

# TWISTED ROADS

by Blackbird Crow Raven

# **PART I: ON THE BORDER**

# CHAPTER ONE

“Oh, come on! What now?” Tom Tilford grumbles at his computer in mock exasperation. Tom has seen error messages on his computer screen many times during his years of programming. “There, are you happy now?” he solicitously/sarcastically asks his computer after making the trivial fix to the code. Tom knows the error message was his own doing, and it is really himself with whom he is upset—after all, shouldn’t it be second nature to him by now to end each line of computer code he writes with a semicolon? At least it isn’t one of those virtually incomprehensible error messages that almost inevitably leads to marathon debugging sessions. Tom tests the fix, just to be sure. Good; the program is working fine now.

Glancing at the clock on his computer screen, Tom notes that it is 3:35. His daughter Katrina should be home from school any minute now. Although Lashonia, Wisconsin has always been a quiet town with no crime to speak of, Tom has always felt it prudent to meet his daughter at the bus stop rather than allow her to walk the few dozen yards to their house alone. ‘Better safe than sorry’ is a maxim Tom lives by. Besides, Katrina is his only child, and by the time school is over for the day he is always anxious to see her again. Five more minutes, and he’ll leave the house to go meet her.

Tom's wife Kathy died when Katrina was only two years old. In the five years that have passed since then, Tom and Katrina have grown ever closer. “Katie” looks forward to seeing her dad at the end of the school day almost as much as he looks forward to seeing her.

Telecommuting allows Tom the freedom to spend more time with Katie; working at home, he doesn’t have to rely on the services of a babysitter or nanny. He is able to be home the time he would otherwise spend commuting, which is significant as he would have to commute to Wausau, and sometimes even out of state to St. Paul, Minnesota, if he worked onsite.

Although eagerly awaiting her return from school each day, Tom sometimes gets so involved in the work at hand that he loses track of time and doesn’t make it to the bus stop before Katie surprises him by chirping out, “Hi, daddy!” as she walks through the door. He is always irritated with himself when that happens, because he wants to be there on time each day--not only due to his ‘better safe than sorry’ philosophy, but also because he wants to show her that she is more important to him than his work. Tom has always prided himself on having his priorities straight, and putting family--now consisting solely of Katie--before work

is something he considers a must. He doesn't want to end up with a "Cat's in the Cradle" type of situation--not being there for her when she's young and needs him most. He fears any neglect on his part could lead to her developing an aloof attitude toward him as she grows older. As it is, Tom can barely stand the thought of Katie growing up and eventually leaving home, let alone the possibility of her cavalierly shutting him out of her life. He feels the way to ensure that never happens is to make time for her now, even when it seems inconvenient or even impractical to do so.

On this day, though, Katie doesn't surprise him by bursting through the door and calling out her greeting as he is struggling with a perplexing programming problem. By the time Tom remembers to check the time again, it is 3:55. Katie should have been home ten minutes ago. Tom's deep attachment to his daughter coupled with his perhaps overly cautious nature provokes in him a disconcerted feeling bordering on panic. He tries to force himself to calm down by reasoning with himself.

The bus *has* been late a few times before, but has never before been late on one of the infrequent occasions when Tom himself has been late in making his way to the bus stop. If the bus *is* late, Katie won't even know that Tom is late in going to meet her. In fact, it will even give him an opportunity to tease her about all the time he spent there waiting for her. That's probably it--the bus is simply a little late, that's all. It probably had a flat tire or something like that. Still, Tom can't shake the uneasy feeling as he makes his way out the door and down the path to the bus stop.

## CHAPTER TWO

Katie is the only child who is dropped off at that particular spot, so there are no other parents there with whom Tom can commiserate. Even if the reason for Katie's delayed return is simply a late bus, the question remains: *Why* is it late? Maybe it is just a flat tire. OK, no problem there. But maybe it's something else. Has the bus driver gotten into an accident? That's always a possibility, and Katie could have been hurt, or even... Tom shakes his head, not even allowing himself to further consider that scenario. He chides himself for making a mountain out of a molehill. The bus has no doubt simply had a minor mechanical problem, or there is some other reasonable and innocuous explanation for its delay.

Tom waits impatiently until 4:05. He doesn't even notice his involuntary foot-tapping, shortness of breath and accelerated breathing and heart rate. The bus has never been *this* late before. Surely the school would have called him if there had been a problem with the bus, letting him know when he could expect Katie to be home, or what other arrangements he needed to make to pick her up. He considers returning home to check his answering machine. But no, he'll give it another ten minutes so the bus will be a full thirty minutes late before doing that. He checks his watch again, and several more times before the seemingly interminable time limit he has imposed until he goes into 'panic mode' expires.

OK, Tom tells himself, it is now 4:15. The bus is a full half-hour late. Tom walks briskly back up the path to his house. He has the urge to break into a run, but if he does so, he'll be admitting to himself just how irrationally worried he is. After all, how likely is it that a serious mishap of some sort has actually occurred? Sometimes Tom wishes that he wasn't so quick to become anxious when it came to Katie. Why couldn't he be like so many other parents who exude the attitude 'Don't worry about it! Nothing will ever happen.' They're probably right. Tom tries to reassure himself by chuckling at his overreaction to the situation. His laughter, though, rings hollow and seems to mock him.

Tom bolts into his house, strides to the answering machine, and checks to see if any messages were left while he was out. None. OK, on to the next step. Call the school? Sure, that seems like the logical thing to do.

"Lashonia Elementary, how can I help you?"

The voice on the other end of the line sounds almost overly pleasant to Tom. "Hi, this is Tom Tilford. My daughter Katrina's bus has not arrived

yet, and it's been over half an hour and..."

The school receptionist interrupts Tom with, "Just a moment, Mr. Tilford. Let me check on that bus, although I haven't heard of any problems. Your daughter rides bus 58, doesn't she?"

"That's right, 58. She gets off at the bottom of the grade on the outskirts of town"

"OK, then, hold on please, Mr. Tilford." The receptionist is away from the phone for only a few seconds, but the wait seems interminable to Tom, who is drumming the kitchen counter with the fingers of his free hand. "Mr. Tilford?"

"Yes? What can you tell me?"

"The bus left the school on time and hasn't radioed in any problems, so... Are you sure your daughter didn't get off the bus at one of her friends' houses?"

"No, no...I mean yes, I'm sure." Tom is getting *very* worried now. His neck muscles tighten, something that happens whenever he is especially agitated. Tom absent-mindedly rubs the back of his neck. He doesn't know exactly what to do now. "OK, thank you, I guess I'll have to keep looking."

Tom doesn't think to ask the receptionist to contact the bus directly. He's never been confronted with this problem before, and he is so wound up about it that he isn't thinking clearly. The school receptionist had considered doing so, but it is near the end of the day and she was in a hurry to get home. Besides, her reaction to the situation is the opposite of Tom's--she is sure Katrina is with one or a group of her schoolmates somewhere. The little girl had probably even mentioned it to her father, and he had forgotten, or maybe never even really heard it in the first place. Men are like that--never paying attention to anything their wives or daughters say.

# CHAPTER THREE

Tom debates what to do next. Call the police? He will certainly do so if it comes to that, of course, but he decides to try one more thing first. What's the name of that girl who lives over the hill that rides Katrina's bus? Brittany? Or is it Nicole? It seems that all of Katrina's peers are either named Brittany, Nicole, Brittany Nicole, or Nicole Brittany. Or might it be Ashley? No, that's not it. Jessica? No. Wait a minute! It's Mary, isn't it? Yes...No, that's not it either. I've got it! It's Sarah. Uh, oh. What's her last name? I've heard it, but I can't remember it at the moment. OK, calm down, Tom. Be cool. Just calm down, and it'll come to you. All right... I think it's a German name--but then again, that's not saying too much here in Wisconsin. I've got it! I'm pretty sure her father is a plumbing contractor. I'll look up plumbers in the yellow pages. Tom yanks the phone book from the kitchen drawer and flips it open to a spot about two thirds of the way through the yellow pages. "Ah, here they are. Abrams, Jurkovic, Klemper... Klemper, that's it--Michael Klemper."

Not wanting to call Mr. Klemper's business number with a personal matter, Tom searches for the Klemper family's number in the white pages. Fortunately, there is only one Michael Klemper in Lashonia, and the number is indeed listed.

A woman answers the phone. "Hello--Mrs. Klemper?"

"Yes, this is Mrs. Klemper. How can I help you?"

"This is Tom Tilford. I don't think you know me, but our daughters know each other...my daughter's name is Katrina... Katie."

"Oh yes, sure! How are you, Mr. Tilford?"

"Well, to be honest, Mrs. Klemper, your answer to my next question will have something to do with that...Did Sarah ride the bus home from school today?"

"Yes. Yes, she did, Mr. Tilford, why do you ask?"

"Katie hasn't gotten home yet, and as you know, her stop is right before Sarah's..."

"Oh, I see." She pauses a moment. "Mr. Tilford, would you like me to talk to Sarah herself?"

"Yes, please."

“Alright, just a moment, I’ll get her.” Tom can hear Sarah being beckoned to the phone by her mother. “Here she is. I’ll let you speak to her yourself, Mr. Tilford. I’m sure Katrina’s all right, but let us know when you find her or if you need anything, won’t you.”

“Yes, Mrs. Klemper, thank you...Sarah? This is Katie’s father. Was Katie on the bus this afternoon?”

“Oh! Let me think...Yes, yes she was. Why? Didn’t she get home yet?”

“No.” Tom replies, attempting to sound less worried than he really is. “She didn’t say anything to you about going anywhere after school today, did she?”

“No. Actually, come to think of it I remember her getting off the bus at her stop now. Well, I didn’t actually see her get *off* the bus, but I remember the bus stopping at her stop, and seeing her get *up* to get off.”

Tom collapses into the kitchen chair closest to the phone. Feeling terrified, sad, and confused all at once, he perfunctorily thanks Sarah and hangs up.

By now, Mrs. Klemper is involved with getting dinner ready, and has temporarily forgotten about the situation regarding Katie’s whereabouts. Her husband sees his daughter on the phone, but gives no real thought to her conversation--no doubt some school friend, with whom she is engaged in harmless, but also meaningless, chatter.

Tom knows he needs help. The situation is definitely beyond the point of being ‘much ado about nothing.’ No one can blame him for being worried at this point. He is not just being a worrywart. It is time to notify the police, and Tom hopes they won’t insist on waiting some arbitrary length of time before Katie is ‘officially’ declared as being lost, and only then take up the search. It seems like he’s heard about that sort of thing happening, or saw something about it on television. Tom will do whatever it takes to get them to accelerate and escalate their response, whether that be accomplished by yelling at them, pleading with them, or threatening them with a lawsuit if anything happens to Katie and they haven’t done absolutely everything in their power to prevent it. Tom doesn’t like to threaten people, and has never sued anybody, but he will stop at nothing to prod the authorities into action--immediate action.

Tom picks up the phone and presses 911. He doesn’t want to take the time to look up the ‘regular’ number for the Lashonia police department, and he also wants to make it plain that this *is* indeed an urgent situation.



All he has to do, Tom tells himself, is simply provide them with the basic facts – that Katie had been seen on the bus but has not arrived home, that she should have been home an hour ago, and that she is a very responsible and level-headed girl; that she would never go somewhere after school without telling him first. She knows better than to do something like that. Now, though, Tom *hopes* he is wrong about that, and that she *has* gone to a friend's house without telling him, and will call any minute to let him know where she is. He will gladly suffer the embarrassment of telling the police he was wrong in describing her as a paragon of responsibility, and that she is now home and safe. He would welcome such embarrassment with open arms, in fact. Let them fine him or bill him for their time, even! He wouldn't mind, if only he could get his little girl back.

# CHAPTER FOUR

Before the phone rings a second time, the 911 operator answers. "Is this an emergency call?" he asks.

"Yes, sir. My daughter is missing."

"What is your daughter's name and age, please?"

"Katrina Marie Tilford; she's seven years old."

"What is your name and address, sir?"

"Tom Tilford. 29 Firefly Court. It's the only house on the East Side of the street."

"Please hold one moment, Mr. Tilford."

The operator contacts squad car 3, which is patrolling in the general area of Firefly Court. Lashonia police Chief Kimberly Pulanski is driving; Sergeant Brant Swain picks up the radio and acknowledges the information relayed by the emergency operator. He looks at his Chief, she nods, and he responds, "We're on our way."

"Mr. Tilford, a police unit is responding, and is on its way to your residence. Please stay on the line."

"Thank you. OK, I will."

After a brief pause, the operator asks, "Mr. Tilford, how long has Katrina been missing?"

Tom glances up at the clock on the wall. "An hour. I expected her home at 3:45. She's always been on time before now."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"This morning when she left for school; around 7:15."

"All right, sir. Please give me a description of your daughter."

"As I said, she's seven years old. She's about 4' tall, and weighs around 45 pounds, I would guess. She has medium-length curly blonde hair, green eyes, and freckles on her nose. Um..."

“Any scars?”

Tom hesitates. As does he, Katie certainly does have scars, there's no doubt about that. But they aren't the kind of scars the operator is referring to. “No; no scars.”

