County PD and was well known in cop circles as a boy scout."

April nodded. "Chances are it's one of his deputies then. Unless we're talking big bucks, enough to turn a good guy bad."

They spent the next hour talking logistics and thought they had a good plan to flush Crawford out in the open and maybe catch Perrison as well.

Karin and April sat in the Adirondack chairs outside their motel room door, it was just starting to get dark outside.

Karin decided to butt in. "I would love to see you and Hank make a go of it. He's always been so good with Hannah and Anthony; he'll make a great father."

"Yeah, I think so, too." April reached into the front pocket of her jeans and slipped something on her finger. It was a single diamond, about a carat, set in the prongs on a thin gold ring. "When he asked me to marry him last week and I didn't answer, he wouldn't let me give it back to him. Said I should wait until I could answer with a definite yes or no. You've answered so many of my doubts and insecurities today, now I'm sure."

Karin took April's hand to examine the ring. "It's beautiful."

April smiled. "It is. I'm going to give Hank a call; he's waited too long already. Thanks Karin." April walked back into the cabin and closed the door to make the call.

Karin hoped she hadn't misled April. Would Hank make a great husband and father? How could she be certain that her words weren't only wishful thinking? Hank spent enough time around Bill. Had the qualities that made Bill a wonderful father and husband rubbed off on Hank?

Karin looked up at the Milky Way. As she looked up at the dark sky, darker here than most small towns because of the Valley's 'Dark Sky' ordinances, she wondered, not for the first time, how and why she was so lucky. Almost fifty, with a loving husband who beat cancer; two bright, normal kids leaving adolescence happy and healthy; her own successful career in a field she loved. And great friends, especially Hank, the father of her daughter Hannah. Thank God for Hank, always there when she needed him. Which may sound funny, it was Bill, a man she met in her sixth month of pregnancy, not Hank, who was there for the birth of their daughter. Hank had already left for his Middle East assignment for the CIA.

April came back outside. "Here - he wants to talk to you." She handed Karin the phone.

"Congratulations Hank, I am so happy for you two."

"Thanks Karin. Now I have a favor to ask you - take care of my fiancée." Karin could almost hear the joy in Hank's voice.

"I'll do my best. Call Bill and give him the news. He'll be thrilled." She handed the phone back to April. April walked back into the room but came back out a minute later. She had the bottle of wine in her hand and topped off Karin's glass.

"Hank's pretty excited, said we had to clear this business up soon and I should get my ass back home. I had to convince him not to get on a plane and come out here himself."

With the engagement of Hank and April, Karin was feeling like a big sister. It was time to get closer to April. Even though Karin and April spent nearly a year working together at Hank and Karin's New York detective agency, they never shared personal information. Now was the time to connect as friends. "How did you get into law enforcement?"

Instead of answering the question immediately, April stood up and walked into the cabin. She came out a minute later with a pack of Marlboros. "Is it OK if I smoke?"

"Sure, I didn't know you smoked though."

"This pack would normally last me a month or two. Sometimes I need a cigarette."

April sat back down on the outdoor chair and lit up. "When I was nineteen and a junior at Columbia, I was walking to my apartment from school. Two gangbangers dragged me into an alley and tried to rape me. Just as one of them said something like "tap that ass" - I bit the hand of the guy that was on top of me, screaming as loud as I could.

"A serviceman was walking past the alley and ran in to see why I was screaming. Without hesitating, he started beating the two guys. One had a knife and even that didn't stop him. The two rapists ran out of the alley because a crowd started to form. The serviceman took off his shirt and covered me since my blouse was ripped to shreds. He picked me up, carried me out of the alley, flagged down a cab and took me to the hospital. He stayed with me, lying that he was my fiancée, until my mother and father came in. He gave the police a description and offered to be a witness if the two guys got caught. I probably owe that man my life, I at least owe him my sanity."

April took a long drag of the cigarette. "I quit school and joined the Army. Spent four years, the last three as an MP. When I got out, I finished my degree and was recruited by the FBI. I know you know that story."

Karin did know how the FBI and April parted ways. And how, after leaving the Bureau, April worked for a private contractor, spending two years in the Middle East, then two years undercover in Central America. Most of the time working to interrupt the world-wide trafficking in young women. That's when the Roland & Price Detective Agency recruited April.

April paused, looking out into the night sky, her thoughts somewhere far away. "Every time I go into a situation that may require killing, I think about those two gangbangers raping me, I see their faces, and I've never hesitated."

Karin had spent enough time with rape victims to know the horror April felt was not uncommon. "You still feel that way - after all these years?"

"It's getting better. Remember Reverend McMasters and his two goon bodyguards? While I was pulling that young mother and her boy out of that mess, I could easily have killed all three but didn't. That's progress."

It was just then that the young man who worked the front desk came out and informed April that the entire property was a no smoking zone.

"Sorry." April smiled at the boy and put the cigarette out. She took the pack and crushed the remaining cigarettes. "Guess if I'm going to get pregnant, these have to go."

April stood up. "I'm turning in. The three-hour time difference makes it one a.m. my time. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night." Just before the door closed, Karin added. "Congratulations, you two are going to be very happy."

Another part of the April Coons puzzle had been put in place. Like most everyone in the New York PD, Karin knew how April Coons, while working undercover on an FBI sting, killed two men with her bare hands when her cover was blown and the two miscreants ambushed her with the intent to teach her a lesson.

A high-level bureaucrat, a big-shot asshole who never spent a day of his FBI career undercover, decided to make an example of her. April received a reprimand in her file, meaning she'd never get another promotion. April told them all to go fuck themselves and left.

Karin's father spent ten years of his law enforcement career in the FBI. The Bureau was always tainted by politics, but over the past ten years or so, it has gotten to the point where politics outweighs crime fighting.

Chapter Nine

Thirty-five miles west of where Karin and April were watching the sky turn dark, Alex Crawford sat in the PCT trailhead parking lot near where he had picked up that hiker three weeks ago.

The whole thing was a fluke, he was returning from SeaTac airport after dropping off one of the Colonel's weekend guests and the young hiker had her thumb out. Alex pulled over, pleased the young lady didn't hesitate before putting her backpack into the truck bed and hopping into the passenger seat.

They had a nice conversation on the drive into town. The young lady, her name was Mona, didn't seem to have any fear, which surprised Alex. Didn't her mother teach her about the boogie man?

Mona explained that the trailhead back where she got off the PCT was a popular spot for through-hikers to leave the trail and resupply in Wolford. Once they returned to the trail it was another seventy-five miles and three-day hike to the Canadian border. Hikers could then either go up into Canada or turn around, having completed the PCT, returning to the same trailhead, catching a ride into Wolford and back to civilization.

"So, are you headed home now?" asked Alex.

"No, I'm just headed into Wolford before getting back on the trail. I started at the Mexican border in March and spent this summer completing the PCT." Mona said this with pride. "I start my senior year at UA in a week, so I haven't much time to finish – I'll have to push it a bit."

Alex didn't want to sound ignorant and ask what UA was, instead he said what was on his mind. "I can't imagine a person doing it alone, especially a woman."

Mona did her best not to laugh at the older man. Obviously one of those guys brought up before Title IX and the dawn of the strong, independent woman. "There are probably more women on the trail now than men. Ever see the movie 'Wild'? It was a movie they made from a true book about a woman who shucks everything and hikes the trail on her own. A lot of women watched that movie or read the book and now give it a go. Some make it the entire twenty-six hundred fifty miles."

Alex was impressed. "All by yourself?"

Mona turned a little red. "Well, mostly. I tagged along with a couple guys through Oregon. But they got off at the Columbia River."

Alex made up his mind. "I have to stop at my cabin for just a minute to feed my dog before we go into town. It will just take a minute." He pulled off the highway and headed up the county road.

"You can let me out here."

"Nonsense. This will take two minutes, then I can take you all the way into town. You may have a heck of a time getting a ride out here and you never know who's going to pick you up." Alex said the last sentence with such a kind voice that Mona began to relax again.

That is, until Alex made the last turn onto the dirt road off the county road that led deeper into the woods. She began to become alarmed; it was so desolate and beginning to get dark. It was the last time anyone would ever see or hear from Mona.

That was three weeks ago. Since then, Alex confronted that girl Lisa in the BB&B bar after knocking out her boyfriend. Alex only saw her face and caught a glimpse of her breasts as she sat in the booth. When he left the bar, he parked down the street, just in case they ran to the Marshall's office. Instead, the kid and the girl walked to the kid's pickup and drove off. Alex watched the girl, she had a great set of legs and ass to match that pretty face. Maybe her breasts were too small, but what the hell, he decided he had to sample her anyway.

Alex drove out to the cabin where the Harris and Roland kids lived. It was one in the morning and there was a Honda in the drive, but not the pickup. He quietly walked around the property and determined nobody was home. He circled around town and saw the boy's pickup in the Woford Motel's lot. There were only three vehicles in the lot. He parked and was walking along the building when two deer came through the trees near the building. It was hard to tell who was more surprised, Alex or the doe and its fawn. Alex knew he was taking too many chances now and returned to his truck, thinking he'd swing by the cabin the next night. But the next night, neither the Honda nor the pickup was there or at the motel.

Alex became determined to make up for this lost opportunity tonight, three weeks after picking up that lone hiker. Could lightning strike in the same place again? Alex sat in the parking lot of that trailhead just on the off chance another naïve girl needed a ride into town. He watched as a couple, a man and a woman, left the trail and walked to the road.

A half hour later he saw two women hikers with giant backpacks leave the trail. He watched as they read the posting board and stood talking. Alex considered how it would work with two. Maybe not be greedy, get rid of one right away before having his fun with the other.

Alex started the truck and drove to where the two women were standing. "Can I give you a lift into town?"