“And what was she wearing when she left your home this morning?”

Tom has to think about that one. He closes his eyes to picture how she looked when he waved goodbye to her as she boarded the bus this morning. “She was wearing... a yellow blouse...blue jean skirt...white socks, and yellow-and-white tennis shoes... Oh, and a pink ‘Barbie’ backpack.”

“All right. Thank you, sir. The police unit should be arriving at your house any moment now.”

“Thank *you*” Tom says, and gingerly hangs up the phone.

The operator issues a BOL\* for a girl matching Katrina’s description to all law enforcement units in the county as well as the neighboring counties. Based on how long Katrina has been missing, she should still be somewhere within that range.

\* ( ‘Be On the Lookout’ )

# CHAPTER FIVE

Seeing the police cruiser pull into his driveway, Tom feels a knot tighten in his stomach. His breathing becomes more rapid and even shallower than it had been. His nervousness does not stem from any previous experiences with the police--he has never even gotten so much as a speeding ticket. But Tom never expected that it would be necessary for police cars to pull into his driveway. Now that it *is* happening, he wishes he could turn back time, or better yet, fast-forward it to the point in time when this whole ordeal would be over--but only, of course, if time is good to him and this incident has a happy resolution. If only this were a nightmare from which he would soon awake. But he knows it isn't; he knows it is, unfortunately, real.

Tom opens his front door before it's necessary for the officers to knock. "Please come in. Have a seat," he says, pointing to the sofa in his living room. Too nervous to sit, Tom stands a few feet in front of the officers, hands in his back pockets.

"First of all," Chief Pulanski begins, "has anything of this nature ever occurred before? Has Katrina ever been late arriving home from school?"

"No, Chief, as I said when I called, she hasn't," Tom replies.

He wonders why the 911 operator didn't inform the officers of everything he had already told him. What's the sense of repeating things? If they're really interested in being efficient, they could begin by sharing information with each other. Or are they testing me, to see if I'll say something different this time? But why would they suspect me of anything? I'm the last person who would ever hurt Katie.

Tom clears his throat, and adds, "Katrina is very responsible for her age. She always comes straight home from school."

Chief Pulanski nods, and continues. "Who is Katrina's best friend at school, or in the neighborhood? I'd like to talk with her--or him--to find out if Katrina mentioned anything about possibly going somewhere after school."

"Why didn't I think of that?" Tom wonders aloud. "I *did* call the girl who rides her bus and gets off at the next stop, Sarah Klemper," Tom offers. "Her best friend in school is probably Amanda Wilson. There aren't many children her age here in our neighborhood. Here," Tom continues, handing the Chief a slip of paper on which he has just finished some hasty scribbling. "Here's the Wilson's number."

"Fine," Chief Pulanski says. "I'll talk to her right away. Meanwhile, Sergeant Swain will get with the bus driver to see if he noticed anything unusual on his route today. We'll let you know as soon as we have any information. And if Katrina comes home, or if you think of anything that may be of any use to us whatsoever, be sure to call us immediately."

Although very meticulous and thorough in her approach to investigations, Chief Pulanski nevertheless also relies oftentimes on her 'gut' feelings, or 'instinct.' Normally, Tom would be a suspect himself, but her intuition tells her he would not, *could not*, harm his daughter. Although she believes in her *heart* he is innocent, she doesn't know that intellectually--that is, there's no solid *proof* yet that he is innocent, so she can't completely discount the possibility. Nevertheless, it is a possibility she will only seriously pursue as a last resort--if no other clues are found after a thorough investigation. As a routine matter, though, she'll have her officers check around, and inside, his house. She has to do that to 'cover herself.' She knows that she would be asked whether she did so when and if her handling of the case is ever reviewed in the future.

"Isn't there something *I* can do?" Tom almost pleads with Chief Pulanski. "I feel so...so..."

"I know," Chief Pulanski reassures him. "Yes, you surely can be of assistance to us, Mr. Tilford. For starters, a recent photograph of Katie would really help."

"No problem, officer," Tom says, and quickly retreats into the kitchen. He returns with a 3 1/2" X 5" print of Katie's latest school portrait, which had decorated the refrigerator. He glances at it wistfully before handing it over to Chief Pulanski.

"Thank you, Mr. Tilford. There's a good chance that Katrina is just at a friend's house. I'll call the Wilsons, and contact Katie's teacher also, but you can call all of her other friends' homes just to make sure she isn't with any of *them*. That will help us to expedite matters. And, Mr. Tilford," Chief Pulanski continues, trying to buoy up Mr. Tilford's spirits. "You might want to think about what you're going to have for Katie's 'welcome home' dinner tonight."

The Chief hopes that Tom will indeed enjoy dinner with his daughter tonight.

## CHAPTER SIX

Chief Pulanski contacts two off-duty officers and asks them to begin their shift early in order to help out with the investigation. She then contacts the other unit already on duty and directs them to ascertain the route bus 58 takes. Once they have that information, they are to conduct a thorough search along the entire route.

The officers coming on duty are assigned to search the area between the bus stop and the Tilford residence, including the Tilford residence itself. Despite Chief Pulanski's gut feeling that Tom is innocent, it simply must be done--it's part of the specified procedure that must be followed in this type of situation. Tom's protests that they are wasting their time searching his home, and that Katie is most certainly nowhere in or around the house--why don't they look for her somewhere where she *might* be, don't sway the officers. They explain to him that all they are doing is following normal procedure, that the search of his home needs to be done, and that it's nothing personal. If he refuses to let them search, they will have to obtain a warrant, which will further slow down the investigation. With a resigned wave of the hand and sigh, Tom allows them to proceed. Shaking his head in exasperation, he trudges back into the kitchen, and returns to calling all of Katie's friends.

Once the officers are satisfied that Katie is indeed not to be found in or around the Tilford residence, they apologize to Tom. "We're sorry, Mr. Tilford. We certainly didn't *expect* to find your daughter here. But it's standard procedure--it's just one of those things that has to be done. Now, sir, I have to ask you something: do you and your daughter have any relatives that live in the area?" The officers, perhaps more adept at sharing information among one another than Tom gives them credit for, already know that Tom's wife died years before. One of the officers, in fact, investigated the accident and recalled that Mrs. Tilford had a baby daughter. The officers are especially interested in finding out if Katie has any uncles, aunts, or grandparents that live in the area.

Tom doesn't fully grasp the import of the question. Surely if Katie might be with relatives he would know that, and they would have been among the first people he would have contacted. Did they think he was a dunce? "No, none," he answers, the confusion showing on his face. "Katie is an only child; My wife was an only child, and her parents have passed away; All *my* family lives in California."

"Please give us a list of the names and addresses of friends you have in the area," one of the officers asks, handing Tom a writing pad and pen.

Tom hesitates for a few seconds before handing it back, saying, "We really don't have any close friends here. Since my wife's death, Katie and I have stayed pretty much to ourselves, I guess. And we were pretty new to the area when my wife... when the accident happened."

The officer reluctantly takes the pad back and returns the pen to his shirt pocket. "Thank you, Mr. Tilford. That'll be all for now. We appreciate your help, and apologize for any inconvenience we've caused you."

"That's all right, officers. I just want you to find my daughter."

"Yes, sir. We're doing our best. We'll find her, don't worry about that."

Katie's best friend Amanda tells Chief Pulanski that there was nothing unusual about Katie's behavior that day, and she hadn't mentioned--or even hinted at--any special plans for after school. Amanda is, of course, worried herself for her friend and asks the police Chief what she thinks might have become of Katie. Chief Pulanski pauses momentarily. How should she respond? She doesn't want to scare the poor child, but at the same time she doesn't want to lie to her, either. "I can't really venture a guess, Amanda. We just don't know yet. Hopefully she's all right, and we'll find her soon."

Amanda starts to cry. Her mother, who has been sitting next to her, pulls her close. Mrs. Wilson can't imagine how anybody could cope with having their child go missing, and is deluged with a mixture of feelings: sympathy for Tom Tilford and for her own daughter, anger at whoever or whatever is responsible for Katie's disappearance, relief that it isn't *her* daughter that is missing, and guilt for her feelings of relief.

Kimberly Pulanski gets up to leave, thanking the Wilsons for their help and trying to sound confident about a quick reunion of the two friends. She doesn't *feel* overly confident, though. She *is* resolute, though. This is shaping up to look like the worst incident that has happened in her entire career in Lashonia--and for that matter in the history of the town, as far as she knows. Pensively, she wonders how much power she will really have over the outcome. Although she doesn't know what the eventuality of the case will be, she knows that she must tirelessly pursue it until it is solved, one way or another.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

Chief Pulanski and Sergeant Swain meet with Lashonia's other police officers at T.J.'s Café to discuss their progress thus far:

1. Pulanski has expanded the BOL to encompass the entire state.
2. The media have been contacted, and Katie's disappearance will soon be known throughout the entire region. Chief Pulanski has mixed emotions about having gotten the media involved, though, because enlisting the help of the public invariably leads to quite a few "false alarms"--people contacting the police who really haven't seen anything but, craving the fifteen minutes of fame they think is theirs as an inalienable right, have talked themselves into thinking that they have.
3. The dispatchers have been asked to check police records to see if there are any sexual predators who live in the area. One has indeed been found, in the neighboring town, but when officers investigate, it turns out that he died of prostate cancer five months previously.
4. Officers have gone from house to house in Katie's neighborhood, but have turned up nothing. Nobody in the neighborhood has seen her since she left for school in the morning. None of them have seen any 'unusual' vehicles in the neighborhood either.
5. A background check has been completed on the bus driver, just to verify that he didn't 'slip through the cracks' when hired by the school district. Everybody who knows him considered the check to be a waste of time --which it indeed turned out to be--but, like the search of the Tilford residence, it was something that had to be done to satisfy police regulations.
6. The officers assigned to follow the bus route have thoroughly checked in all the culverts, fields, dumpsters, and empty lots along the bus route. They also asked all citizens they encountered along the way whether they had seen a child matching Katrina's description. None had.

"Were you able to get anything from the bus driver?" Chief Pulanski asks Sergeant Swain.

"No; he was quite upset, though, when I informed him that Katrina was missing, and seemed to be trying to force himself to remember something--anything--that he might have seen around her stop. He got frustrated with himself because he really couldn't remember anything out of the ordinary. I asked him if he had ever seen Katie wander off with friends after getting off the bus instead of going straight home. He said 'No.'"

"*Somebody* had to have seen *something*," Chief Pulanski intones, as if



talking to herself.

"I *did* ask the bus driver for a list of all the children on the bus," Sergeant Swain says. "We could talk to them also. He couldn't remember them all, though--I think because he was so upset. We'll have to contact the school to get a complete list of all the kids who rode that bus today."

"Good," answers his Chief. "Please do that, and when you have it, we'll meet at the station for a quick briefing."

After the list has been acquired and all the officers have assembled at the police station, Chief Pulanski explains the situation to her officers. She then adds, "There were thirty-seven children that rode bus 58 home from school today, but only twelve were still on the bus after Katrina got off. We'll speak with them first, as we're mostly concerned with what they may have seen immediately before and after she got off the bus."

The half-dozen officers are each assigned two names from the list.

Almost all of the twelve children have been interviewed, and none yet have reported seeing anything out of the ordinary at or near Katie's bus stop. Chief Pulanski is about to assign the officers their second group of interviewees (those who had gotten off the bus prior to Katie's spot) when Sergeant Swain calls her on the radio. "Chief, this is Swain. I just spoke with a student who claims he saw a car pull into the area near Katie's bus stop as the bus was topping the crest of the hill after dropping her off. All he knows is that it was a dark-colored car, older model – an 'old foggy's car' is how he described it. He was too far away to be able to provide a good description of the driver, but said it *was* a man. He doesn't recall having seen anybody else in the car."

"OK, thanks, Brant. Good work." Pulanski doesn't know whether to be happy or not about this clue. They *do* have a lead now, but it seems a rather ominous one. She knows she will have to inform Mr. Tilford of what the boy claims to have seen. His remembrances could be the product of an overactive imagination, but they have to follow up nonetheless. They have no other leads to pursue – not yet, anyway.

Chief Pulanski now issues a statewide BOL on a dark, older-model car containing a man and the girl on which the previous BOL was issued.

If Katrina isn't located soon, she will escalate the BOL and notify the neighboring states of Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, and Michigan also.

Before she goes any further, though, Chief Pulanski knows she should contact the FBI. Although crimes perpetrated against individuals are not the FBI's highest priority, assisting in kidnapping cases *is* part of their

charter. She will certainly welcome their help. In a case like this, it doesn't really matter who gets the 'glory' for solving it--just that Katie is located, and the sooner the better. She calls the FBI's Milwaukee field office and is put through to SAC (Special Agent In Charge) Denton Jackovich. After explaining the nature of the case, and the age of the child, she is assured that Special Agent Roger Dawes will soon be on his way to Lashonia to assist in any way he can.

After all the officers have returned to the station, Chief Pulanski realizes a way they can be more proactive in their search. There is a way to target specific people who may have seen something. This would be better than the 'buckshot' approach provided by media exposure. She knows that the second shift at the bicycle factory in town begins at 3:30. It's possible that one of the workers coming in for the second shift, or going home from the first, may have seen something.