The two women looked over at Alex and their eyes swept across the truck. Without hesitancy one woman responded. "No thanks, we're waiting for our husbands. They should be here by now."

Alex noticed the silent woman's hands reaching for a red canister of bear spray on the side of her backpack.

"Okay, just thought I'd offer since I was heading that way. Have a good night."

The two women walked back toward the trail. They both had canisters in their hands now. Alex watched as they disappeared into the woods, then his eyes caught the notice on the trail bulletin board.

"MISSING. MONA GOMEZ. 5'6" 130 POUNDS, BLACK HAIR, BROWN EYES. LAST SEEN NEAR PCT TRAILHEAD GETTING INTO DARK PICKUP TRUCK. CALL WITH ANY INFORMATION FOR REWARD. 555-555-5555."

"Shit." Alex put the truck in gear and drove home.

Chapter Ten

Marshall Mark Stephens sat at his desk wondering when everything went into the toilet. Twenty-five years with the King County Sheriff's office, ten as the senior detective in the Homicide Department and the last year spent looking forward to a simple retirement in a small town; his dream of an Andy of Mayberry semi-retirement. Find a small, sleepy town where the major problems are controlling stray dogs, mediating a rare fist fight, and making certain the tourists have a good, safe time. Mark thought he struck gold when the position for Woford Town Marshall opened up.

The perfect position in the perfect spot. Between his pension and the Marshall's salary, finances would never be an issue. Mark and his wife Margaret sold their Auburn house on the ten acres that Margaret always hated because the maintenance was so constant.

The first pin prick bursting his balloon occurred just after their house sale closed. Margaret chose that evening to inform Mark that she wouldn't be moving to Wolford.

Mark stood there, wondering if he heard her right. "But I thought this was our dream."

Margaret looked at him. How could she answer this without crushing the man she loved for most of their twenty-seven years together and who fathered their three children? "No Mark, it was always your dream. If you listened to me once over the past two years, you would have heard me tell you that I have no desire to leave Western Washington. Our children and grandchildren are here, my friends are here. Hell, both trips to Wolford have only reinforced my dislike for that place. And my not even subtle complaints fell on your deaf ears."

Could this be true? Could the man whose reputation as a great detective because of his listening and perception skills be that blind, deaf and dumb to his own wife's reluctance to follow his dream?

And at that moment he knew it was true. He quit listening to Margaret about the same time he quit loving her. Their first five years of marriage were utter bliss. Then came the children and the diverging interests. The disagreements which should have been bumps but became hills, then mountains. Mark realized he wasn't all that disappointed Margaret wouldn't be joining him in Wolford. The biggest impediment? He'd have to split the proceeds from their home sale and probably his pension. Suddenly, financial worries might become a reality.

Mark and Margaret divorced. Mark moved to Wolford; Margaret stayed in Auburn, moving into a nice condominium in a 'fifty and older' complex. Mark's pension was divided, but Mark didn't have to pay any alimony, the judge deemed Margaret capable of getting a job and living on her own earnings with the half pension.

The second pin prick? The knowledge that someone in his three-person office was feeding what should be confidential information to people outside the department.

For the past year there have been rumors of a leak in the Marshall's office and the suspicion fell on Mark, since he was the newest department member. But Mark knew it wasn't him and tried to find a way to uncover the leak, so far without luck. The latest incidence of a leak was the beating that Roland kid got two days ago. The kid never came into the office to file a complaint and that told Mark all he needed to know – the kid didn't trust him. The only reason Mark knew about the beating was Sally, the bartender, had seen the kid walk out of the bar with a broken nose. Sally described the guy she thought did the damage, he'd been in the bar once or twice before, but no one knew who the guy was.

And now Mark was waiting in his office, waiting for the kid's mother to show up for the appointment she made yesterday. Mark spent yesterday afternoon after talking to the mother, trying to find out who she is. She mentioned having a private investigator's license and the reason for her visit, that her son was accosted in his town, but nothing else. What Mark found out about Karin Roland sent chills up his spine; her reputation preceded her.

According to his sources at the King County Sheriff's Office, Karin was ex-NYPD on the anti-terrorist squad. Her former partner at her New York detective agency was ex-CIA. There was a story going around the NYPD about a syndicate enforcer who threatened Roland's daughter and disappeared without a trace. Then last year, a man who threatened Karin Roland, a man in Federal Witness Protection, met the same fate – disappeared completely. Some

said it was Roland's ex-partner, some said it was done by a Columbian drug cartel. It seemed the Rolands were not a family to fuck with.

Karin Roland refused both the chair in front of Marshall Stephens' desk and the office admin's offer of a cup of coffee. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee at the café down the street. Everyone I've talked to in town said it's the best in Eastern Washington."

It took them five minutes to walk to the café and grab two cups before they sat down on a park bench nearby. No one was close enough to overhear their conversation. Karin opened the dialog.

"I'll come right out with it. After my son was attacked and told me the guy had information Anthony only shared with the Marshall's office I had you checked out. Every cop in Western Washington swears you're a man of integrity; that it couldn't be you who leaked. The trouble is that's contrary to what everyone in the Rangers' Station believes. The word there is you're not to be trusted."

Marshall Stephens shook his head. "I know I have a leak in the office and a few people think I'm on the take. Let me put it this way - if I find out who's selling information, I'll have the son of a bitch prosecuted or at least make certain they never wear a badge again - anywhere. I'm sorry to hear what happened to your son and I'll help you in any way that's legal to find out who it was."

"I believe you, that's why I'm talking to you first before I go out to the Perrison cabin and start asking questions. It's also why I didn't want to have this conversation in your office. Any idea who's leaking?"

"I have a pretty good idea it's Deputy Lawson. He didn't get the Marshall's position when the town hired me. I've had the impression from the start that I'm being undercut by the son of a bitch. Just little things to give the town council reason to refuse my permanent hire once my probation is completed. It doesn't take much in these small towns when I'm the outsider and Lawson is a local kid."

"Why didn't they hire him in the first place?"

"Experience. My twenty-plus years in law enforcement versus his year and a half. But like a lot of young bucks, Lawson thinks he knows everything and is doing his best to spread false rumors. I just can't prove it."

"Maybe when this shakes out I can help you there. If Lawson put my son in danger, he deserves to go to prison."

Stephens saw the look in Karin's eyes. "I can't abide by you breaking the law to get revenge."

"I wouldn't expect you to, everything I do will be legal. But don't expect me to play nice."

The phrase 'tough broad' came to Stephens' mind and he had to hold back a grin. "As long as it's legal, let me know how I can help."

Karin nodded, the calm returning to her face. "So, this is where we share information, but only if it remains between you and me."

"Agreed."

"The man's name is Alexander Crawford. He works as James Perrison's personal security for Clayton Industries. He's former Army, retired and supposedly has a reputation for violence, including rumors he was responsible for the death of his superior officer when he was stationed in Iraq." Karin paused for a second to retrieve the notes

from April. “No one has a current address for Crawford. Only that he has a 2020 Dodge Ram registered to his name in Virginia.”

Stephens interrupted. “What color truck?”

Karin looked at her notes. “Granite Metallic.”

“Damn. Not to get off track, but three weeks ago a hiker was seen getting picked up by a dark pickup. The woman named Mona Gomez just got off the Pacific Coast Trail and like many of these hikers, probably put her thumb out to come into town. She disappeared and the only lead the State Police have is that someone saw a hiker get into a dark pickup on the road near the trailhead about the same timeframe. The witness didn’t get a license, but said it wasn’t a Washington plate.”

Karin shook her head at this news. “Sometimes I hate our job.”

Stephens agreed without saying a word.

Karin continued. “I’d like to flush Crawford out and I’ll need your help.”

“What do you need?”

“I’m headed out to the Perrison home. I’m assuming he won’t be cooperative and he’ll shut me down. Can you plan to drive out there in an hour, ask him a few questions about Alexander Crawford, let him know I’m investigating, shake him up a bit?”

Stephens nodded his agreement. “Not a problem. Anything else?”

“Later this afternoon, tell your deputy that someone has found a body in the woods. Don’t give specifics, tell him you’ve been asked to accompany a Ranger tomorrow morning to help with the investigation. We want Crawford spooked.”

“Won’t it seem odd to Crawford?”

“That’s why we’ll keep the information as vague as possible. Blame it on poor communications or whatever. What we need is the deputy to contact Perrison or Crawford – whoever is his contact, keep them all guessing.”

Stephens was skeptical. “It all sounds complicated. What are the chances this will work?”

“One thing I learned working counter-terrorism with NYPD, the more complicated and harder to believe, the more these types want to believe it, it fits with their paranoid view of the universe.”

“What about the head Ranger, Larry Page?”

“I’ve already asked for Page’s help. He likes my son and agrees to help in any way he can. I’ll call him and let him know what we’re up to, just in case your deputy has a side door into the Ranger Station. Someone there is helping Lawson tarnish your reputation. Page will be just as anxious to know who it is as you are to rid yourself of Lawson.”

Chapter Eleven

Shortly after leaving the Marshall, Karin picked up April at the motel and they headed toward Perrison’s cabin. Karin pulled onto the gravel road that led up to the house, stopping within the first one-hundred yards to let April out of the car. April was clothed head to toe in the camouflage outfit she had purchased that morning at the

outdoor shop in town. Karin continued driving to the front of the cabin as April made her way on foot through the woods.

Karin knocked on the front door. It took a full minute before a middle-aged woman dressed in work-style overalls and holding a duster answered the door. She didn't say anything except, "what?" then waited for Karin to speak.

"Is Mr. Perrison home?"

The woman replied, "Wait here" and closed the door. Two minutes later a middle-aged man opened the door.

"Mr. James Perrison?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"My name is Karin Roland, my son is Ted Harris' roommate. May I speak with your daughter, please?"

"My daughter has returned to Philadelphia."

"Then maybe you can answer some questions. Ted's last known location was your home. Why don't we go inside and talk?"

Perrison became belligerent. "I've already talked to the police and have nothing further to say." He started to close the door.

Karin put her hand on the door and quickly, before the door could shut, asked, "Why did Alex Crawford, a man in your employ, assault and threaten my son if my son didn't stop talking to the police?"

Karin knew she hit a nerve; Perrison quit putting pressure on the door and had a surprised look on his face. The assault on Anthony was news to Perrison. Karin continued. "I take the threat very seriously. If you had anything to do with Ted's disappearance and my son's assault, I will find out and I will make certain you end up in prison!"

James Perrison wondered how this woman knew Alex Crawford's name, but quickly recovered. "I didn't have anything to do with either of those two things. I still think the Harris kid just took off. And as far as your son, maybe the kid got into a fight with Alex. How should I know? Now get off my property before I call the Marshall." This time he was able to slam the door shut. He didn't see the smile on Karin's face – mission accomplished – the guy was spooked. In fact, she could hear him yelling at the maid, telling her not to open the door without seeing who was on the other side.

Karin headed out and found a spot just inside town to wait for April's call.

Within ten minutes of Karin's departure, the Marshall was knocking on the Perrison front door. He heard the maid yell at Mr. Perrison, "You get the damn door since I don't know how to answer a door!" Stephens barely wiped the smile off his face before the door opened and Perrison was there, angry red in the face.

"What do you want, Marshall?"

"Wanted to ask why I had a private investigator, who happens to be one pissed off mother, in my office making a complaint about someone she claims works for you. Do you know an Alexander Crawford?"

Perrison was thinking, "That woman was a PI? This just kept on getting better and better!" Perrison kept his cool, though, while answering the Marshall. "She was just out here asking the same question. If she comes back again I'm going to call you and have her arrested for trespassing."

"You didn't answer my question. Do you know an Alex Crawford?"

"Yes, but like I told that bitch, if Alex did punch the kid, her son must have done something to antagonize Alex."

"Can you tell me where I can find this Crawford?"

Perrison paused a second, wondering whether to lie to the Marshall. "Can't say I know where he is. He comes when I need him, which I don't right now."

Stephens knew he was lying. "If you do see him, ask him to stop by my office so we can straighten this all out. Thanks Mr. Perrison."

The Marshall turned and left Perrison wondering why he didn't press the matter. "Damn, no wonder the guy is working in this one-horse town, he's a complete incompetent. But I guess we're lucky to have such an imbecile in town until I'm out of here." Perrison was talking to himself as he closed the door before shouting to the maid, "Helen, get your ass out of here and come back tomorrow!"

Helen was emptying the dishwasher as Perrison barked his order. She had a steak knife in her hand and fantasized what she'd like to do with it before closing the drawer and heading out the door without even saying goodbye to her employer.

The next part of Karin and April's plan worked as expected. The Marshall left, followed by the maid and within a half hour, Crawford's pickup pulled up to the garage as April sat fifty yards from the house. April immediately crawled under Crawford's vehicle and placed the GPS tracker on the inside of the spare tire.

The GPS tracker was cutting edge technology. Gone were the days when three car shifts were needed to tail a suspect. The tracker was motion sensitive which helped extend the battery life. When the vehicle started to move, the GPS sent a signal to a satellite giving its position. The signal continued while the vehicle was in motion and for thirty seconds after the vehicle stopped. The app on Karin's phone gave the vehicle's location within twenty yards.

After April finished attaching the tracker, she headed over to the house hoping to overhear anything.

Crawford and Perrison had every expectation of privacy, the maid was gone and they were over a half mile from the nearest house or road. April didn't have much trouble hearing their raised voices through an open window as both men yelled at each other.

"What the fuck did you think you were doing, threatening some kid in town?"

Nothing pissed off Crawford as much as this blowhard ex-officer who always thought he was superior in some way. He may be his boss, but Perrison wasn't shit without Alex to prop him up. "Listen asshole – the kid was making noise, insisting his roommate wouldn't disappear like that."

"According to the Marshall, his mother is some kind of private detective."

"I knew that! What makes you think we need to worry about some private eye? Probably chases cheating husbands and wives. They're a dime a dozen."

"Let's hope so. She was out here asking to talk to Geena. Then the Marshall shows up asking if I know you and if I know where you are. This is getting way too complicated. I'm a year from getting the hell out of here with some real money and now this."

"You want me to get rid of the mom?"

"Crap – no way, let's at least wait and see. The last thing we need is for a bunch of bodies starting to pile up."

Crawford almost smiled at Perrison's statement. It was lucky he didn't know about the female hiker or he'd really be sweating bullets.

Perrison finally calmed down. "Keep out of sight until this Roland bitch gets tired of hanging around and leaves. In the meantime, I'm going to make certain Lawson keeps his eyes and ears open. We're paying him enough; he can earn his money."

Crawford decided he needed to get laid, the attempt to pick up some strange at the PCT trailhead didn't work out and it sure wasn't going to happen in this town during the off season. "I'm leaving for Seattle tomorrow. If you need me, call, I'll only be a few hours away."

Perrison was happy Crawford was leaving town for a while. It was harder and harder dealing with the insubordinate prick. If only he didn't need the asshole!

Crawford got into his truck and drove to his cabin in the back corner of the Perrison property. As the vehicle began to move, Karin could follow it on her cell phone. At the same time, she received a text from April. "Come pick me up." Karin started the car and went to collect her partner out by the county road. By the time Karin picked up April, Crawford's truck was sitting still for a while. Both Karin and April thought it odd, according to the Forest Service map, there shouldn't be anything at this location, right on the border between private property and the National Forest. They waited a half hour, but still the vehicle didn't move. Could Crawford have found the tracking device?

Maybe they underestimated Crawford and Perrison. Maybe the hunted became the hunters. If so, were they sitting ducks right now? Was Crawford somehow ready to pull a one-eighty? They talked it over.

"Listen Karin. There's only one way we'll know if we've found where Crawford is hiding out. I'm going to go and find out. Give me your cell so I can follow the GPS signal. You can track me with your 'find my phone' app."

"Why you?" asked Karin.

April was tempted to knock a couple times on Karin's prosthetic leg but thought that would be rude. Instead she answered Karin. "Because I've spent two years doing exactly this, creeping around the jungles in Central America. Please don't argue, you know I'm right."

Karin did know she was right, but she hated the idea of April going out there alone. "Be careful."

April smiled in return and headed out into the woods. Karin turned the car around and went back to where she previously waited. Waiting and worrying.

April made her way slowly through the dense trees keeping her eye out for game cams, booby traps or anyone hiding in wait. Two years in the Central American jungles helped April develop a keen sixth sense. The Pacific Northwest woods were different from the jungle, but the potential threats were somewhat similar.

Through the trees she caught sight of Crawford's truck in front of a small log cabin. The cabin could have been built a hundred years ago but it was in good repair. The logs were chinked and the roof was metal. There was a large cistern tank above the roof which meant they didn't run a well for fresh water. Twenty feet from the cabin there was an outhouse that appeared to still be in use. April spotted the generator on the south side of the cabin; the generator wasn't running. That was good, it meant there was a slim chance of any motion-sensitive lights in the area. But given Crawford's background, more than likely he would have booby-traps set up to protect his privacy.

After taking a few photos from different angles on Karin's phone, April backed off and ran toward the county road, texting Karin to pick her up. As soon as she stepped inside the car, she showed the photos to Karin. "We need to get him away from the cabin so I can take a look inside."

Karin agreed. "Marshall Stephens and I worked out a plan while you were away. This afternoon he'll lead Lawson to believe someone has found a body in the woods. Neither of us think Crawford would be stupid enough to bury a body on Perrison's land. He must have a place deep in the woods, a place where it's a thousand to one that it would be found. We'll play on his fear the 'one' happened. Chances are the missing woman is in the same spot. He'll wonder whether he left something that ties him to the murders."

"You're assuming Crawford murdered both of them?"

"As much as I'd like it different, I have little doubt that's the case. What we need to do is make certain Perrison is implicated for at least Ted's murder."

April nodded. "That plus what Singh pulled off of Harris' cloud account should be enough to send him away for a long time."

"I'd still like to find Ted's body. It will help his family get closure. Otherwise they'll always be wondering."

Neither of them knew Alex Crawford was at that very moment searching his cabin for his only physical link to Ted's murder. While packing a bag for his Seattle trip and folding his light grey coat, he realized Ted Harris' Mini-Mag flashlight wasn't in the pocket of the coat. Crawford sat on the bed thinking, reviewing when he last had the flashlight. He remembered taking the coat off in Harris' Jeep. He put the coat in his backpack before taking off for his long hike home but couldn't remember whether the flashlight was still in the pocket.

"Son of a bitch!" he said it out loud. The flashlight was in one of two places, it was where he dropped off the body or in the damn Jeep. And it had his fingerprints on it. Did he dare return to either location looking for the flashlight? A better question was – did he dare leave it to chance? Crawford sat silently swearing at his own stupidity when his phone rang and it became a moot question.

Before leaving his office at mid-afternoon, Marshall Stephens called Deputy Lawson into his office.

"Lawson, you're in charge tomorrow. I just got a call from the Forest Service. Some hunter was out scouting and found something that looks like a body that's been chewed up. It might be nothing, it might be a crime scene. Which is why they asked me to ride along. I don't know how long this will take."

"Where's the body?"

"Hell, I forgot to ask. I was in the middle of something else when Ranger Page called. I'll let you know tomorrow."

The hook was ready, would Lawson take the bait?

Stephens wasn't out of the office for two minutes before Lawson was on the phone with Perrison.