Chief Pulanski calls the bicycle factory's general foreman to find out which employees were scheduled to work those two shifts today and, depending on where they live, would most likely have passed Katrina's bus stop on the way to or from work.

This stratagem leads to the second clue. One of the workers, on his way home, had apparently overtaken the suspect's car going up the hill just after Katie's bus stop. The worker claims the car in question was traveling quite slowly up the hill (which would be consistent with the suspect's car starting up the hill from a dead stop at the bottom). He hadn't really looked at the occupants of the vehicle, but did notice Missouri plates on the car, and recalls that the vehicle was dark blue.

Another employee of the bicycle factory, on his way to work, had been late for his shift, and remembers seeing a blue or black car with a man and a young girl in it. The man was pointing his finger at the girl, and she was leaning up against the passenger door, staring back at him, wide-eyed. He surmised it was just a father angry with his daughter over something or other. He noticed, as the first man had also, that the car bore Missouri plates--that stuck in his mind because Lashonia is not exactly a hotbed of tourist activity.

Both workers say the car was heading west, out of town. The one going home estimates the time he overtook the car in question at 3:45 (right around the time the bus had made its stop near Katie's house), and the man traveling to work estimates that it was probably sometime between 3:45 and 3:50 when he had passed the suspect car going in the opposite direction. His best estimate of the girl's age is between six and nine ("definitely school age, maybe a first grader or so," he had said). As for the man, he had rather short dark hair and was clean-shaven. Nothing else stands out in his mind about the driver--he seemed to be of average

height and build, and was probably in his 30s, as far as he could tell.

Armed with the information about the man in the dark car, the BOL is extended to Iowa and Minnesota, the states immediately west of Wisconsin, the direction in which the car was seen traveling. If necessary, the BOL will eventually be extended to the Dakotas, and Nebraska after that.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

Chief Pulanski apprises Tom of developments regarding the case. Tom is beside himself with anxiety, confusion, anger and guilt. Agonizing questions race through his mind: How is Katie? Is she all right? That is to say, is she alive and not suffering--either physically, or in the same way that he is? What kind of man would kidnap a child? How could anybody be so presumptuous, so uncaring? What gives *anybody* the right to encroach upon *her* rights, *my* rights, the rights of the community, in this way? For all that slime bag knows, Katie has not only a father but also a mother and siblings who are worried sick about her and would do anything to have her back again, safe and sound.

Of course, the actual situation is that her mother is no longer living, and Katie has no siblings, but that doesn't change the fact that abducting a child is among the worst, maybe *the* worst thing, one person could do to another. The guy must be a psychopath. Maybe this jerk can't even comprehend what it's like to truly love somebody, to be concerned about their welfare. Perhaps he was an unwanted child. But that's just an excuse; a lot of people who have been raised in less-than-pleasant circumstances turn out just fine. Everyone has their "issues", but most don't viciously turn on their fellow humans, and certainly not on innocent little children.

In fact, if a person had any decency, any suffering they had experienced in their childhood and throughout their life should prompt them to be *more* sympathetic toward others who were unfairly treated--knowing just how much it hurts--and make sure that they never hurt others in the way that they had been hurt. That is a strong indication of a person's character, whether they are fundamentally good or bad--namely, do they perpetuate, or do they prevent, pain?

What did this man plan to do to Katie, or what had he possibly already done to her? Tom began to blame himself: If only I had been on time at the bus stop to meet her! None of this would have happened. The man would have simply kept on driving. Or, if he *had* stopped and tried to take Katie, he would not have been successful in his attempt to do so.

Tom was not especially large or physically strong, but he knows that if it came to such a situation, the fear of losing Katie, and the rage against anybody who would try to take her away, would imbue him with whatever strength was necessary to subdue the attacker. Many people have pleaded "temporary insanity" in court to avoid punishment, and Tom normally viewed the allowance of such a plea as insanity itself, but in such a situation--if his daughter was threatened, that is--he knew it

would really be true in his case: the man who was content to never hurt anybody would be instantly transformed into a raging bull. Certainly, he would “lose it.” The would-be kidnapper would have been sorry he had ever laid his eyes on Katie. Or Tom would die fighting. It’s true, there might not be much he could do against a man with a gun. *Was* the man armed? If the worst thing imaginable happened, Tom would personally hunt the man to the ends of the earth, if need be, and see to it that he never hurt anybody else's daughter—or anyone else--ever again.

Tom goes back to beating himself up: Why didn’t I go to meet her when I noticed she would be home in a few minutes? It would have been better to be a few minutes early than even a little bit late. What did I accomplish that was so all-fired important in those few minutes? What’s the big deal about that program I’m working on, anyway? What does it really matter when it gets finished? Or even, for that matter, whether it gets finished at all? Nobody’s life depends on it. That stupid program won’t make the world any better or worse than it already is. Why couldn’t I have just let it go for a few minutes? All it will accomplish, in the long run, is make the rich guys richer and the fat cats fatter. Oh, well. Nobody’s forcing me to do it, after all. Not that I have much choice--programming is really all I know. How else would Katie and I get by? I have to support my family--that is, Katie and myself. I could live very simply and cheaply by myself. But I don’t want to be alone. I don’t know what I’d do without Katie. I missed meeting Katie at the stop because I was so involved with that trivial problem in that insignificant program! If anything happens to her, I’ll never forgive myself.

## CHAPTER NINE

When Katie gets to the bus stop, she sees that her dad isn't there waiting for her. She is looking forward to getting home to tease him about it. Katie knows he's not late because he doesn't care about her. He just gets so involved in his work sometimes. He calls it being "in the zone." She calls it "spacing out in front of his computer."

Katie hasn't really paid attention to the sound of the car approaching her from behind, and then stopping. By the time her mind focuses on the sounds, and she turns around to see who it is, the man is right behind her. He clamps his right hand over her mouth and grabs her left arm with his other hand. He tells her that if she does what he says, she won't get hurt.

"Come on; you're going for a ride," he says. Katie feels weak. This can't really be happening. She knows things like this really *do* happen. But she can't believe that it is happening to *her*, here, now, and so close to safety, so close to her home. Her father is probably within shouting distance, but she can't yell out because the man's right hand is over her mouth. She can't run, because the man's other hand is tightly gripping her left arm. She probably wouldn't be able to run anyway, shaking the way she is.

On the way down the embankment from where he has surprised the girl, Roy Thornquist tenses up as he hears the car coming down the hill. He can't get caught here. Who knows how long they would keep him locked up if he were to be captured again. Too long, he knows that. It's boring in prison. There are no kids to torment there. He watches intently as a car drives by, heading east towards the town he had just driven through--what was the name of it? Lashone? Lashonika? Something like that. Doesn't really matter. Anyway, it's just a car full of punk kids--teenagers. They don't even so much as glance in his direction. Good. He hasn't been noticed, then. Those idiots will know soon enough that they've missed their opportunity to be heroes--or martyrs.

When they get to the car, Roy presses Katie up against it with his body and, with his right hand still over her mouth, removes her backpack with his left hand. Opening the driver's side door with his left hand, he throws the backpack onto the passenger-side floorboard and pushes Katie into his car.

Katie immediately tries to open the passenger door, against which she has landed. But it won't open. The door has been rigged so that it's impossible to open it from the inside. Roy just grins at her. "You can't get

there from here, angel,” he says. “Now you be a good girl and do what I say, like I told you, or else,” he points his finger at her to intimidate her, “I’ll have to hurt you! Now you wouldn’t like that, would you?”

Katie is unable to answer. Just as she had been shaking too hard to try to run earlier, even if he hadn’t had such a tight grip on her, she is now too scared to talk. She just stares back at him. “Well!” he roars “would you!?” Katie shakes her head no. Roy chuckles. “You’re even too scared to talk, aren’t you?” As she nervously looks down, and then longingly out the window, he breaks into a big smile. He sighs. A contented sigh. As he turns on to Highway 53, which would take them up towards northern Minnesota, he sighs again. A weary sigh. *I have to do this. I can’t help myself*, Roy thinks to himself. But then he adds, *I want to do this. Who’s stopping me? Nobody.*

# CHAPTER TEN

Meanwhile, Katie is trying to think of how she might be able to escape. If her dad hasn't noticed that she is missing yet, he will very soon. He will know what to do, once he realizes what has happened. It probably won't be long, and the police will find her, and she can go back home. Home, where she's safe. She thinks about the doors in the backseat of the car now. The first time the man has to stop at a stop sign, she'll scramble over into the back seat, quickly unlock the door, throw it open, and leap out. Hopefully there will be somebody nearby that will see her, and help her. If she has to, she'll scream to attract attention.

Roy sees Katie surreptitiously peering into the back seat. "Hey! You're even dumber than other girls! I told you, you can't get there from here! Do you think I would make it that easy for you!? Huh!? The only way to get out of *this* car is through *this* door," Roy yells, punctuating each word with a staccato jabbing of his finger through the air, indicating the front driver's side door. "You'd have to go through me! And I'd like to see you try it!" He reaches across and yanks her hair. "That's for being stupid," he tells her. Katie begins to weep, softly.

Roy watches, enthralled. He enjoys watching children cry. It is almost as exciting as the look of terror they get on their faces when he tells them what he is going to do to them.

"Any more monkey business, and you'll be riding in the trunk. How would you like that?"

Katie considers that option, although she knows it was meant as a threat, not an offer. Riding in the trunk might actually be preferable to sitting practically right next to him on the front seat. At least she'd be further away from him if she were in the trunk. But no. For that to happen, he would probably pick her up and put her in there, and she doesn't want this mean, scary man to touch her again.

"No. Please, no," she says.

"All right then, behave yourself," he admonishes, again pointing his finger at her, almost jabbing her in the eye.

They stay on Highway 53 for a couple of hours. It seems like days to Katie. To Roy, it is a scant few minutes. He is high. High on adrenaline, high on the excitement of having complete control over this girl. He realizes he doesn't even know her name.



“Hey! Dummy! What’s your name?” he asks.

Katy resents being called a dummy. She is far from being a dummy. She’s one of the smartest girls in her class. But being called names is the least of her worries. She quickly considers whether she should tell him her name or make one up. When she sees that he is about to start yelling at her again, she decides it probably won’t hurt to go ahead and tell him her real name. She can’t think of a made-up one anyway, she's so nervous.

“Katrina,” she blurts out. She wants to speak to him as little as possible.

“Katrina,” he repeats. “That’s not too bad. What do they call you? Trina? Kate? Katie? Kitty Kat?”

“Katie,” she responds warily. She resents him knowing her nickname, the name her father and her friends call her.

“All right, Katie. I’m your daddy now. You can forget about your old daddy. Those days are gone now. You were probably daddy’s little pet, weren’t you? You always got your way. Yeah, I can see that. You look like a spoiled brat. Now hear this: I’m your world now. All that matters to you is me. What *I* say goes. When *I* say jump, I want you to say ‘how high?’ *I’m* the boss! *I’m* the master! Got it, Miss prissy, sissy, sugar-and-spice-and-all-things nice snot-nosed brat?”

Katie looks down, and sullenly shakes her head in the affirmative, albeit barely perceptibly. She knows that any other response would be futile. He would just yell at her again.

Katie waits for her tormentor to look out his window, though, and when he does, she shakes her head “no.” She will never give in to being his slave, or even his “daughter.” How could he compare himself to her father? Her daddy would never talk to her, or treat her, as this man had. It was only a matter of time, and either she would be rescued, or she would escape somehow. What scares her is what might happen between now and then.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

"You call *me* 'Best Daddy.' That's *my* name," Roy orders, pointing first at her and then at himself. Katie nods again, but then looks out her window and rolls her eyes. She shuts them, and begins to sob again.

A few more miles and Katie is so exhausted from the ordeal that she nods off. When she awakens with a start, the man's hand is on her leg. She moves even closer to the passenger-side door, and jerks her leg away, out of easy reach from his touch. "What's wrong? Don't you want 'Best Daddy's' lovin,' Katie?" Roy asks in mock disbelief, trying to act as if he is offended by her reaction. "I was just trying to be *sociable*."

"Don't touch me!" she says.

Roy's response is immediate. He lashes out with his right hand, striking her on the mouth. "Don't *you* try to tell *me* what to do," he shouts. She yells out in pain, and her mouth begins to bleed. She instinctively covers her mouth with both hands and bends forward in her seat. Roy then punches her as hard as he can in the shoulder.

Katie again cries out from the pain and, trying to fight back the tears, implores, "Why? Why are you doing this to me? What have I ever done to you? Please! Just let me go! I'll walk home, I don't care! Just let me out!"

Katie isn't prepared for Roy's reaction to her pleadings. He simply gazes back at her, smiling, with a distant look in his eyes. "You don't *really* want to leave your Best Daddy. And what would I do without my 'Best Girl'? Get used to it. You're going to be mine forever, Katie." He smiles again, this time even bigger than before.

Katie closes her eyes. She wants to be somewhere else so badly. Anywhere. School would be paradise compared to this. She even longs to be doing her homework, or taking her piano lessons--anything else, anywhere else.