"Colonel Perrison, you asked me to forward anything that might have something to do with Harris kid's disappearance and this might be something. The Forest Service Ranger called Marshall Stephens and said a hunter came across a body out in the woods."

"What makes them believe it's Ted Harris?"

"The Marshall didn't say, just said he and Page are headed out there first thing tomorrow morning."

Perrison hated dealing with these backwoods yahoos but kept his voice calm. "Where in the woods?"

"Didn't say that either."

It was getting harder for Perrison to keep his cool. He blurted out, "What do you know?"

Lawson almost told the jerk to go stuff himself until he remembered how much the old colonel was paying him and how he had promised to make him Marshall as soon as Stephens was out of the way. "Colonel, Stephens either didn't know or he wasn't sharing. I called you the minute he walked out the door. That's all I know."

Perrison was still bitching about the deputy's incompetence when he called Crawford with the news. Crawford didn't dare tell Perrison that he was so reckless as to lose the Harris kid's flashlight with his fingerprints on it.

"Any reason to believe it's the kid's body they found?"

"None, the Marshall didn't share any information with his deputy or didn't know. Could be Stephens is suspicious of Lawson and is keeping it from him. But how many bodies can there be out there?"

Crawford didn't answer Perrison's question since it was one more thing he kept from him – that there was at least one other body in the forest, the girl he dumped a quarter mile from Harris – and this one had some of his DNA inside of it. Another stupid mistake! Dumping both bodies so close to each other.

Perrison interrupted his thoughts. "Are you still going to Seattle tomorrow?"

"Yeah." Crawford didn't tell Perrison his plans between now and then. He'd run out and check the jeep first; then, if necessary, check the trail above the cliff face. The more he thought about it, the less he was concerned with the Gomez girl's body still having any DNA. Three weeks was plenty of time for the scavengers in these woods to complete their task.

Chapter Twelve

Karin and April sat at the picnic table outside the small pub just outside of town watching the GPS signal. They split a decent Reuben sandwich and an order of fries, both were disappointed having to drink a soft drink instead of any one of the twelve ales the pub had on tap. This wasn't the day to fool around with slowed reaction times.

"Do you think he'll take the bait?" April asked.

"It sure would make our job a lot easier. Otherwise we spend another night here waiting until he leaves tomorrow so we can search the cabin."

Ten minutes later the GPA tracker app gave off a beep. "Crawford's vehicle is moving again." They both watched as the red dot moved out onto the County road and then headed west on the State Highway.

"Let's get into position. If he's headed to Seattle, we'll have two days to search his place." They headed to the SUV.

At the junction they kept an eye on the dot. Fifteen miles west up the State route, the vehicle turned into a marked Forest Service road and headed north. Karin pulled out the Okanagan National Forest map and found the road. There were five trailheads off that road. The red dot showed as vehicle moved west toward the third lot.

"What do you want to do?" April asked.

"I'm going up there. You search his place while I see if I can catch him before he destroys any evidence."

April didn't like it, this was exactly why Hank sent her out west, to stop Karin from taking too many chances. "Why don't we both go up there?"

"Because this could be our best chance to get in that cabin."

April shook her head. "Then let me follow him and you search the cabin."

"It was my kids he threatened."

April knew it was no use arguing with Karin. She hopped out and started up road as Karin shouted, "good luck" and drove toward the State route.

April jogged down the gravel road leading to the cabin's drive. It was a full half mile and she was winded when she stopped to check again for game cams or booby traps. She didn't find anything until she studied the wooden steps up to the porch. The eight screws that held the second and third steps in place had more sheen than the screws on the first step. April looked under the steps and found the small IED underneath. Too small to kill someone but enough to blow a foot off. Crawford was no fool, April could tell the detonator switch was set so it would require at least a hundred pounds before it engaged. The odds of anything but a large mammal, like an adult human, setting it off was remote. April looked under the stairs and deck again, didn't find another booby trap and stepped past the two trapped steps onto the porch.

April spent a full three minutes examining the door. She decided not to take a chance. She kicked the door open and twisted to her right immediately, if the door was a trigger to any explosive, the thick log walls would most likely protect her. Nothing happened. April entered the cabin.

Chapter Thirteen

While April was entering the cabin, Karin was still driving like a bat out of hell down the State Highway toward the Forest Service road. The red dot on the GPS signal suddenly stopped, most likely at the trailhead. Just in case, Karin placed a pin at this location, the app would keep the coordinates in its memory. By now Karin was out of cell tower range, so she turned on the satellite in the SUV and Bluetoothed the phone to the car.

For ten minutes the red dot hadn't moved, then it did; Crawford's truck was now returning to the Forest Service road.

Karin pulled into the Forest Service road and was surprised at the poor condition of the road. Her SUV had AWD, but it wasn't an offroad vehicle. Not wanting to get stuck out here, she slowed down to 10 MPH. It wouldn't matter anyway, this road was the only way out of the National Forest and Crawford would have to come her way to exit.

Karin watched the red dot head her way. She stopped to check her sidearm. Dropping the magazine, clearing the weapon, dry firing to relieve the firing pin, checking the magazine to make certain it was fully loaded, and smacking the magazine's spine to prevent jams. Karin took two deep breaths before seating the magazine back into the weapon and sliding a round into the chamber.

Checking her watch, she was pleased her heart rate was seventy-five beats per minute. She closed her eyes for thirty seconds and checked again. "Good." It was now below seventy. Karin continued driving up the road, looking

for a good spot where her vehicle could block Crawford's truck from getting past her. She found a decent spot and estimated Crawford was ten or so miles away and still coming toward her.

Then the red dot turned east. "What the hell is he up to?" Karin cursed silently while checking the Forest Service map again. This had to be the road going toward a remote trailhead at least fifteen miles northeast into the steep canyon near Baldy Peak. Karin sent a text to April, letting her know what direction she was heading and moved the gearshift into Drive, slowly proceeding toward the second trailhead road.

April felt her cell phone vibrate and checked the new message from Karin. On the one hand she was pissed that Karin was driving deeper into the woods in pursuit of Crawford. Was Crawford aware he was being followed and leading her into a trap? On the other hand, April was pleased she'd have at least another two or three hours to search this cabin. It took her thirty minutes to make certain the two-room cabin was clear of any additional booby traps or surveillance. After that, she meticulously searched the main room for any hidden compartments and so far hadn't found a thing. It would take her another hour before she could get started on the second room. Both rooms were bare bones by normal standards, but April knew a man with Crawford's reputation with no convictions meant he was very careful.

Crawford was exhausted, not so much from the physical exertion as the anxiety. After searching the Harris kid's jeep and the surrounding area for the flashlight without luck, he backtracked to the Forest Service road toward the trailhead where he dumped the kid's body, swearing the entire forty minutes it took him to drive from one remote trailhead to the other. He parked the truck, took the Colt .45 out of the console, grabbed the backpack and the seventy-five-foot length of rope before jogging the quarter mile down the trail. He was jogging because it was getting dark. He knew exactly where on the trail he needed to look because of the mark he left on the uphill cliff face, but he'd need some light to find the mark.

He found the mark and immediately located the Maglite just off the trail where he had thrown Harris off the cliff. It was sitting there two feet from the edge. Another two feet and he would have had to repel forty or so feet to check the bottom of the gully, then climb the rope back up. Crawford wiped flashlight clean of his prints then threw it over the cliff. No sense getting caught with the damn thing. No longer in a hurry to beat sundown, Crawford walked back to his truck. His duffle bag was in the truck, he would head straight to Seattle.

April's first pass through both rooms of the cabin didn't produce anything of value. She returned to the bedroom and sat down on the bed, looking around the room. The bedroom contained a queen-sized bed on a plain metal frame, a six drawer double dresser, and a hanging rack of clothes because there wasn't a closet. April had already turned the mattress upside-down to check for hidden pockets and had pulled all the drawers out of the dresser to look for hidden compartments. There were two hanging cheap metal framed posters on the wall, both better suited hanging on a frat-boy's college dorm wall since they were photos of semi-nude silicone-enhanced Barbie dolls. Whether Crawford hung these up or they were leftovers from the days when the cabin was used by hunters, April didn't know and didn't want to guess. The only other piece of furniture was an old wash basin on a pedestal. A search of this came up empty.

All four walls were logs with no deviations. The floor was fir and the ceiling was pine. April pointed her LED flashlight across both the floor and ceiling, sweeping slowly in a grid. She grabbed the broom in the other room

and spent twenty minutes crisscrossing the eight by ten room, tapping with the broom handle, listening for any hollow sound.

April's eyes swept the bedroom one last time. She was ready to begin her second search of the main room when she focused on the metal clothes rack. She already searched the dozen hanging coats, pants and shirts, but now thought of something else – the frame. April tossed the clothes on top of the bed and began dismantling the rack. Each metal frame piece was hollow. As she dismantled each piece, she looked through its center. The first two pieces were empty. The third had a rolled up Moleskin notebook and the fourth two leather pouches.

Chapter Fourteen

Alexander Crawford could hardly believe his eyes, he blinked twice just to make certain he wasn't imagining this. There in the middle of the road was a white SUV blocking his path out of here. And standing beside the SUV was a middle-aged suburban soccer mom, except this soccer mom was holding a semi-auto in her hand. Crawford stopped his truck twenty yards short of the SUV and thought for a second. There wasn't room to get around the SUV, the road was less than two car-widths wide with a cliff on the uphill side and a steep drop-off on the downhill side. The SUV was too big for his truck to push it out of the way.

"Damn!" All the reasons for choosing this mountain as a great spot for dumping bodies made it a trap for his truck.

The woman's voice brought him back to the present. "Get out of the truck with your hands in the air where I can see them. If you have any weapons, toss them out the window before getting out of the truck. Now!"

The old broad did speak with some authority. Maybe she was a cop in a former lifetime. Crawford considered a couple courses of action. He could drop down on the seat and try for the passenger door, the door would offer him some protection if she fired. He could get out of the driver's side and use some feint before drawing his gun. He had no doubt of his ability to win in any fair gunfight, but she had her weapon ready to fire and that decreased his odds considerably.

Then there was the one course of action that appealed to Crawford above all others. The same way he took care of that bitch MP at Fort Wainwright when he was stationed up in Alaska.

Twelve years ago, it was his good luck and the MP's bad luck that Corporal Haines was patrolling alone that night, alone because it was 4:00 AM on Christmas Eve and no one expected trouble. Alex had broken into the Officers' Club and loaded thirty cases of premium labelled booze into his truck.

As he pulled out from around the back of the club, he almost slammed into the MP's jeep as it cruised down the street. Both vehicles stopped, their bumpers within a foot of each other. Corporal Haines didn't have a chance to call it in and before Crawford got his truck in reverse, she was out of the jeep, her hand on her service weapon, yelling for Crawford to stop. Crawford put the truck in 'Park' and waited.

"Step out of the vehicle, sir!" Haines demanded. She still had her right hand on the Baretta's grip, still in the holster because at this point the situation was merely suspicious.

Crawford stepped out and walked toward the MP, his hands by his side.

When Haines saw the size of the man walking toward her, she pulled the Baretta out of the holster and pointed it at Crawford.

"Stay right there and put your hands on top of your head!" said Haines, then started to walk backwards toward the jeep so she could call dispatch.

Instead of obeying Haines' command, Crawford kept his hands where the MP could see them and walked toward her.

"I'm unarmed."

"Stop right there." Haines kept the gun pointed at Crawford but it was starting to shake a bit.

"Don't shoot, I'm unarmed." Crawford was three feet from Haines, moved his right hand to distract Haines and reached forward with his left to seize the Baretta out of the MP's hands. He put the gun in his coat pocket, looking down on the woman. He stood almost nine inches above her and outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds.

He loved the look of fear in the woman's eyes as his right hand clamped down on the MP's small throat and his left hand pulled the zipper down her insulated parka before fondling her breasts over the blouse. Crawford kept his hand tight on the throat. "You like that, dyke? You like the feel of a real man on these tits? How about this?" He left her breasts to grab her crotch.

Corporal Janet Haines was frozen in fear. Her only thought was of her three children. Her husband, a pipefitter who worked on the Alaska Pipeline, and the children were spending Christmas Eve with her husband's parents because she had to work. What kind of Christmas would they have if they woke up on Christmas morning to learn their mother was dead – murdered? Every Christmas for the rest of their lives would be tainted by the ghost of this morning's event.

Crawford kept the pressure on the frozen woman's throat, just enough to cause her to feel dizzy but not enough for her to lose consciousness. "I could crush your throat without any effort," he increased the pressure slightly for emphasis, "or not" as he backed off on the pressure.

The feeling of power over this woman, especially given she was an MP, was almost sexual. There was no time to do the things Alex wanted to do to her, all the physical pleasure he could derive from this body, he'd be happy for now with the almost spiritual pleasure of watching her eyes as tears rolled down her cheeks. Her heart rate pushing in the triple digits as his fingers felt blood passing through the artery in her neck.

Crawford reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the MP's Baretta, cocked the hammer and stuck the muzzle in Haines' mouth. The pungent odor made him smile as Haines' bladder released.

"You're never going to tell anyone about our little run in. If you do, two things will happen. One, everyone will know how I took your gun away and made you my bitch, how you froze in fear. Number two, I'll find you and kill you, then I'll kill anyone you ever loved. Do we understand one another?"

Haines nodded yes. Crawford removed the muzzle from her mouth. "Say it out loud."

"Yes" was all she could get out.

"Say, 'yes sir' louder."

"Yes, sir."

Crawford released her throat and Haines fell to her knees. Crawford emptied the Barretta, tossing the magazine in a snowbank across the street and clearing the chamber. He jumped in the jeep and backed it out of his way so the truck could get past. Haines was still on the ground, shivering and weeping. He grabbed the collar of her parka and

dragged her out of the way, got in his truck and drove to the warehouse in town where the owner of four local bars waited with the three thousand dollars for the thirty cases.

Crawford counted the money – he trusted no one – and pulled one bottle of top shelf bourbon out of one case. “A Christmas present to myself.” Crawford waved the bottle to the two men standing there and drove home. The bottle was empty before New Year’s.

No one ever came for Alex Crawford and he wasn’t surprised to hear that Corporal Janet Haines left Fort Wainwright and the Army before January 31st.

Twelve-plus years after that night at Fort Wainwright, Crawford looked at the woman standing in front of his truck and made his decision, he would play this just as he had then. At the same time, Karin was rethinking her positioning. She could stand behind the passenger’s door and use it as a shield if Crawford decided to start shooting, but that would put her in a poor position if he tried to exit out of his passenger side of his truck and ran for the woods for cover. She never envied those State Troopers or County Sheriffs, out alone stopping vehicles on semi-deserted roads. As a city cop, she almost always had a backup nearby.

Karin decided to stay in front of her vehicle and be ready, it gave her the best field of vision and flexibility to react if Crawford made a run for the woods.

“Crawford – I said throw your weapons out of the window and come out with your hands in the air where I can see them. Anything else gets me shooting!”

Karin watched the onyx-handled .45 fall to the ground followed by a KA-Bar knife. Crawford stared at her through the windshield and showed her both hands. He reached down with one hand and opened the door using the outside handle, then raised that hand back up as the door swung open. Karin kept her focus on Crawford, waiting for the slightest move meant to distract her. It surprised Karin when it didn’t come. Instead, Crawford moved slowly out of the truck, keeping his hands up.

“I’m not armed.” He closed the truck’s door with his hip. “I’m surrendering and I’m unarmed.” He took three steps toward Karin. His face was neutral without a trace of malice.

“Stay where you are. Do not approach me. Get down on your knees, NOW!” Karin yelled.

“Don’t shoot, I’m unarmed.” Crawford said it again as he took two more steps and was about to sprint the last eight feet and grab her gun when he heard the explosion. His legs instantly buckled below him.

“You shot me! You shot an unarmed man!” He couldn’t understand it. Who the hell was this bitch? He looked up and saw that she still had the damn gun pointed at him. Worse of all, there was no look of panic or angst on her face.

“To paraphrase Clint Eastwood in ‘Unforgiven’, ‘If you are going to threaten my children, you should have armed yourself’.”

Alex looked down and moved his hands from his waist. “I’m bleeding and you’re telling me movie lines?”

Karin looked down on the guy and kept the gun pointed at his chest. “All I want to know is this – where is Ted Harris’ body?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Call an ambulance to get me out of here.”

Karin was shaking her head. “Not going to happen until you tell me where Ted is.”

“I don’t know. Perrison must have dumped the kid somewhere.”

“Bullshit, Perrison doesn’t get dirty. Everyone knows that’s why he has you around – to do his dirty work. Tell me where the body is, then tell me what Perrison told you to do, and then I’ll call for help on my satellite phone. I’ve got all day – you don’t.”

Crawford caved. “About a quarter mile up the trail, he fell over the cliff. He tried to take off on me but tripped in the dark. Probably broke his neck or something. It was an accident; we were only trying to scare the kid.”

“So, Perrison set it all up?”

“Yeah, the kid found Perrison’s papers in his den and needed the kid to shut up about it. Like I said, the kid wasn’t supposed to die, just scared.”

“What about the PCT hiker, the Gomez girl, where is she?”

Crawford couldn’t believe this, how much did this witch know, and how does she know it?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Karin shook her head again. “Once more – I have all day and you have maybe an hour. Don’t be stupid.”

Options again. If he doesn’t tell the bitch, she lets him bleed out. If he tells her, maybe a good lawyer keeps him out of prison. Any decent attorney can get the evidence thrown out because of duress, given he’s shot and bleeding. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d been found ‘not guilty’ because of a technicality.

“I’m not admitting to anything, but I thought I saw a body down below another quarter mile on the same trail. Now, call that ambulance.”

“I will as soon as you tell me the truth. You’re lying about the hiker which leads me to believe you’re lying about Ted.”

Crawford got mad and tried to get up, realizing for the first time that his legs didn’t work. He tried moving them and couldn’t. He moved his hands and looked at the wound, dead center just below his sternum. The bullet must have hit his spine.

“You crippled me, you bitch!” Crawford screams at Karin.

“So? You’re probably going to die here anyway since you keep lying to me. You won’t need your legs.”

Crawford always knew and accepted he might die violently, given the way he lived his life, but he always swore he’d never spend a day in prison or die by the hand of a woman. This was so damn unfair! He didn’t deserve to die like this, shot by a middle-aged soccer mom. He had one more trick up his sleeve.

“Can I at least have some water? There’s a bottle in the cup holder in my truck.”

Karin thought about it. Could she be compassionate? The scene reminded her of a movie she watched with Bill and Anthony. ‘Heat’ starred Robert DeNiro and Al Pacino. DeNiro plays a bank robber who during a shoot-out has killed a number of policemen and Pacino is the Detective tracking him down. (Spoiler Alert) Pacino shoots DeNiro and as DeNiro is dying, holds DeNiro’s hand as an act of humanity. Karin never understood that scene. She never felt any empathy toward the men she killed because they were all monsters. Men who preyed on weaker people. And this Alexander Crawford? Crawford dying meant one less monster in the world.

But it wouldn't be too terrible to relieve his dry mouth. Besides, maybe it will help him loosen his tongue, Karin had a few more questions. Karin walked past Crawford, kicked his Colt and knife away before opening the door to reach in for the water bottle.