It makes Katie nervous that they are on Highway 53, as opposed to the main Highway near Lashonia, I-94, where it would be more likely that they would be seen, as that road is much busier.

Maybe 'Worst Daddy' is trying to get into the wilderness somewhere. Maybe he has a cabin hidden in a forest where it would be very hard for people to find him. Katie wonders if there is something she can do to help them find her. Maybe she can leave a clue behind somewhere. Her backpack? No, too big. Worst Daddy would notice it was missing even if

he didn't notice her drop it. Besides, she can't open the door or even roll down the window, so how would she drop it out of the car?

She has to figure out some way of getting out of the car, even if it means having to get out of the car with *him*, and taking an item with her that she can "accidentally" drop somewhere. An *item* from her backpack? A pencil, a piece of homework with her name on it? No, that wouldn't work either. She would have to unzip the backpack, and he would hear that. Or, she would have to unzip it very slowly. That won't work, because whatever she does, she knows she will have to do it fast, while Worst Daddy is looking the other way. How about something she's wearing? She obviously can't, and wouldn't want to, leave her skirt or even her blouse behind. How about a shoe? No; sooner or later, probably sooner, Worst Daddy would notice that, and who knows what kind of fit he would have then?

*I've got it! My necklace! Perhaps he won't notice if I "lose" it. Most boys are like that--not really paying much attention to accessories and jewelry. I hope Worst Daddy is like that, too.*

Now the problem is: How to get out of the car? She *does* need to go to the bathroom. She thinks about it for awhile. Katie's kind of embarrassed to tell Worst Daddy she needs to go. But she really does, and it's the only way she can think of to help her dad, the *real* 'Best Daddy' to find her. She doesn't want to call this terrible man 'Best Daddy.' She hopes he won't *really* insist on her calling him that. Maybe he'll forget about it.

"I need to use the restroom," she announces.

"*Best Daddy*, I need to use the restroom," he corrects, poking the air again with his index finger.

She sighs inwardly, takes a deep breath, and says, valiantly trying to mask the sarcasm in her voice, "*Best Daddy*, I need to use the restroom."

Katie holds out a faint hope that he will take her to a public restroom in Solon Springs, the next town up the road. The sign said it's only 3 miles ahead. In that case, she might even be able to write a note on a piece of paper in the bathroom, or, if that is not possible, on the mirror with soap. She saw somebody do that in a movie once. But that's probably too much to hope for, she thinks.

It is.

"We'll have to just stop along the road here somewhere, then," Thornquist says. "We have to keep our relationship secret for awhile. People wouldn't understand."

Katie has no idea what Roy is talking about, and isn't at all sure that she wants to. She certainly isn't going to ask him what he means by that.

Katie had planned to slip off her necklace while out of sight behind a bush or tree, and to keep it rolled up in her hand until they got back near the car, and then to drop it on or near the road as she was getting back into the car. She doesn't get the chance, though. It makes her very angry, and embarrassed, but he watches her the whole time she is going to the bathroom. He won't even turn his head, and stands right there watching, with that sickening little smile on his face.

On the way back to the car, Roy opens the trunk. "I have to stop for gas in the next town, and I don't want anybody to see you," he explains. "And I don't want anybody to hear you, either," he adds, as he ties an old, dirty rag he finds in his trunk around her mouth.

Roy ties it so tight, and the smell of gasoline on it is so strong, that Katie panics; she is having a hard time breathing. She is pulling at the gag with her hands when Roy lifts her a little ways off the ground and then shoves her by the shoulders into the trunk so that her knees hit the bumper, and she bangs her head on the trunk as she tumbles in.

Roy laughs as he sees her eyes dilate in fear and pain. He watches her for a few moments, cocking his head a little to one side and placing a thumb and forefinger under his chin, as if contemplating a work of fine art. That sickening smile spreads across his face again, but she doesn't see it, because her eyes are filled with tears. Her mouth still hurts from the too-tight gag, but her throbbing head hurts even worse. Her knees have also been scraped, but she hasn't even noticed that yet.

Roy seems to return from somewhere he had gone in his mind, and warns her, "Don't make *any* noise when we stop. Don't bang on the trunk. Not even once! Don't even move a muscle from the time we stop until we get back going again. If you do--let me tell you right now, you good-for-nothing little piece of crap--everything I've done to you up to now is going to seem like a day at the park. If anybody tries to save you, I will kill them quickly--and then I will kill *you* s-l-o-w-l-y."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Roy pauses, puts his leg up on the bumper of the car, reaches into his boot, and pulls out a long switchblade. He presses the button on the side, and the blade springs open. After making sure Katie is watching, he twists the blade slowly through the air, staring deeply into her eyes as he does so. "You got it, smarty-pants!?" he asks.

Katie doesn't answer, but he knows she understands. He knows because she is trembling all over, and is looking at him with that expression of agony and fear he savors so much. He takes another long look at her, frowns menacingly, and then slams the trunk shut.

When Worst Daddy stops for gas about five minutes later, Katie remains motionless. She hears the nozzle being inserted into the gas tank, the sound of the gas flowing into the tank, the nozzle being placed back onto the fuel pump, a brief conversation between Worst Daddy and somebody else, the fuel cap being twisted back on, the fuel door clicking closed, and then the tires rolling on the road and the increasing volume of the engine and pitch of the tires as they gain speed. Away from people; away from normal people who, if they only knew that she was there, would try to save her. But she hadn't dared make a sound; if she had, Worst Daddy would probably have carried out his threats.

Katie thinks again about her necklace-dropping idea. If Worst Daddy lets her out of the trunk, maybe she can do it then. In the hopes that will be the case, she reaches up and slips the necklace off. She gathers it into a small mound in her hand and closes her fingers tight around it. It was her mother's necklace. She likes wearing her mother's jewelry sometimes. If nobody finds it, she will remember where she dropped it and come back and get it after this is all over with. She'd better be careful not to draw attention to what she is going to do, and so practices holding her hand loosely clenched--just closed enough to conceal the necklace and not let it inadvertently fall out.

Just then Katie feels the car turn off the highway. There is a bump, and then it sounds as if they are driving on a gravel road. Worst Daddy brings the car to a stop. She hears him open his door, get out, and walk to the trunk. He opens the trunk and, hands on hips, glares down at her with a look of disgust on his face.

"Now you listen to me, young lady," he begins, pointing his finger at her. "I'm going to let you ride up in front with Best Daddy again. You may as well forget about trying to get away. Nobody will ever find you. You'll be with me forever."

Roy reaches down and grabs Katie by the arm, yanking her out of the trunk in one swift motion with his right arm. He grabs her by the same arm in which she is holding the necklace. Roy doesn't notice her holding anything in her hand, or that she is no longer wearing the necklace. He turns her around, and clamps his right hand around the back of her neck. He pushes Katie to the front of the car and, using the hand that is encircling her neck, pushes her head down so that he can shove her in.

Just at this moment, Katie reaches out a little to the side with her left hand, so the necklace won't fall on Worst Daddy's shoe, and opens her hand slightly. She feels the necklace slip through her fingers, and is relieved to note that it makes very little sound as it hits the ground. It must have fallen on soft dirt. Hopefully not so soft and fine that it will disappear into it, though.

Roy also takes advantage of the moment. With Katie bent forward at the waist, he reaches down and gooses her. He makes a yearning, grunting sound, then sighs and slaps her--hard--on the behind with one hand, finally shoving her into the car with both. "There's going to be a hot time in no-mans-land tonight!" he cries out, smiling at Katie. He continues to stare at her, waiting for some kind of reaction. She has no idea what he is talking about, and so is more confused than fearful about Roy's statement. His face loses all expression, and his voice becomes monotonic as he asks, "Are you ready to go, dear?"

She doesn't want to answer that. For one thing, she is not his or anybody else's 'dear'--except maybe her father's, and besides that, what would she be agreeing to if she said 'yes'? She looks straight ahead and stares out the window.

Surprisingly, Roy doesn't force the issue this time. He advances the car slowly forward. Then he slams on the brakes. Captor and captive examine each other from the corner of their eyes. Roy puts the car in reverse and returns to the same spot where they had just been parked. He opens his door, picks the necklace out of the dirt, and holds it up in his hand.

"Why darling, you should've told me you weren't ready to leave yet," Roy says. "You forgot your necklace. How careless of you. Oh! Maybe you intended to give it to me, as a lover's gift, but was embarrassed and didn't know just how to tell me. But," he continues, feigning disappointment, "I don't think it will fit me." He unhooks the clasp of the necklace and, holding it against his neck, demonstrates that his neck is too big for it.

"Again you've proven how stupid you are! You give me a gift I can't even

use!” Roy’s voice has gotten its hard edge back. “*You* obviously don’t want it, and it doesn’t fit *me*, so it’s completely worthless!” Roy breaks Katie’s mother’s necklace in two by pulling it apart with his hands, and then flings it as far as he can, over the top of the car and out into the brush. “Maybe some animal even dumber than you will find it someday, and drag it into its den. Your *old* daddy will never find it, though. He’s probably already forgotten all about you. He should be glad to be rid of somebody as dumb and worthless as *you*.”

Katie knows it’s not true, but it still hurts to even hear those words. Roy jams the car into gear and floors it. With a cloud of dust behind them, they head out again, back onto Highway 53, headed north.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Playing the waiting game is a difficult thing for Tom Tilford to do. He can't sleep because he's too nervous; he can't eat because his stomach is too agitated to keep anything down; he can't work because, under the circumstances his powers of concentration are simply nonexistent when it comes to any subject other than his daughter; and after calling all of Katie's friends (none of them know anything that sheds any light on her whereabouts), there isn't really anything more for him to do. If only he could put all the nervous energy and drive he has to some constructive use. He's a miserable, nervous wreck. Katie has only been missing for 2 ½ hours, but Tom already looks as if he has aged a decade.

The police are doing all they can. FBI Special Agent Roger Dawes from the Milwaukee field office has arrived, and is assisting with the investigation. All departments within the range the suspect could have covered in the time that has expired since Katrina was abducted are on alert for a dark, late-model car with Missouri license plates being driven by a clean-shaven man with short dark hair, probably of average height and build, age between around 30 and 40. They also have Katrina Tilford's description. The two *might* still be traveling together, but that is by no means a foregone conclusion. The only person who has reported seeing them together so far is one of the bicycle factory workers in Lashonia.

If the two *are* still together on the highway somewhere, you would think that *somebody* will eventually spot them. How many dark-haired men with blonde girls in a car bearing Missouri license plates could there be in western Wisconsin at any given time? But then again, there is always the possibility the driver has switched the plates, disguised himself, has put the girl in the trunk, or has her tied up on the floor--if she is still in the car at all. Depending on how cautious or resourceful the kidnapper is, it could be very difficult indeed to catch him.

Media coverage of the unfolding event leads to the next break in the case.

Several false leads have been investigated. In most cases the 'sightings' were indeed a man and a girl who were traveling together and more or less matched the descriptions, but so far the pairs had turned out to be fathers and daughters on their way to soccer matches, or movies, or to visit relatives. Once investigated, none of the cars really had Missouri plates, either, until a young man calls from Eveleth, Minnesota. He claims to have seen a vehicle matching the description and in which a man and a little girl are riding. The caller identifies the car as a 1970 dark blue Dodge Dart with Missouri license plate 723 DMA.



The police report reveals that the car is registered to a certain Roy James Thornquist of Elmwood, Missouri. As the car has not been reported stolen, there is at least a fair chance that the driver, the kidnapper, is Mr. Thornquist himself. The next step the police take is to request a background report on Thornquist.

Upon receipt of the report, Chief Pulanski feels as if she has been hit between the eyes. Both Sergeant Swain and Tom Tilford notice her expression as she reads the report; the news obviously isn't comforting. Tom braces himself for a shock.

"Is Katie all right?" Tom asks, yearning to hear one answer while dreading the other.

"The witness said she seems to be fine, Mr. Tilford," Chief Pulanski says, as reassuringly as she can, before continuing:

"Roy James Thornquist, the owner of the vehicle spotted in Eveleth, Minnesota, was released from the Missouri Treatment Center for the Sexually Dangerous in 1991. He has no arrests since then, but had been incarcerated at that center for child molestation and for trafficking in child pornography.

"In an earlier case," Chief Pulanski continues, after glancing at Tom, who is sitting on the edge of Sergeant Swain's desk with his head in his hands, "he was a suspect in the rape and murder of a six-year-old girl whose body was never recovered. There wasn't enough evidence to bring him to trial, but it is thought that he disposed of her body somewhere in the Green Mountain National Forest, in Vermont. All attempts to find the body so far have been unsuccessful."

Tom feels as if his blood has reached the boiling point. His neck tightens. He stands up and vents some of his anguish on Chief Pulanski and Sergeant Swain. "Why do you let people like that out?! Ever!? Why aren't they executed, or at least put away forever--with *no* possibility of ever being released!? I just don't understand it! What asinine legislator, or judge, or parole board, or whoever, would *ever* let a low-life like that go free!?"