There it was – the moment Crawford waited for – this moment. She was no different from the hundred pigeons who proceeded her. All those who were so easy to take advantage of because they were weak and willing to think Alex had some humanity inside him. Crawford couldn't see Karin but assumed she was looking inside the truck for his water bottle when he heard the door open. But instead, Karin was waiting to see what Crawford would do if he thought she wasn't paying attention. Crawford reached inside his boot for the little .380 ACP he kept there. He was pulling it out and turning himself toward where he thought she'd be standing, he was raising the little semi-auto as he turned; he heard Karin say, "you idiot" and everything went black as his head exploded from the bullet when it entered his forehead and mushroomed through his brain.

Karin checked the lifeless body, then walked over to her vehicle. The cell phone buzzed with an incoming text message from April. *'Got it – call when u can'*.

Chapter Fifteen

Karin made the call, April answered with the words, "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine." Then proceeded to fill April in on everything that transpired since dropping her off.

"Did he tell you where he hid the Harris kid's body?"

"I think so – and the missing hiker."

April knew it was a thousand to one the missing hiker would still be alive but was still saddened when Karin confirmed the girl was dead.

"Crawford left a small notebook hidden here in the cabin. It's more of a CYA in case Perrison ever turned on him. There's nothing in here about the girl, but he does state Perrison paid him twenty grand to get rid of Harris. There's also a leather bag with some jewelry inside. Maybe it's Crawford's trophy case."

Karin was pleased. "Great work, April. I'm going to call Marshall Stephens and ask him to meet me out here. I'll have him pick you up on the way, bring the notebook, but don't share it with the Marshall just yet. I want to read it before it goes into evidence."

"Okay but give me another half hour before he picks me up. I need to dismantle a booby trap before I leave. I want him to pick me up at the State Highway just in case something goes sideways. I don't want anyone threatening me with a B&E."

As soon as Karin hung up with April, she dialed the Marshall and made arrangements for him to meet her after picking up April. She texted him the GPS coordinates and asked if he could keep this off the radio for now. "I'll tell you why when you get here." Stephens reluctantly agreed.

The sky was darkening when Stephens pulled up with April. Karin reviewed the chain of events from the time Crawford's truck pulled up to Karin's vehicle until when Crawford went for his boot gun and was shot a second time.

Karin and April were concerned when the Marshall asked one of his follow up questions. "So, Crawford had thrown down his .45 and the knife before he approached you and you shot him the first time?"

"Yes, I gave him two warnings. He didn't hesitate as he continued toward me."

"Well, he outweighs you by a hundred pounds and he's got a clear history of violence. I'd say that's self-defense, his bare hands are obviously lethal weapons."

Karin was relieved. She had no doubt in her own mind that the shooting was justified and self-defense, but it would save a great deal of time and expense if the Marshall agreed and wrote his report of the shooting that way.

"I'd like to follow up with James Perrison before you go to arrest him. You're going to get a warrant for his arrest before you go out to his place. With what we found off the papers in Ted Harris' cloud account, Perrison has some locals, including some County officials, on his payroll. They'll try to warn him, giving him time to destroy evidence. If you show up because I'm calling you from his home, you'll have time to secure the premises."

Karin could tell the Marshall was debating with himself. He finally spoke. "I can't have you going up there and blasting his ass away. I don't want another shooting or death."

Karin shook her head. "I just plan to talk to him, not physically hurt him. What I want is for Perrison to sit in prison for the rest of his life. And not a Federal country club prison. I'm hoping the State has first crack at him for what he did to snuff out Ted's young life, think you can convince the powers that be?"

Stephens nodded. "I think enough people owe me favors we can make it happen. It would have been the same for this one had he lived." Stephens pointed at Crawford's body with his eyes.

"I don't think so. Crawford may have hated being locked up at first, but within a year he'd be wearing Aryan tattoos and terrorizing anyone weaker than him. His kind always find a way to prey on the weak. Perrison doesn't have the balls this one had."

April was listening to this exchange and finally interrupted. "How about I go with you?" she asked Karin.

Karin shook her head and pulled April to where they couldn't be overheard. "I'd rather you stayed with the Marshall. I'm going to be breaking in and I don't want any witnesses."

"So - you are going to kill him."

"No, trust me. I want him alive and talking. Give me the notebook you found in the cabin. I need to give it a quick read before I talk to Perrison."

April pulled the notebook out of her pants pocket and handed it to Karin. "Be careful."

Karin nodded, then spoke to the Marshall. "I'm off then, I'll call you to pick him up in a few hours."

The Marshall was already regretting his agreement with the PI. "Don't forget our deal, no rough stuff."

Karin held up three fingers. "Girl Scouts' honor." And took off with a smile.

April walked up behind the Marshall. "You can trust her. I've never known her to betray a friend; and you've made a friend."

For the next hour, April stood back, watching the Marshall take photos and processing the scene. It took two hours from the time Stephens called the County Sheriff's department before the coroner's wagon showed up to

transport the body to the morgue. A deputy sheriff arrived minutes before the wagon, Marshall Stephens reviewed the photos and scene with the deputy and asked whether there was a need to secure the area any longer.

“What about his truck? Do you need a tow truck?”

“I’ll drive it back.” April offered.

The deputy was satisfied and, after arranging a search party at first light in the morning, left at the same time as the coroner’s wagon. The County Sheriff was already on the phone with the State Police and Forest Service Rangers to have a team ready to find the two bodies in the gully.

A half hour later April followed the Marshall’s SUV in Crawford’s pickup out of the woods and toward town. As soon as she had cell service again, she checked her phone for messages and was worried when there wasn’t anything from Karin. For the third time in the past two days April wondered why she let Karin convince her to separate. And for the third time she hoped Karin’s luck would hold out.

Chapter Sixteen

Karin kicked the bed a second time, this time a little harder than the first. The bottle of sleeping pills and the bottle of Scotch next to the bed was most likely the reason she had such a hard time rousting the naked man.

Perrison opened his eyes, shaking the fog in his brain. “Who the hell do you think you are - breaking into my house?”

“Don’t you remember me?”

Perrison suddenly remembered his nakedness but decided to act tough despite his discomfort because he didn’t see the woman standing next to his bed as much of a threat. “Yes, now get out of my house before I call the Marshall.”

Karin gave him a slight grin. “Why not call Deputy Lawson? I’m assuming you have him on speed dial.”

Perrison was once again stunned. Earlier this afternoon the woman knew about Alex Crawford working for him, now she’s telling him about Lawson. How much does she know?

“Maybe I’ll call Alex.” Perrison tried to sound threatening as he said it.

Damn, how she loved these assholes, always underestimating a woman. Thinking tough talk will scare or intimidate a woman. “Go ahead, give him a call. I’ll wait.” She threw him his phone that she found on one of his nightstands.

They both could hear the ringing until Crawford’s voicemail demanded the caller leave a message.

Perrison left a short “call me” before pressing ‘end’. Looking up at Karin, he said, “He must be out of cell service.”

Karin’s voice had a cheerful tone when she replied, “well, he’s definitely out of service.”

Before Perrison could make sense of what she said, Karin grabbed his phone now that it was unlocked. She took a step back to put some distance between them and with one eye on Perrison and the other on the phone, she scrolled through the log of calls to Crawford’s number. She kept her gun pointed on Perrison. “What made you think I’d let you and your little sidekick threaten my son and his girlfriend?”

"I had nothing to do with that. Crawford acted on his own." Perrison kept up the banter as he made his plans to end this farce. "Let's say I know what you're taking about. Number one, I never threatened anyone. Number two, if you knew anything about my 'little friend', you wouldn't be sitting in my room making your own threats."

At that moment Perrison moved quickly, more quickly than Karin anticipated, but it didn't matter. As Perrison reached into the shelf on the far side nightstand, he came up empty.

Karin put the phone down and raised the Colt 1911 out of the back of her waistband; pointing it at Perrison. "Looking for this?"

Perrison thought about charging, but he was in no position to get to her, especially given Karin now had two guns aimed directly at his heart and she chose that moment to cock the hammer back on the Colt, the distinctive 'click' sounded loud in the room.

"Please Colonel Perrison, please make me pull the trigger." Karin said the word 'Colonel' with a smirk in her voice.

Perrison didn't move but kept his eyes open for another chance to get out of this. He now had the bed between him and Karin which didn't afford too many opportunities.

"Kneel asshole! And put your hands on the bed." Karin kept her gun pointed at Perrison's chest but lowered the Colt directly at his groin area.

Perrison did as he was told. Karin threw a pair of handcuffs at him and told him to put them on. As soon as they were secured, Karin released the hammer on the Colt and returned it to her belt behind her. She picked the phone back up and continued to scroll until she found what she was looking for. A call to Crawford the night Ted Harris disappeared, just about the time Geena told Marshall Stephens in her statement that her father returned early from his Seattle trip.

Best of all, an hour later, Perrison received a text from Crawford which read, *'done, get my truck and put it in your garage, back late tomorrow'*.

Karin continued. "You and I are going to sit here for the next hour or so. Then Marshall Stephens will be coming to take you away. I wanted to take this opportunity to tell you why your life is about to turn to shit. Oh, by the way, Alexander Crawford won't be coming to your rescue, he seems to be having trouble breathing."

Perrison was sweating now, even though the room was sixty degrees. Not only was this little bitch smiling, but her words started to sink in: Stephens coming? Crawford having trouble breathing?

Karin interrupted his train of thought and explained. "Crawford and I ran into each other earlier this evening. When he tried to jump me, he made a huge error in judgement. I shot him in the gut. Then got cute and tried to pull his three-eighty out of his boot. Now he's dead. Oh, you want to know the best part? He had time to talk before I shot him the second time."

Now Perrison was really worried.

"Not that it mattered much, but it was nice to fill in some of the blanks. Plus, the Harris family will at least be able to bury their son.

"You, however, will be spending the next few decades in a State and then Federal Prison. You fucked with the wrong people. Your crimes up until now kept you under the radar. You were too small a fish to deal with.

"So, here's what we know: We know you paid Alexander Crawford twenty-thousand dollars to have Ted Harris murdered. We know about the bribes to the Afghan Defense Minister and your recent attempts to bribe the

Malaysian Ministers. Both Federal crimes. Then there are the bribes made to the local county commissioners and planning employees, plus Deputy Lawson. Did I mention the fact Ted Harris' phone automatically backed up all its photos to the cloud? We have the photos he took the night you had him murdered."

Karin paused a minute to let it sink in. "The Justice Department and Army will be looking into your dealings while you were stationed in Iraq, some of the crimes you committed have no statute of limitation. Even if they have trouble making some of those stick, you'll be paying such high attorney fees it will make your head spin."

Karin stood up and walked around the bed to where Perrison was kneeling, his face twisted in agony. He knew he was royally screwed.

"You want to know the best part of all this? I made a deal with the Marshall. He's going to make certain you go to the State prison at Monroe for Ted's murder before you serve any time in a Club Fed. You'll be with the bad boys – the white, brown and black gangs. If you survive that, then maybe you get to finish your life on Earth in a Federal prison."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Perrison was weeping.

"Your biggest mistake was fucking with my family! Because of you my son got jumped in the men's room and could have been seriously injured. Hell, the only reason you're walking out of this bedroom with your balls is because he'll be all right in a couple weeks."

Karin's cell phone sounded a notification of an incoming text. It was from Stephen's cell. *'just pulling up and coming in – everything ok?'*

'yes' she answered.

Stephens and April walked into the bedroom and April took the gun from Karin's hand. Karin relinquished both guns without saying a word, but she did give her friend a nod of thanks. Her blood pressure was high, her jaw was tight. She walked out of the room without saying another word.

"Do you need either of us for anything right now?" April asked the Marshall as the Marshall took Perrison by the arm, still handcuffed, and led him out to the great room where they could sit on the leather sofas.

"No, I'm good here. I called my old partner from the King County Sheriff's Office and he'll be here in another hour. I'll swear him in as a deputy and let him secure this place until I can get a search warrant."

"You'll want someone to secure Crawford's cabin. There's a gravel road that leads to it, I'll mark the entrance with a ribbon. I was out there earlier to have a look around. Check under the last two steps leading up to the porch. There's a booby trap there, an IED with enough explosive to blow someone's legs off. I disarmed it, but you'll probably want someone with the expertise to dispose of it."

Marshall Stephens shook his head in wonder, thinking, 'who is this woman'. What came out of his mouth was a simple, "Thanks, under the steps you say?"

"Yeah, I looked around but didn't find any others, but that doesn't mean there aren't others. I broke down the front door, to make certain the missing hiker wasn't tied up inside, so be careful."

The Marshall had so much on his mind that he didn't think to ask what April was doing around Crawford's cabin. That would come later – maybe or maybe not. He heard the front door closing as the two women left Stephens alone with the prisoner. Perrison spoke for the first time since April and Stephens entered the house.

"Hello, Mark."

Chapter Seventeen

April wasn't surprised to find Karin sitting in the passenger seat of her SUV. She opened the driver's side door and hopped in.

"You going to be okay?"

"Yeah, give me a little time. It's starting to hit me now that the adrenaline is wearing off. I could keep it together when Perrison was loose. Now with him in custody, I'm trying not to cry."

April squeezed Karin's hand. "It wouldn't be the end of the world if you cried. Wasn't it just two days ago we talked about how hard it is to take a man's life? Only the two of us are here, I'm not going to judge you and there aren't any macho assholes around."

Karin didn't cry, in fact, she gave her friend a smile. "Thanks"

April headed down the drive, down the County road and into the drive toward the cabin. She stopped the SUV and put it in 'Park'.

Karin looked around. "Why are you pulling over here?"

April opened her door. "Wait here, I'll only be a half minute." April placed a ribbon on a branch, then stepped around the back of a huge pine tree twenty feet off the road. She returned holding two leather sleeves and put both on the center console. Karin waited patiently, April put the vehicle in gear and spoke as they headed up the gravel drive.

April pointed at the two sleeves and explained. "I'm going to return the notebook, put it somewhere half hidden so whoever searches the cabin is sure to find it. I'm keeping these two," indicating the two pouches, "one has a baker's dozen of what I think are Crawford's trophies, the other you should look for yourself." April handed it to Karin.

Karin picked up the two-pound bag, opened the sleeve and turned it upside-down into her hand. When the first two gold pieces fell out, she quickly lowered the sleeve's bottom to prevent any others from escaping. Karin brought the two coins up to look closer.

April spoke. "Krugerrands, full one-ounce. There are thirty-two in there, total worth in the neighborhood of sixty-thousand. I'm going to use them to pay myself and try to track what happened to whomever owned those thirteen pieces in the first bag.

"I thought about this ever since you told me about the hiker's body being dumped in the woods. That poor woman's family would have never known what happened to her if Crawford hadn't attacked Anthony in that bathroom. The only reason why Ted Harris and Mona Gomez's bodies were found is because you got involved."

Karin couldn't argue with April's logic, but she didn't have a chance to ask her follow up questions as they pulled up to the cabin.

When April jumped in the vehicle after returning the notebook, the two women discussed the ethics of keeping the gold coins and the trophies. Before they arrived back at the motel, Karin was comfortable with April's plan.

"Call me if you need me." ended the discussion.

Marshall Mark Stephens stood staring at his prisoner, wondering why Perrison had the nerve to address him with such familiarity. Emboldened by the Marshall's silence, Perrison pressed on.

"Mark, now that those two are gone, don't you think there's an opportunity for you and me to make some kind of arrangement to our mutual benefit?"

Stephens gave the impression he was willing to listen. "What did you have in mind, Colonel?"

Perrison was pleased the Marshall addressed him by his rank. "Well, if Alex is no longer 'breathing' as that bitch detective put it, Clayton Industries and I will need a new security chief. Alex made a little over a hundred-fifty thousand a year. I heard about your divorce; you could probably use an increase from what you make in this dipshit one-horse town."

"I won't kill people." Stephens replied.

Perrison smiled. "You wouldn't have to kill anyone. Alex did that as an independent contractor, not as an employee of Clayton."

"What would I have to do?"

Perrison's smile widened, the bait had been presented, now to set the hook. "First off, take these cuffs off, then help me defend myself against these ridiculous charges. I'm not saying I haven't cut a few deals here in the County to get my project off the ground, but if anyone thinks I had something to do with having the Harris boy killed – why, that's outrageous slander. Todd was my daughter's boyfriend; I couldn't do anything to break my baby's heart. Alex must have made it all up to cover for his own carelessness in whatever accident caused the poor boy's death. My daughter will be heartbroken."

Stephens was silent, giving Perrison the impression he was considering his offer. "It seems like I'm taking a big chance, risking my pension and maybe prison just to double my current salary."

Perrison thought it's time to change bait. "What if I sweetened the pot? Let's say you get a signing bonus of a year's salary up front and a base pay of two-hundred grand a year."

"I won't perjure myself in court."

"And you won't have to. If you write this up right, my attorneys will make certain no charges will ever be filed."

Marshall Stephens took his cell phone out of his breast pocket to make certain it was still recording. Which it was. He kept Perrison talking, asking questions about the security position – how much foreign travel, whether there was back-up – until he heard a car pull up into the drive. There was a knock on the front door and Stephens yelled, "Come on in".

Two men walked into the house. Stephens was only expecting Dave Phillips, his old partner. Samuel Johnson was with him. Dave didn't give Mark a chance to ask.

"When you told me what you're dealing with out here I thought 'more is merrier' and safer. I asked Sam to join me and he was happy to oblige."

Stephens knew Sam, Dave's neighbor and a fellow officer from the Tukwila P.D. He shook Sam's hand. "Glad to have you, thanks."

Turning to address Dave. "You're just in time. I was tired of listening to this asshole's line of bullshit. He's been offering me a bribe to let him go free."

Both Dave and Sam broke up laughing when they heard this; anyone in law enforcement on the Westside knew Mark as a straight-shooter.

Perrison interrupted the hilarity. "I did no such thing! There was no bribe!"

Stephens pulled the phone out of his breast pocket. "We'll let a jury decide."

"I'm taking this scum bag to the County jail. Dave, I need you to secure this place until the State Police show up. Sam, there's a cabin nearby that needs securing. I'll drive you over there. I told the State guys we needed enough bodies to go through both places. They're supposed to bring search warrants and a bomb squad tech. There's at least one IED in need of disposal."

Chapter Eighteen

When two State Detectives arrived at the County lockup, James Perrison made a big stink claiming he was assaulted by Karen Roland. The detectives replied that his complaint was a town matter, not in their jurisdiction, and that he could take the matter up with the Welford Marshall the next time Perrison was in town. Neither detective seemed upset by Perrison's continuous complaints as they loaded him into their SUV and headed to the State lockup in Spokane.

It took a full day before two carloads of State agents with search warrants and found enough evidence to keep Perrison locked up for at least twenty years solely on State charges. Due to the charge of conspiracy to commit multiple counts of murder and evidence he had offshore resources, Perrison was denied bail and never saw the outside of a prison when he died fifteen years later of a heart attack. Of course, the Feds tried to grab Perrison for all the Federal crimes he committed, but the State held fast, thanks to Marshall Stephens influential friends, and the Feds had to wait their turn. A turn which never came when Perrison died at Monroe State Prison.

A number of officials, individuals and groups were embarrassed when the treasure trove of documents and recordings found in Perrison's home were examined. Two County Planning employees were fired and their pensions forfeited. One County judge pled guilty to lesser charges of accepting bribes. Deputy Lawson decided to take his chances with a jury of his 'peers', given his lifelong County residency. The jury came back with a verdict of 'guilty' on all counts and Lawson spent three years in prison.