"Whoever is responsible for letting that wretch out of his cage is also partially responsible for this!" he cries. "Whatever happens to my daughter, I will hold him, her, or them personally responsible! The culpability is primarily Thornquist's, but whoever made that tragic and stupid mistake is also to blame! If the people they release commit further crimes, they should be prosecuted as *accomplices* in those crimes!" Tom wants to smash something; to hit somebody or at least some *thing*. He

raises his hand to knock the inbox off the desk on which he is sitting, but then catches himself, slowly lowers his hand to his side, and apologizes. "I'm sorry. I know it's not *your* fault. You're doing all you can--and I appreciate it. It's just so frustrating that somebody released this vermin back into society where he can pick up where he left off with his demented, disgusting life."

Chief Pulanski is not married and has no children of her own, so she can't *precisely* understand what Tom is experiencing, but sympathizes nevertheless. She does not begrudge him his outburst. He is going through just about the worst thing a parent ever could. It is a living nightmare for him, not knowing where his daughter is and how she is, hoping for the best but dreading the worse. Sergeant Swain, who does have two children of his own, just waves his hand at waist level as if to say, 'Don't worry about it. I understand.'

"Don't give up hope, Mr. Tilford," Chief Pulanski says. "Now that we have a sighting of the vehicle, which seems to be genuine, we can narrow our search and concentrate our efforts in the areas Thornquist is most likely heading. Things are actually beginning to look up."

Tom doesn't see how. To him, things seem to have taken a turn for the worse.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Within minutes, all police departments within a 100-mile radius of Eveleth are put on heightened alert, and an airplane is dispatched to search all possible routes the suspect could have taken from that town. Special Agent Roger Dawes gets in touch with his SAC, Denton Jackovich, who in turn contacts the SAC in Minneapolis, Hector Rivera. The Minneapolis field office dispatches Squad Supervisor Spencer Albright, along with Special Agents Becky Anthony and Matt Hammitt, to assist in the case.

"The suspect has apparently stayed on Highway 53 since he kidnapped Katrina," Chief Pulanski says. "I don't know what his plan is--or if he even has one--but if he stays on 53 we should find him soon. Otherwise, there are a lot of back roads in that area, and a good part of the surrounding terrain is the Superior National Forest. In fact, he'll be traveling through the Forest as he crosses the Mesabi Iron Range. We'll have to rely on the departments in Minnesota to scour those areas.

"When the FBI agents get here, we'll form a task force with them, using their expertise. In the meantime, though, I want to follow up with this Missouri Treatment Center for the Sexually Dangerous. As is Mr. Tilford, I'm curious as to why Thornquist was released. More important right now than why, though, is: Did Thornquist have any confidants there at MTCSD who can shed some light on what he might do now, or where he might be heading?"

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After involuntarily engaging in some of the customary phone tag and bureaucratic runaround, Chief Pulanski is finally put in touch with the warden at MTCSD. Following brief introductions, Kimberly informs the warden of the recent events in connection with former inmate Roy James Thornquist. The warden is saddened but not shocked by the news. He does remember Thornquist, but finds it necessary to refer to his records to provide Chief Pulanski with the data in which she is interested.

“Ah, here it is... Mr. Thornquist was released April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1991. He applied for release at the first opportunity--after serving three years of his five-year sentence.”

“Why was he released so early?” Pulanski wants to know.

“Well,” Warden Jacobsen begins, a little embarrassed, “both psychologists who worked with him, Henry Fuerst and Robert Hunter, recommended his release. In their learned opinion, they no longer considered him to be a danger to the community. According to them, Thornquist had been successfully ‘rehabilitated.’”

“That’s just hunky dory,” Chief Pulanski says. “The shrinks were wrong, this dangerous madman is on the loose, and he has apparently kidnapped a little girl in my community. Tell me, can you give me the phone numbers of these geniuses? I need to find out if Thornquist may have said anything to them that might indicate where he might go or what he might do.”

“I *can* give you their phone numbers, Chief,” Warden Jacobsen replies, “but it probably won’t do you any good. I doubt they will divulge anything to you, for two reasons: One, under the circumstances, any damning information with which Thornquist may have provided them will put them in a bad light if they reveal it to you. If Thornquist did reveal anything to them that might help you in your investigation, it raises the question as to why they recommended his release, and two, they will doubtless refuse to divulge any information to *anybody*, taking refuge in ‘ethics,’ citing ‘doctor-patient confidentiality.’”

\* \* \*

Unfortunately, the warden is right. Hunter and Fuerst are of no help whatsoever. When Chief Pulanski interviews them, they seem defensive and evasive. Almost as bad, they express no interest in or concern for Katrina Tilford.

However, Warden Jacobsen did provide Chief Pulanski with a possible lead. Parolee Johnny Calaveras had shared a cell with Thornquist during the months preceding Thornquist's release. Calaveras may (or may not) be willing to speak with Pulanski about any propensities Thornquist seemed to have had as well as any plans Thornquist may have discussed with his cellmate. Warden Jacobsen doesn't know where Mr. Calaveras is living now--his probationary period has long since expired--but he does know that Calaveras was also released in 1991, a few months after Thornquist had been.

\* \* \*

Sergeant Swain is able to track down Johnny Calaveras, who is currently residing in Las Vegas, Nevada. That is the same city in which he had killed a prostitute, the crime for which he was sentenced to MTCSD. After several attempts, Sergeant Swain is finally able to get a hold of Calaveras on the telephone. Swain makes the call because his Chief feels Calaveras would probably be more likely to speak freely to a male officer than to a female one.

"Mr. Calaveras?" Sergeant Swain inquires, when Johnny picks up the phone.

"Yeah, whaddaya want?"

"This is Sergeant Swain from the Lashonia, Wisconsin police department."

"La-who? Where? I didn't do it. I've never even been there. In fact, I don't even know where Lashanocka is," Johnny protests. He is about to hang up. Guessing that to be the case, Brant interjects quickly, "Don't hang up. Please, Mr. Calaveras, don't hang up. I just have a couple of questions--about Roy Thornquist."

"Thornquist? Never heard of him," Johnny lies.

"Roy James Thornquist. The '*gentleman*' you shared a cell with at the Missouri Treatment Center for the Sexually Dangerous," Sergeant Swain reminds him.

"Oh. *That* Thornquist. What about him? What'd he do--kill another kid or something?"

It's not lost on Sergeant Swain that Calaveras said "kill *another* kid." He knows that Thornquist had been *suspected* of killing a girl in 1986, but had not been tried for it due to lack of evidence. Apparently, Thornquist

must have confessed the murder to Calaveras. This was a good sign. Not only might they be able to determine where the body of the missing six-year-old could be found, but more urgent at the moment was anything he might be able to extract from Calaveras regarding whatever it is that Thornquist might be planning now.

Swain takes advantage of Calaveras' carelessness. "Mr. Calaveras, are you aware that it is a felony to withhold information regarding a murder?"

"What are ya talkin' about? I don't know nuthin' 'bout no murder. What are ya tryin' to pull?" Johnny objects, his voice rising in pitch and volume.

"You said, 'What'd he do – kill another kid or something?' Thornquist was sent to MTSCD for child molestation and trafficking in kiddie porn, *not* for murder. You obviously know something about a murder for which Thornquist was responsible," Brant explains.

Johnny is getting nervous now. He doesn't want to go back to prison with all those weirdos--like Thornquist. He considers himself to be just an average Joe. He hates prostitutes, sure, but who doesn't? He should have killed his mother, the slut. But what those other guys did--he didn't want anything to do with them ever again. Besides, what does he owe Thornquist? Nothing. He decides to talk. But only if the cop will make a deal with him.

"All right, Twain," he begins.

"Swain. It's Sergeant Swain," Brant calmly corrects him.

"SWAIN! Whatever!" Johnny yells. *Stupid cops! What do I care what this stinkin' cop's name is.*

"Look, I'll talk if you forget about this 'withholding information' crap," Johnny offers.

Brant exults inwardly but keeps his voice calm. "If I feel you're holding out on me, Johnny, the deal's off. You'd better be straight with me. If you are, I won't implicate you in the other matter. But I will want that information later, too."

"OK, OK," Johnny concedes. "Whaddaya wanna know? Hurry it up! I'm a busy man."

"If Thornquist were to kidnap a child, where would he go?" Brant asks.

"I dunno. How would I know?" Johnny retorts. *What, am I supposed to be some kind of mind reader or somethin'?* But then he adds: "Wait! He'd prob'ly take her to some forest somewhere. He always said way out in the woods was the best place to take 'em. They're afraid of bears and snakes and stuff like that. And nobody can hear 'em screamin' out there."

Brant makes a note to see which forests might be in the vicinity of the point from where the girl who Thornquist had allegedly killed was taken. The time to pursue that was later, though. There's probably nothing anybody can do for that girl now. It's too late to rescue *her*. Katrina Tilford, on the other hand, is--hopefully, anyway--still alive.

"That's good. That helps. You're doing fine, Johnny. Now: What do you think Roy would do with a girl after he kidnapped her?"

"The same thing he did to that other little girl! I mean, he'd prob'ly rape her, and then torture her to death. Thornquist was one weird dude. He said he enjoyed watching the scared look on their faces, seeing them shake and cry, and finally watching the light fade out of their eyes. I told him he should go after prostitutes. They're the worst. They deserve to be killed. He said he wasn't inter'sted in them, though. He said it was kids he wanted. He was one disgusting dude, man!"

"If that's how you felt about him, why would he talk to you about these things?" inquires Brant.

"He prob'ly didn't know how I felt. I didn't show nuthin' when he told me them things. That place was chock full o' freaks, man. I was outnumbered. I had to learn to fit in some way--you know."

What Johnny has told me sounds plausible enough so far, Brant reasons to himself. It's very possible that Thornquist is taking little Katie to the Superior National Forest. But there are several ways to get there from where his car was spotted. We'll have to have the airplane keep a special lookout for roads leading there. But come to think of it, there are plenty of remote places he could've already taken her that he's already passed by. Why is he pushing his luck like this? We're bound to catch him before long. Maybe there was still something further Calaveras could tell him.

"Johnny, is there anything else you can think of that Roy said when he was discussing these kind of things with you? Anything at all that you can think of?" Brant ventures.

Johnny is getting impatient. He has things to do. And he's getting thirsty for a drink. He thinks about it, though; he remembers their deal, and he definitely does not want to get locked up again, especially with those

freaks in MTCSD. He's going to be a lot more careful the next time he kills a whore, and he certainly doesn't want to have to go back for something *somebody else* did.

"Oh, yeah! There was this one really screwed-up idea Roy had," Johnny recalls. "He said that a border between two countries would be the best place to 'off' somebody--the governments on both sides of the border wouldn't know which country should handle it, they wouldn't want to work together, and the whole thing would get so messed up that you could do anything you wanted and get away with it. He said either the Mexican border or the Canadian border would work like a charm. I think he's full of it, but I'm just tellin' ya what he said."

That certainly is a bizarre idea, Brant reflects. But he recognizes it as the gem for which he has been prospecting. Logical or not, it may be just the tidbit they need to be able to rescue Katie before it's too late. Hopefully she hasn't suffered too much already, and she has been and will be able to survive--physically and emotionally--whatever she has suffered and might yet suffer before the whole ordeal is over. Poor girl. And poor Tom. Brant wants more than anything to help return Katie to her father.

"Thanks, Johnny. That's all for now. As far as your situation is concerned--so far, so good. But we'll need to talk again later about the other incident before you can consider yourself 'off the hook.'"

"Hey! I held up my end of the bargain! Don't give me that crap about going back to lockup, man!" Johnny yells. He wants the whole thing to be over and done with, not to have to think about it any more. He doesn't like to have things hanging over his head.

"Like I said, Johnny--we'll talk again. Be thinking about any details Thornquist gave you about that girl he murdered. Better yet, write it down," Brant replies, and then hangs up. As he reaches for a pen, he wonders if Johnny is literate.

Johnny slams the phone down on its cradle. *Write it down! Who does he think I am--his secretary?*



# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Brant relays the information he has gotten from Johnny Calaveras to Chief Pulanski. Based on the sighting of Thornquist and Katie in Eveleth, Minnesota, and the information garnered from the suspect's old cellmate, they surmise that Thornquist is probably headed towards the Canadian border. Based on that assumption, Pulanski narrows Thornquist's most likely routes down to three.

"He's probably headed either to International Falls, or to Crane Lake, or to Winton," Chief Pulanski begins. "The advantage International Falls offers him is that he could drive all the way to the border. The disadvantages are—if he's intelligent enough to realize it—that International Falls itself is relatively populous, and he would have to continue on a somewhat heavily traveled highway to get there. Thornquist doubtless doesn't know, though, that he's already been spotted. The media has not been informed of that. I don't know if we could trust them to keep that secret."

Pointing to the map, Chief Pulanski continues: "His other two best chances to reach the border are either here, taking Highway 169 northeast and onto Highway 18 to where the road ends at the Kawishiwi River. It looks to be a 10-15 mile hike from there along Moose Lake to the border; or here, taking Highway 23, and then 24, to Crane Lake. I would estimate the distance from the end of the road to the border to be around five miles. I don't know how rational Thornquist is. If there is some measure of rationality intertwined somehow into his irrational plan, my hunch would be that he is headed to Crane Lake – it's a shorter distance to the border than it is from the other spot near Winton, and it's much more remote than International Falls."