The Mitalkwi River Citizen Council barely survived the embarrassment when the recordings of the meetings held at the Perrison home were released by an unknown person. The MRCC president was heard saying "we need to get as many of these uneducated Neanderthals out of the valley as soon as we can. They don't think like us, vote like us or even smell like us! Hell, one of their spawn had the tenacity to ask my daughter out on a date. She said, 'yes' until I put my foot down and threatened to take her car away."

A second voice agreed. "We'll set up a bus line to shuttle them in and out because we'll still need them for maids, waitstaff and such. Hell, that's what they do in Aspen!"

That was only one of many meetings when the group of elites expressed their disdain for the working-class residents of "our valley". The noise died down when all the MRCC officers resigned, but contributions nearly dried up for the next decade.

Chapter Nineteen

April Coons, now Price, knocked on the door of the well-maintained double-wide trailer just on the outskirts of Fairbanks. April wondered how a trailer stood up to the harsh Alaska winters. She was pleased when a middle-aged woman answered the door. The woman's dress and overall appearance reminded April that much of Alaska was still a frontier.

"Mrs. Janice Haines?"

"Yes?" Mrs. Haines answered as she looked at the woman with suspicion. They didn't get many visitors out here. She wasn't too worried, she was holding Duke's collar; Duke being the big half German Shepard, half wolf that was very protective of Janice and the children.

"Mrs. Haines, my name is April Price. I'm a private investigator and I've been hired to find individuals who may have had a prior confrontation with a man by the name of Alexander Crawford."

At the mention of Crawford's name, the woman's facial expression went from curious/neutral to hostile/alarmed. April saw the change and immediately tried to calm her.

"Alexander Crawford is dead."

"How did he die?"

"Can I come in? It's cold out here." April had flown in from Seattle, where with Spring weather everything was in bloom; Fairbanks was still at least a month from Spring and April wasn't dressed for the weather.

Janice held Duke and waved April into the front room. The inside was just as well maintained as the outside.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee?" Janice asked.

April was pleased with the offer. "Yes, black, thanks."

April stood at the counter while Janice poured the coffee. Duke settled himself on the carpet next to a Lazy Boy recliner.

"He was shot and killed by a female private investigator in Washington State."

"Good!"

April pulled the locket out of her coat pocket. "Is this yours?" She held it out to the woman, who took it and started to tear up as she gazed at it.

"It was a gift from my husband when I left for basic training. We were dating and he wanted me to know he'd be waiting for me when I decided to accept his marriage proposal. How did you get it?"

"Let's sit down and talk." April suggested.

They sat in the living room, April on the sofa, Janice in a rocker, the coffee table between them where they set their cups on the coasters the Haines twins had made in Brownie camp art class. April explained how Crawford kept a trophy bag and April had spent the last seven months returning the pieces to their owners.

April didn't go into details. She didn't tell Janice Haines that she was one of two 'lucky ones'. April started her quest within a week of Crawford's death, after she flew home to New York and married Hank Price. April and Hank spent four days honeymooning in the Bahamas, then she got busy.

Each of the thirteen pieces had a small tag attached, the tags had a series of stick figures, obviously some kind of code. It was Singh who decrypted the code. It seems Singh became a big fan of the Sherlock Holmes stories after hearing from Hank how Karin Roland solved what they were now humorously calling 'The Case of Red Headed Waitress'. When Singh saw the stick figures, he immediately recalled Sir A. C. Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Dancing Men'.

Using the story as a guide, which decodes nineteen of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, Singh spent two hours decoding Crawford's labels. But after two hours, none of the labels made any sense. With Hank and April looking over his shoulder, Singh sat back and studied the gibberish. Suddenly he sat up.

"It's a code inside the code!" He went to work on each line. "He wasn't too bright, but he was bright enough to know if he read the story, others may have as well. So, he shifted each letter over three spaces. 'A' becomes 'D', 'B' becomes 'E', etc."

"What about the seven letters that don't appear in the story?" Hank asked.

"That's where he got clever. If one of those six was to be used, he substituted a stick figure that had no meaning, just to throw someone off."

April and Hank looked up from where Singh was decoding and rolled their eyes at each other. It wasn't the first time they were stunned by Singh's intelligence. They considered themselves lucky Singh enjoyed the excitement of working for a detective agency, he could easily make two or three times his salary working at Amazon or Google.

Singh interrupted their silent dialog. "The other thing he did was substitute letters for numbers, but he did this without the shift. See here, these two letters, 'G'/'V', represent August of 2022. The label reads 'MG, Wolford, 8/22.'"

April interrupted. "Mona Gomez, she went missing in August. This necklace must be her cross." Within an hour April had talked to Ms. Gomez's family and confirmed Mona always wore the cross she received from her father to celebrate her high school graduation. The next day April FedEx'd the cross to Mona's sister with her condolences. The family was already aware Mona was dead, what remained of her body having been recovered from the ravine, but they were happy to have the necklace back. It would drape the urn that held Mona's ashes.

Singh finished decoding the labels, he and April began their research. Hank gave his new bride a kiss and squeezed Singh's shoulder. "I have to get back to other assignments. I'll leave you two alone, but Singh – you need to limit your time on this and stay with what you have on your task list. We can't fall behind."

"Right, boss." Singh was already searching the National 'Missing Persons' data base. Both Singh and April were stunned at the incredible number of missing persons.

"Let's cross reference this list with the list of Crawford's duty stations while he was in the Army. That should cut it down considerably."

That was seven months ago. Since that day April was able to identify ten of the thirteen pieces from Crawford's trophy case. Two of the remaining three were most likely Iraqi women and would never be identified. The thirteenth could not be correlated to any of the towns where Crawford was stationed and neither April nor Singh

could guess the location given the nature of Crawford's code. Too many of the letters in the location's name were among the seven they were unable to decode.

April was trying to be satisfied with the ten she had identified. Four were 'Jane Does' who had long ago been buried in unmarked graves. Four were missing persons, now assumed dead given Crawford's proclivity for violence. One was a woman in Pinehurst, still alive, but still carrying the scars from the violent rape by an unknown assailant. Only alive because two drunks stumbled onto the scene and started cheering when they thought they caught two lovers being indiscrete.

The last 'trophy' was the locket belonging to Janice Haines. As April sat on that sofa and looked around the room, she hoped she was doing the right thing. It could be Mrs. Haines had put the entire incident in the past, April assumed Haines was a rape victim like the woman in Pinehurst. The room was tidy, there were family photos on the wall, April couldn't help but feel the love in this room. Thank goodness when this is over; April was tired of the travel, she was five months pregnant and Hank has been demanding she come home and rest.

"I spent three years as an MP." April said it to break the ice.

Janice wasn't stupid. "I wasn't raped. I know what you're thinking."

April wanted to deny it, but kept her mouth closed.

Janice continued, telling April about that early morning one Christmas over twelve years ago.

"I found out I couldn't take another person's life, even to save my own. I would be a danger to whomever partnered up with me. I put in my papers and returned to civilian life. I was a lucky one, my husband Trace wanted me home full time. The twins were five and Trace junior was two. I've been a homemaker ever since."

April spoke for the first time, never interrupting Janice while she related how Crawford had approached and disarmed her before molesting her and taking the locket. "Crawford pulled the same stunt on Karin Roland – big mistake."

"Who is this Karin Roland? Do you know her so you can tell her thanks from me?"

April laughed and gave Janice the Readers' Digest abridged version of how April knew Karin and a little about Karin's background in law enforcement.

Janice shook her head. "That's one tough broad."

April agreed. "She is, but you couldn't find a better friend."

Epilogue

Bill and Karin sat on the Adirondack chairs on the same motel porch April and Karin had occupied nine months ago. Bill was drinking a locally brewed IPA, Karin had a glass of red wine from the local winery. Karin spent the previous day in court giving testimony against James Perrison in Superior Court. They decided to take a few days off and spent today's midday on a hike along the Mitalkwi River.

Bill spent the hike in awe of the valley's physical beauty and now, sitting back in the chair with an ale, told his wife what was on his mind all day. "I can see what Anthony loves about the woods."

Karin agreed. "Funny how a kid who grew up in the biggest city in the States can transition to a place with more trees than people."

"I could see spending more time up here. Especially with Anthony and Lisa moving up here for the summer."

Karin looked at the wine in her glass. "Well, it does help that this small town has a brewery, a winery and a couple of decent restaurants. Yeah, I can see us spending a few weekends here this summer."

They sat for a while without talking.

Still staring out at the mountain across the river, Bill asked. "Were you surprised Lisa is transferring to Eastern from Stanford in the fall?"

"Nothing that young lady does surprises me anymore. She knows what she wants and does what's needed to get it."

"You mean how she wants Anthony?" Bill needed to know how Karin felt about those two committing themselves so young. "They're not even old enough to buy a beer, but both ready to commit a lifetime to each other."

Karin sat up, turning to face Bill. "I love her and couldn't imagine a finer daughter-in-law."

"Anthony asked me last week if we'd object to them getting married. I guess I have your answer."

"And you agree?" Karin was still facing Bill, looking into his eyes.

"Yes, darling." Bill understood the secret to a long, happy marriage.

Karin laughed, twenty years with this man, she knew his secret. "Lots of changes for our young son. Moving from New York to Portland, then to the small towns of La Grande for school and Welford for work, now marriage." Bill heard the sigh leave her lips.

Bill looks up in the sky and across the valley as the sunset lights the hillside. "That's the thing that amazes me. Humans have the capacity to adapt to such diverse situations, climates, environments. "What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason," Shakespeare wrote.

"Then there are men like Crawford and Perrison who only bring evil and heartache to such a beautiful place."