FBI Squad Supervisor Spencer Albright then has his supervisor contact *his* supervisor, who in turn gets in touch with the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) Commissioner's office in Ottawa, requesting whatever assistance the RCMP can provide across from the Minnesota border near Crane Lake. Eventually it is relayed to him that yes, the RCMP Deputy Commissioner in Regina, Saskatchewan has agreed to provide help via their Air and Marine Services divisions.

\* \* \*

Armed with the knowledge provided by the sighting of Thornquist's car, the bulk of the manpower is assigned to patrol Highway 53 by police cruiser and unmarked cars, and to monitor the routes to Winton and Crane Lake by airplane.

Within the hour, the police command center, which has moved from the small town of Lashonia, Wisconsin to the small city of Superior, Wisconsin (across Lake Superior from Duluth, Minnesota) receives a call from the pilot patrolling the routes to Crane Lake and Winton.

“I’ve spotted the suspect’s vehicle, abandoned at the end of Highway 24, at Crane Lake. There doesn’t appear to be anybody in it.”

Everyone in the command center, including Tom, who has traveled up in his own vehicle following the officers, directs their full attention to the conversation between the pilot and Chief Pulanski.

“Can you see the suspect or the girl from your vantage point?” Chief Pulanski asks the pilot.

“I’ll see what I can do, but I won’t promise anything. The forest cover is pretty dense, and if I *do* locate them, it’ll probably be more luck than anything else.”

“Do what you can. Good work, by the way!” Chief Pulanski responds.

“Brant, rescind the BOL, and let the other units in the area know they can stop searching,” Kimberly directs. “I don’t know what Thornquist has in mind, or how he expects to get to the Canadian border – it runs right through the middle of the lake.”

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hearing the roar of the airplane engine swooping low and close, Roy scurries to a tree, pulling Katie along behind him. Obviously they are onto him. Otherwise they wouldn't be taking such a close look at his car.

"We've got to hurry, honey. They'll be tracking us soon, and we've got a date with destiny," he winks at Katie. He pulls her after him with one arm as he runs. He knows he can't let go of her, or she'll try to escape. But she can't keep up with him, no matter how much he yells at or threatens her. This irritates Roy to no end, and his hatred for her, and the entire female gender, grows even more. He picks her up. Carrying her slows him down, but it's still faster than dragging her along. He has to get to the border before they catch up to him.

Just as Roy makes a break across a meadow for the deep woods that would conceal them, he hears the plane again. It's flying toward them, and gaining on them fast. Roy looks back to see the plane dive-bombing him, or so it seems. It is flying so low it looks as if it will barely clear the treetops of the line of trees ahead. 'Portagee' Pete Lima, the pilot, wishes he could fly low and accurate enough to decapitate the no-good, low-life, dirtbag without hurting the little girl. Or land somewhere and pummel the guy. But neither one is possible. He pulls his craft heavenward, and radios in another message.

"Command center, this is Portagee Pete again. I've spotted the suspect and the girl. They're headed northeast along Crane Lake, into the forest. He's carrying the girl. I couldn't really tell what kind of shape she's in-- she did look up at me, though, as I passed over."

"Thanks, uh, Pete, great job," Chief Pulanski answers.

"He must have been flying awfully low to have been able to see her look up at him," she mentions to those gathered around her.

Pulling the .38 revolver from his inside jacket pocket in the same instant that Pete had reached for his radio, Roy empties the chamber, shooting wildly at the plane. Only two bullets hit the general target: one goes through the cockpit, barely missing the pilot's head. The other pierces the fuel tank at a 90° angle, severing the fuel line and igniting a fire. The flames spread quickly; they have already nearly reached the cockpit as Pete radios in his last message. "Mayday! Mayday! Command center, the suspect is armed. He shot a hole in my fuel tank with a pistol, and I've caught fire. I'm ditching into Crane Lake."

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Portagee Pete doesn't survive the crash into the lake. He is knocked unconscious by the impact, and then drowns.

Immediately after receiving Pete's last report, Albright arranges for two seaplanes to fly the task force to Crane Lake: one for Pulanski, Brant, Tom, and two dog-teams; and the other for the four FBI agents (Albright, Anthony, and Hammitt from Minneapolis, and Dawes from Milwaukee) as well as two paramedics from Duluth. From the next command center on the southeastern shore of Crane Lake, Chief Pulanski is to continue serving as Incident Commander of the task force overseeing the manhunt.

The two dog teams (each team consisting of a dog and its handler) are Jerry McGarrity and his golden retriever tracking dog Ranger; and Rob LaVotte and Trooper, his airscenting chocolate Labrador Retriever.

Note: A 'tracking' (or 'trailing') dog does the work that you sometimes see in movies when prisoners escape from a chain gang. Contrary to what many people may think, though, a tracking dog doesn't have to be a 'hound dog.' All breeds of dogs have an excellent sense of smell. What makes one dog breed differ from another in its aptitude for tracking is its intelligence, stamina, and its degree of desire to please its handler. Besides the stereotypical 'blue tick' hounds, other types of dogs meeting those criteria and possessing the potential to excel at tracking are Retrievers and Shepherds. Of course, training a dog to track is hard, time-consuming work. The trainers also must possess stamina.

Tracking dogs follow scent that a person has left on the ground. That's why you see them working with their nose to the ground. They can positively identify somebody they've never seen before by being 'given the scent' of the person whom they are supposed to find, and then following it until the person is located.

Search and Rescue operations also use dogs with related, but different, skills. For instance, there are dogs that specialize in avalanche search (trained to ignore scents on the surface, and only 'alert' to scents coming from below the surface); cadaver search dogs (whose specialty is obvious); and then there are 'airscenting' dogs. An airscenting dog can be either 'non-discriminating,' in which case they search for any human odor, or 'discriminating' dogs who (similar to tracking or trailing dogs) are 'given the scent' of a particular person to find. They detect scent that is present in the air.

As she didn't know whether Katie would be walking under her own power, or if she would be carried, Chief Pulanski decided on requesting an airscenting dog to be given her scent. This proved to be a wise decision, as the pilot reported Thornquist was carrying her. The tracking dog team she requested will be given Thornquist's scent. His scent will be taken either from the steering wheel or the driver's seat of his car. The handler will prepare a 'scent pad' that he will use to 'fire' his dog. He'll carry it with him in a plastic bag (to prevent 'contamination' with other scents), so that he can 're-scent' his dog at intervals, if necessary, to be sure his dog continues tracking the right scent.

An air of somber expectancy fills the plane in which Tom Tilford is flying. It will all be over soon, one way or the other. At least, as far as the emergency period of the ordeal is concerned. No matter how it turns out, Katie and Tom's life will never be quite the same again; their lives had already inalterably changed when Thornquist spotted Katie exiting the school bus. Or maybe things had turned for them when Thornquist was released, back in 1991, but they just hadn't known it yet. Katrina was not even born yet, and Tom and Kathy Tilford were newlyweds.

Tom's heart beats as if it is going to leap right out of his chest. Under normal circumstances, the turbulent flight and the roar of the seaplane's engine would have made him at least a little nervous, or maybe he would have enjoyed the birds-eye-view of the lakes and forests below, but he is not thinking of his safety or the scenery at all. He yearns to see his daughter again, to hold her in his arms. To get her away from that pathetic man who has come to represent for him all the evil in the world.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

The landing is uneventful. The pilot runs his craft up onto the shore, and his passengers quickly file out. First Chief Pulanski and Sergeant Swain, then Tom, followed by the dog teams, and finally the pilot himself.

Knowing that the first plane had already performed a preliminary search of the area, the plane carrying the FBI agents makes an immediate landing when it arrives, and the pilot deftly maneuvers his craft alongside the one in which the first group arrived.

The task force now on hand consists of nineteen souls: four FBI agents (Squad Supervisor Spencer Albright; Special Agents Becky Anthony and Matt Hammitt from Minneapolis, and Roger Dawes from Milwaukee); Chief of Police Pulanski and Sergeant Swain from Lashonia; Lake County Sheriff Anders Nelson and his Deputy Mark Davis (who were waiting on shore for them when they flew in, having been contacted by Albright while en route); two dog teams; two paramedics, the two seaplane pilots, and Tom.

The pilots, Tom, the FBI agents, Pulanski and Sheriff Nelson are staying behind at the impromptu command post, near the spot where Thornquist abandoned his car. The two dog teams will start working immediately, making radio contact as soon as they discover anything or need assistance. Sergeant Swain is assigned to accompany Jerry and Ranger, following Thornquist's scent. Lake County Deputy Mark Davis is to accompany Rob and Trooper, following Katie's scent. If Thornquist still has Katie captive (which is assumed to be probable), the two dog teams will probably be working in very close proximity to one another.

Tom had already given Katie's shoe to Chief Pulanski. She, in turn, had handed it over to Rob with which to 'scent' Trooper. Rob had placed a 'scent pad' in Katie's shoe pad during the flight, allowing her scent to permeate the pad.

As soon as they deplane, Rob 'scents' Trooper. He then places the pad in a plastic bag, seals it, and deposits it in his shirt pocket.

A potential problem with airscenting is that odors traveling through the air can meander every which way based on what direction and how hard the wind is blowing, the temperature, the time of day, the topography, and other factors. The wind is currently blowing fairly stiffly and erratically changing direction, making it difficult for Trooper to home in on the best route to follow. Trooper detects Katie's scent first coming at him from above, then from below; from the left, and then from the right.

He circles around for awhile, trying to orient himself. He finally chooses what seems to him to be the most likely direction, and begins heading along the eastern shore of the lake. They already know that is the direction into which Thornquist had started to travel when he was sighted by the pilot, but Rob doesn't want to 'prejudice' Trooper into going in any particular direction. Trooper needs to find the scent himself, and follow it without being influenced by his handler, whom he desperately wants to please.

In the meantime, Jerry, Brant, and Ranger jog over to Thornquist's car, where the others are already heading. Being the first to arrive there, Jerry notices Katie's backpack on the floorboard of the car and shouts his discovery to the group of officers approaching the car. Jerry then gets right down to business. He collects a scent pad from the steering wheel, walks several yards away from the car, and offers the scent to his partner and friend. Ranger buries his nose in the scent pad. He sniffs, and sniffs again. Jerry gives the command: "Track!"

Without hesitation, Ranger darts straight for the car. She sniffs excitedly all around the car, showing the most interest in the area around the driver's side of the front seat. Ranger then turns and, nose to the ground, practically runs back toward the lake, sniffing the ground all the while. It is a good thing that both McGarrity and Swain are in good physical condition, otherwise they would not be able to keep up with Ranger, who is moving so quickly now his leash is taut and Jerry is having a hard time hanging on to it.

It isn't long before Jerry, Ranger, and Brant overtake the airscenting team.

The wind is blowing hard enough, and has changed directions often enough, that Trooper is having a very difficult time following Katie's scent. He is zigzagging around, sometimes describing a circle before he takes off again, always following the general direction of the lakeshore, but never seeming altogether sure of where he's going. Within half an hour, they are well behind the tracking team.

Eventually, Jerry forces Ranger to slacken his pace a little. He and Ranger could keep up this pace indefinitely, but he notices that Brant's stamina is not quite on par with theirs. He doesn't want to leave Brant behind. When they do come upon Thornquist, they will need Brant and possibly his gun, too.

Trooper, as an airscenting dog, is allowed to run free. The closer he gets to Katie, the more sure he seems to become, and he is no longer zigzagging around. The wind has died down to almost nothing, and so her scent lingers right where she has been instead of being blown about.

A few minutes more, and the indefatigable Trooper has overtaken Jerry, Ranger, and Brant. The stronger the scent becomes, the faster he runs, and the straighter his course.

Rob's dog has been trained to find his subject and then, if he has ranged out of sight of his handler, to return to him and bark, indicating he has located the subject of his search.

Tramping through the underbrush, Roy doesn't even hear Trooper run up behind him. By the time Roy does see Trooper, the dog has reversed course and is headed back at full speed to his handler.

Roy shakes his head in disgust and picks up the pace. He knows he can't waste any time. He's breathing hard, but there's no time to rest.

Scarcely 500 yards behind Thornquist, Jerry spots a brownish blur about 30 yards to the left of him, darting through the forest. It's Trooper running back towards Rob. Jerry notes that Trooper doesn't seem to be wounded, and that he's running at or near his top speed. He stops, turns around, whispers, "Brant!" and motions for the officer to catch up to him. "Trooper has found the girl, and is returning to alert his master," Jerry reports.

"Then we're probably very close now," Brant answers. "We'll have to proceed as quietly as we can. We don't want to advertise our presence to Thornquist."



## CHAPTER TWENTY

Roy, who is indeed just a short distance ahead of Jerry, Ranger, and Brant, trips over a tree root. He drops Katie, who goes sprawling and tumbling. Without even thinking, her pent-up nervous energy finally finds an outlet as she springs up and begins to run. Roy is even quicker getting up, though, and catches up to her in three long strides. He takes her down with a flying tackle, re-injuring her scraped knees.

“Didn’t I tell you that you are destined to stay with me forever?” Roy growls under his breath. He holds Katie down with his hands on her back as he gets to his feet. He takes a deep breath, and is about to bend down and pick Katie up when he hears the tracking trio coming. He grabs Katie by the hand, yanks her up, and throws her over a fallen log nearby. She thinks of running, but as soon as she looks up he is already there, directly above her, diving over the log. Roy wedges her between himself and the log with his chest, and reaches in his jacket for his pistol. He had forgotten to reload it after firing at the plane, and does so now.

Just as Roy places the last bullet in its chamber, he hears a rustling in the leaves back around the area where he tripped. Pistol at the ready, he raises his head enough to peer over the log. The dog is coming right at him, covering ground fast. When the dog is within about 20 yards of him, Roy fires. The first shot misses. The second bullet, though, strikes Ranger squarely in the chest. She whimpers once, her legs buckle beneath her, she skids on her chest for a few feet, and then flips over, landing on her side. The bullet killed her instantly.

Thornquist laughs hysterically. “Did you see that stupid dog, honey bunch?” he grins at Katie’s back. Katie did see it, through a crack between the bottom of the log and the forest floor. She doesn’t answer. She feels nauseous.

Jerry has also seen it, as he had been only a few yards behind Ranger when she had broken into a run. Jerry had lost grip of her leash at that point. When he sees Ranger go down, he becomes engulfed with a blind rage. Not giving a thought to his personal safety, he runs towards his fallen friend. Another shot rings out, shattering Jerry’s left kneecap and sending him sprawling in a manner not unlike that of his dog.

Roy lets out a whoop and cackles again. He pumps his left fist in the air. “Did you see that crazy nigger, baby? Whew! I guess I showed him! Now watch this!”

Jerry can't move. Roy aims the pistol slowly and deliberately at Jerry's head, all the while grinning from ear to ear. At that moment Brant comes into view. Roy is startled at his sudden appearance. Brant reaches for his sidearm, but Roy already has his at the ready. Three rapid shots slam into Brant's chest, knocking him backwards.

After waiting a couple of seconds to see that Brant isn't going to get up, Roy again points the gun at Jerry's head. Jerry reaches out with his right arm and lays it on Ranger's neck. "Goodbye, girl," he whispers, but continues staring up at Thornquist with a look of resolute disdain.

Click. Click. Roy's gun is out of bullets.

*No time to reload now*, Roy tells himself. He knows there must be others, and that they are probably close behind--especially now that they have heard the shots. Unwilling to lose any more precious time, Roy shoves his gun back in his jacket, picks up Katie, and disappears again into the forest.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jerry tries again to rise, but it is simply impossible. His shattered knee prevents him from even being able to elevate that leg, and he collapses in a heap, perspiring profusely. The blood loss from the wound is also making him light-headed and weak. Overriding his physical pain, though, and even intruding into his thoughts as he gradually slips out of consciousness, is the realization that his partnership with Ranger is over forever.

Roy and Katie disappear out of earshot. An eerie silence prevails in the small clearing where Jerry lays fallen alongside his dead partner. Not even the sound of wind in the trees, frogs croaking, or crickets chirping break the silence. It remains completely silent for a full two minutes.

Finally, Jerry regains consciousness as he hears the sound of footsteps approaching from behind. It's Rob and Trooper, along with Deputy Davis. The tracking team stops and quickly surveys the situation. All three of their companions are down: Sergeant Swain is sprawled on his back, breathing but unconscious; he's not bleeding. His bulletproof vest absorbed the brunt of the bullets' force. About 10 yards ahead and to the left, Jerry is lying still, but breathing. Ranger is a few feet behind and to the right of him, lying in a pool of blood and completely motionless.

Trooper sniffs Sergeant Swain, and whines softly. He then runs up to Ranger, sniffs her, and whimpers loudly. Finally, Trooper joins his master next to Jerry, and whines yet again.

Fearing the worst, Deputy Davis asks, "Mr. McGarrity, can you hear me?"

Jerry is too weak and dizzy now to raise his head. It takes all his strength just to open his eyes. He looks up at the deputy and groans, "He got me in the kneecap. I can't move. You all will have to catch him, now, and stop him somehow."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Don’t worry, Jerry. We’ll get him,” Rob says. “We’ll get him, and we’ll rescue the girl, too.” Davis radios Chief Pulanski and briefly informs her of the events, and the condition of Sergeant Swain and Jerry McGarrity. He doesn’t think to mention Ranger’s condition. Pulanski directs the two paramedics who flew up with the FBI to toggle their rescue beacons from transmit to receive mode. Swain’s and McGarrity’s are still set to transmit, so they will be able to locate the two injured men.

Roy and Katie reach the spot to which Thornquist has been intent on returning--the narrowest section of Crane Lake, with the United States on one side, and Canada on the other. He strides to the boat he has hidden in the underbrush on the bank, still pulling Katie behind him. With his left hand, he reaches into the boat and retrieves a length of rope. He spins Katie around to face him, and steps on her right foot with his left one, raises his fist to her face, and warns her not to try to escape. “You try to squirm away from me, my sweet little bride, and I’ll jam this fist right down your throat!”

Roy reaches into his boot and pulls out his switchblade. Opening it, he cuts a length of rope, and ties Katie’s arms in front of her. He uses the remainder of the rope to tie her ankles together. Then, he picks Katie up, dumps her unceremoniously into the boat, and drags it into the water. Finally climbing aboard himself, Thornquist starts the motor, and then stands up to see if he can spot any pursuers. There’s nobody in sight. Swiveling his head around, he surveys the lake. Nothing there, either. A rush of excitement sends a shiver through his body as he realizes his long-awaited dream is about to be fulfilled. He has outsmarted everybody, and is about to prove to the world the magnitude of his genius. This will be his magnum opus, his coup de grâce! Nobody before has been as clever as he is, to commit a crime in the ‘no-man’s-land’ between two national borders, where no laws are in effect, where therefore nobody can be arrested, no matter how heinous their crime.

Fifty yards out into the lake, Thornquist sees Rob and Trooper arrive at the spot on the shore from which he entered the lake. Trooper goes straight for the spot where Katie stood as she was being bound, looks up at his master, and then follows the scent to the edge of the lake. He sniffs the air and looks out onto the lake. Trooper begins to enter the water, but Rob holds him back. Although it is June, Trooper wouldn’t survive long in the cold water of this northern Lake.

Rob calls the command center to apprise them of the current state of affairs. He reports his position, and the entire assemblage of personnel,

except for Special Agent Hammitt, scramble back into the seaplanes to make the quick hop to the scene.

Albright orders Hammitt to find a boat in the town of Crane Lake to rent, or commandeer if necessary, and meet them at the position reported by LaVotte. They might need it to pursue Thornquist out onto the lake.

It only takes a few minutes to fire up the planes, take off, land again a few miles to the northwest, beach the planes, and deplane. But by now Thornquist has already made it out to the approximate middle of the lake--where the shores of Canada and the United States are simultaneously visible to him.

With his binoculars, FBI Squad Supervisor Albright can see Thornquist, standing up in the middle of the boat, talking and gesturing wildly. The only person that can hear Roy is Katie, but she can't make any sense of his oratory.

"Where am I? Where am I?! In the United States? Or Canada? Do you know? I don't know! Neither do you!" he yells, pointing toward the line of people he sees standing on the United States side of Crane Lake. He wasn't really expecting an audience, but it is just as well. He knows they can't do anything to him. They wouldn't dare. They know he would take his case to the UN, or the Hague, if necessary, and he would win a decisive and glorious victory, embarrassing both countries and advertising their shortsightedness and incompetence. They wouldn't dare do it.

"I don't know if I'm in the United States or Canada! And neither do you!" he repeats. "There's nothing you can do to me! Not a thing! Your idiotic laws don't apply here in no-man's-land! I can do anything I want--anything--and there's *nothing* you can do about it!"

Roy is too far away for any of those on shore to risk a shot. Only a scant few feet separate Thornquist and Katie. They know that she is with him in the boat because Thornquist has propped her head up against one of the seats, and she is facing her abductor.

Albright considers using one of the seaplanes to get closer. No, that won't do any good; Thornquist would simply use the girl as a shield, and might be provoked into doing something they might be able to prevent if they just play it cool for now.

Roy sits down on the seat at the fore of his little boat and looks over at Katie. He begins to speak to her, softly now, as if he's telling her a bedtime story. Instead of beginning with 'Once upon a time' and ending with 'happily ever after,' however, he terrifies Katie with his grisly

ramblings. First, he recounts the rape and murder of that ‘sweet little thing’ back in ’86. Then, he continues: “Let’s see, my precious little thing. How should I kill *you* after I’m through with you? Should I cut you to pieces with my long, sharp knife? Should I shoot you like I did that stupid jungle bunny and his dog? Strangle you? Drown you?”

Katie is shaking violently. She feels sorry for the girl Worst Daddy talked about. She wants to be back in her father’s arms. Her real daddy. The real ‘Best Daddy.’ Roy pauses to admire the look of sheer terror on Katie’s face.

After staring at her expressionlessly, save for a slight smirk, Roy suddenly stands up. In what seems like one quick motion in a split-second, he takes a step toward Katie and yanks her to her feet. By the time the observers see the knife in Roy’s hand, he is already using it to cut the rope off her wrists. He steps back again, standing and gawking at his captive. “Take off your blouse!” Roy orders. Katie complies. She is shivering, both out of fear and because of the cold temperature out in the middle of the lake, with a slight breeze blowing and the sun beginning to set.

Roy bends down to sever the rope tying Katie’s ankles. He stands up, and then steps back again. “Now, take off your skirt, *dearie*. It’s time for me to show you what Best Daddy can do!”

Katie continues to shiver, more violently now. She no longer feels the cold. “If you don’t take it off, I’ll cut it off!” Thornquist screams, his voice rising in both volume and pitch, looking every bit the rabid and insane predator that he is.

“Please,” Katie says, her voice quivering, “Don’t make me.” Roy’s face contorts with rage, and he lunges forward, knife in hand. The RCMP Staff Sergeant, who has been watching the scene unfold from the Canadian shore through his binoculars, presses the button on his lapel and blurts into his radio transmitter:

“Now!”

About 100 feet on the Canadian side of Thornquist’s boat, the RCMP diver suddenly shoots up from below the lake’s surface.

WHOOSH! PFFFT!

The “WHOOSH!” sound is the weapon flying through the air after being expelled from the diver’s speargun. The “PFFFT!” is the sound the spear makes as it enters Thornquist’s shoulder. The diver missed his target--with Thornquist's left side toward him, he was aiming at a spot between

Thornquist's cheekbone and temple.

The force of the blow knocks Roy out of the boat. Blood squirts out of his shoulder and into the lake. Katie is also pitched out as the boat rocks violently from side to side. For a few moments, both remain submerged.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Katie emerges to the surface of the lake, flailing her arms and gasping for breath.

For another several seconds, there is no sign of Thornquist. All observers hope he has been mortally wounded or is in the process of drowning. But then the spear is seen again, rising straight out of the water – first a few inches, then a couple of feet, until finally it describes an arc through the air, starting perpendicular to the water's surface and ending parallel to it. Now Thornquist's face surfaces, and he too gasps for air. Looking around wildly, he spots Katie and immediately begins swimming toward her, a cold stare of determination on his face. Just as he's about to grab her, the RCMP diver surfaces behind him. He delivers a vicious blow to the side of Thornquist's head with the butt of his speargun, knocking the miscreant unconscious.

The diver swims over to Katie and quickly places a flotation device around her head and pulls a cord to inflate it.

Seemingly out of nowhere, An RCMP helicopter appears above the diver and Katie. The diver pulls the mask away from his face and reassures Katie that she will be all right now. He then helps her into the basket that has been lowered from the helicopter, secures her inside, and gives the signal for them to raise the basket. After doing so, the helicopter pilot flies to the U.S. side of the lake, landing near the shoreline.

An RCMP boat motors out to pick up the diver and Thornquist. The diver drags Thornquist, who has regained a semblance of consciousness and has been desperately treading water, through the water and over to the side of the boat, where two of his fellow Special Constables are waiting. One constable trains a rifle on Thornquist's head while the other reaches down, grabs the shaft of the spear with his right hand and Thornquist's right shoulder with his left, braces his left foot against the side of the boat, and lifts the semi-comatose madman, with the aid of the diver pushing from below, into the boat. Thornquist is then unceremoniously flung into a corner of the deck.

By the time the RCMP boat reaches the United States side of Crane Lake, Thornquist has caught his breath and regained full consciousness. When he realizes in whose custody he finds himself, and surmises more or less what has transpired, he sputters, "You can't do this to me--we're in U.S. territory! I'll sue you for impersonating an officer! You're out of your jurisdiction! You can't do this!"



The RCMP Special Constables and their Staff Sergeant look at Thornquist, then at each other, shake their heads, and chuckle. Later, when they recount their adventure, they will laugh heartily when recalling his protestations, but until they know just how the girl is going to be, they're not in the mood for too much mirth and merriment.

As the RCMP helicopter lands, Tom pushes his way through the mass of people gathering beside it. Katie has already been dried off and wrapped in blankets by the personnel on board. The first person she sees when the helicopter door opens is her daddy, rushing at her with open arms. The look in his eyes are a mixture of panic and relief; her eyes reflect the very recent terror she has experienced, but also, as her dad's do, relief. Relief to finally see her daddy--her source of comfort and love, of strength and security--again. They had both wondered if they would ever see each other again; this was a dream come true following an unspeakable nightmare.

Katie and Tom briefly look into each other's eyes, and then hug. Tom holds his daughter, his sweet, innocent, daughter, who didn't deserve any of this, who nobody has the right to harm, tightly but tenderly. Neither of them wants to ever let go. They have now, in their arms, all they will ever need. All they really want. Both of them are crying now, uncontrollably crying. Tears of anguish. Tears of joy. Tears of relief. Tears of anguish because of what *has* happened; tears of joy and relief when what *has* happened is compared to what *could have* happened. Tears springing from unspeakable strain and stress, bursting out in a torrent after being suppressed, for the most part, for the past several hours. How long had it been? The sun was setting. All this had taken place in one single afternoon--a lifetime of fear, anguish, and stress condensed into a few hours. Hours that Katie would have normally spent doing her homework, eating dinner, and watching television or talking with friends on the phone.

Both Tom and Katie are crying so hard that they can't speak for quite awhile. Tom finally chokes back his sobs enough to grab his daughter gently by the shoulders, look deep into her eyes and ask, "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

Katie doesn't know what to answer. He *had* hurt her, yes, but not in the way her daddy might be talking about. She knows about rape, and why she should be wary of strangers. Tom has taught her not to allow anybody to touch her private parts, nor to allow anybody to touch her in any way that makes her feel uncomfortable. 'Worst Daddy' hadn't hurt her in *that* way, but she had been afraid that he would try to.

"As long as you stay with me, I'll be all right, daddy. He didn't hurt me too bad."

Tom is partly relieved, although he knows his daughter *has* most definitely been hurt, if not physically at least emotionally. She has been hurt inwardly, in the heart, even as he has been. Even as far as the physical part of things went, though, he wants to know to what exactly it is that she is referring. “What do you mean ‘he didn’t hurt me *too* bad.’ What did he do to you?” His voice rises and he begins to feel an indescribable rage toward his daughter’s former captor.

Katie is uncomfortable. She has never seen this look on her daddy’s face before.

“What did he do to you!?” Tom again asks her, holding her shoulders tightly and staring into her eyes.

“Well... he pushed me, he punched me, he called me names, he...” Katie can’t go on. It was too painful, too scary, too embarrassing, to relive it all just now. She doesn’t even want to think about it, let alone have to talk about it.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Katie,” Tom soothes, hugging her again, and brushing her hair with his hand. “Don’t worry. It will never happen again. I won’t let anybody ever hurt you again. You understand?” he asks, looking into her eyes, hoping she will believe him. Hoping that she won’t have to spend the rest of her life in terror, afraid of everyone, every place, every day.

“Yes, daddy. Just don’t leave me. Not even for a second. I need you. I love you so much.”

“I’ll never let you go, Katie. Don’t worry – I won’t leave you, no matter what.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When Katie told her father that Thornquist had hurt her, his rage urged him to rush over and pummel the vile creature. He wanted to unleash all the pent-up energy that had been building throughout the last several hours and punish Thornquist, repay him for some *fraction* of the pain he had caused his daughter and himself. But now he knows he can not leave Katie, not even for an instant, not now. His rage toward Thornquist is superseded by pity for his daughter. His desire to seek revenge has been overpowered by his desire to hold and comfort his little girl. All of a sudden he feels drained, anyway. He can't muster up the energy to beat up anybody just now, not even Thornquist.

The paramedics carry up the stretchers, one at a time, on which Swain and McGarrity lie, and place them in the helicopter. McGarrity is now unconscious, but Swain has regained consciousness. The police Sergeant is suffering from broken ribs; his upper chest is black, blue, and yellow. McGarrity has lost a lot of blood, and is being administered saline solution to replenish the lost fluid.

"Mr. Tilford, it's time to go," FBI leader Albright says. "Fortunately, your daughter seems not to have suffered any serious injuries. Nevertheless, we need to get her to a hospital for a complete examination. As soon as she's ready for it, we'll have one of our crisis counselors speak to her regarding this incident, so we can--hopefully--put this guy away for good this time."

Tom nods in agreement. He begins to climb into the helicopter, but then turns around to address Albright. Not maliciously, but matter-of-factly, he states, "If you don't, I will."

Sitting next to Katie, Tom holds Kaite close. As the chopper rises, he gazes out the window to the ground below. FBI Squad Supervisor Albright is conversing with the RCMP Staff Sergeant. The boat that FBI Special Agent Hammitt was able to 'acquire' had just arrived on the scene when the RCMP diver shot Thornquist with the speargun. Hammitt is attaching a line to the perpetrator's boat, preparing to haul it to shore. Thornquist himself has been handcuffed and placed in leg restraints. He is being led by two FBI agents, who are flanking him, to one of the seaplanes. Thornquist is apparently still vehemently railing against the agents, probably claiming his rights have been impinged upon, turning his head first to the left to yell at the agent on that side of him, and then to the right for the same purpose. The FBI agents seem to be doing a magnificent job of ignoring him. Chief Pulanski looks up at the helicopter as it swings around and flies out of sight, on its way to Falls Memorial

Hospital in International Falls.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

As the crimes committed have taken place on U.S. soil, and the victims are all U.S. citizens, the RCMP turns Thornquist over to the FBI. Albright thanks the entire RCMP team for their assistance and assures them that, in case it is ever needed, assistance to them from the U.S. side is only a phone call away.

Physically, Katie is going to be fine. She is a little dehydrated, and has suffered some bruises and scrapes from Roy's rough treatment. She has contracted a cold, probably due to a combination of stress and the few minutes she spent in the cold waters of Crane Lake. Following her examination that evening, she falls asleep, an I.V. rehydrating her through the night. Her father sleeps in a chair at her bedside, holding her hand. He is exhausted, too, and dozes off a couple of times during the night. When awake, Tom caresses his daughter with his eyes. He weeps silently while watching her sleep. When he thinks of how things could have turned out even worse, he smiles to know she is alive and now safe.

But he is still worried for Katie. How will she face the days, weeks, months, and years ahead? Can he protect her from the dangers surrounding her? From the disgusting, vile men who would take everything from her, and him, just to satisfy some selfish demoniacal 'need'? He doesn't know; there are no guarantees. But he will do all he can to prevent a recurrence of any event remotely similar to the one that has scorched a hole in his very being.

Shortly after dawn the next morning, while still sleeping, Katie's face takes on a look of concern, and she begins squirming in her bed, as if struggling to free herself from some bondage. Tom doesn't want to startle her. He puts his hand gently on her head and softly says, "Katie. It's me, daddy. It's alright." Katie's eyelids spring open, betraying a mingling of fear and hope. Which 'Daddy' is it? When she sees that it really is her daddy, her *real* 'Best Daddy,' she sighs, smiles up at him, and spreads her arms wide for a hug. Tom bends down over her and squeezes her gently. They embrace each other as if they never want to let go, as they had the day before, in the helicopter.

A nurse enters the room. "Are you hungry, Katie?" she asks.

"I don't know," Katie replies, looking at her dad.

"You really ought to eat something," the nurse says. Tom nods at her.

“OK,” Katie responds. “Daddy, are you hungry?”

“No; I’ll eat later. But you go ahead; you need to build up your strength.”

The nurse smiles and turns to go. “I’ll be right back,” she says.

“Daddy?” Katie asks.

“Yes, Katie?”

“What will happen to that man?”

Tom’s smile vanishes. He looks down, and then out the window for a few seconds. Looking back again at his daughter, he tries to smile and replies softly, “He’ll never hurt you again, Katie. I promise you that.”

Tom knows that Thornquist will be ‘put away’ for a long time. Besides kidnapping, he will be charged with manslaughter (‘Portagee’ Pete Lima), two counts of attempted murder (Deputy Swain and Jerry McGarrity), and who knows how many counts of aggravated assault against Katie. But Tom can’t be absolutely certain that Thornquist will never be released again. He knows, though, that he will live up to the promise he has made his daughter: Thornquist will never hurt her again, no matter what that means Tom has to do to prevent it.

Lashonia police officer Brant Swain, and Jerry McGarrity, the volunteer Search and Rescue dog handler, are also going to be fine--depending on your definition of ‘fine,’ that is. They are going to live, anyway. The same can not be said for Pedro Jaime Bruno ‘Portagee Pete’ Lima, who left behind a wife and three young children.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Kimberly Pulanski is awakened by her alarm clock. Lying in bed, she takes stock of the previous day's events. A young and innocent girl had been terrorized. Her father especially, but in addition to that the entire community of Lashonia had been subjected to unnecessary fear and anguish because of it. 'Portagee' Pete Lima had been killed. Jerry McGarrity had been injured, and may not walk without the use of a cane again. Besides that, his dog had been killed. Her Sergeant, Brant Swain, had suffered painful gunshot wounds; if not for his bulletproof vest, he would surely have been killed, too. All this devastation and carnage caused by one man's twisted desires and ruthless actions.

She thinks again about the two psychologists who had recommended Thornquist's release from the Missouri Treatment Center for the Sexually Dangerous. She is almost as mad at them as Tom would be if he knew the circumstances leading to Thornquist's release. If a man like Thornquist can outfox those psychologists, what good are they accomplishing in their chosen professions? Maybe they should take up a career that would be more suitable for them, at least something in which they wouldn't cause so much damage. Tom was right--these people who helped Thornquist get released bear a measure of responsibility for what that despicable deviate did.

Regardless of what their intentions are, these men, Fuerst and Hunter, are a danger to society. Is it going too far to say that they are terrorists, polluters, enemies of the state--of the citizens of the state, to be more precise--when they release this rancid rabble back into the midst of an unsuspecting public? If there is *any* doubt whatsoever about someone who has already proved himself capable of such heinous crimes, why take a chance? Why impinge on the rights of all the potential victims by allowing such a person to *ever* have another opportunity to repeat their crimes? Shouldn't the rights of the many--especially the children--supersede those of individuals--especially suchlike individuals?

Chief Pulanski can't comprehend why Thornquist was released any more than Tom can. Maybe if the legislators, judges, parole boards, psychologists or whomever facilitated the release of these monsters back into society *were* held accountable for what those they released thereafter did, they would be more hesitant to do so. If a rattlesnake bites somebody, and you are standing right there with a shovel in your hand, would you let it go, reasoning 'maybe it will feel sorry for what it's done, and resolve never, ever to bite anybody again'? Yeah, right. Is a rabid animal who attacks somebody spared because it 'didn't know what it was doing'? Hardly. Moreover, these people are far worse than

animals--animals don't kill without reason. Even rattlesnakes only strike when they feel threatened--not out of a desire to see people suffer.

After a thorough examination, Katie is released from the hospital and is allowed to return home. Kimberly Pulanski decides that after work she is going to drive over to the Tilford home to check up on Katie and Tom. She wants to see how they are getting along and if there is anything she can do to help. Maybe Tom will allow her to prepare a belated 'welcome home' dinner for Katie.



## **PART II: CLOSURE**

# CHAPTER ONE

On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1986, six-year-old Jessica Tracy was picked up by a stranger matching Thornquist's description while playing near her home in Hudson Falls, New York. Although it was proven that Thornquist had been in the general area at the time, not enough evidence had been available to bring him to trial. The girl's body had never been recovered.

Only somebody who has been through the experience themselves can really understand what Robert and Linda Tracy felt, and still feel: Panic, shock, anger, frustration, depression, desperation. And then there's the guilt. Maybe there was something we could have done to prevent it. If only we had done this, or not done that. If only I hadn't let her go out to play that day, Linda often berated herself. Jessica had homework to finish. Why didn't I make her do her homework first? Why wasn't I watching her more closely?

Her husband Robert sometimes blamed himself, too. Why had he put off telling his daughter about the world, and what some people were like? Why hadn't he emphasized to her more clearly that she should never *ever* accept a ride from a stranger, no matter what he might say? Who knows what he may have said to lure her into the car? 'I work with your daddy. He got hurt at work, and I need to take you and your mommy to the hospital to see him. Hurry up! Get in, and we'll go pick up your mommy!' Was that what he had said? Or had he been harsh from the beginning, threatening her if she didn't do exactly what he said? Either scenario was more than Mr. Tracy could handle. Had he even remembered to kiss her goodbye when he left for work that morning? He had been running late...

Worse yet, the Tracys sometimes blamed each other, although they never verbalized it. Linda was sometimes beside herself with rage at her husband for not protecting their daughter somehow. That was his job, his role, wasn't it? And Robert, in turn, blamed Linda for cavalierly sitting idly by, without a care in the world, allowing his little girl to be snatched away from him. Shouldn't she have been keeping an eye on her? Was that really too much to expect?

It probably goes without saying that the effect on their marriage was not a positive one. Robert found reasons to work late, so as to avoid the awkwardness and hostility he felt at home. Linda began to drink during the day, anytime the pain and loneliness was too much to bear--which was most of the time.

Not helping matters was the way some of their friends and neighbors,

and even in some cases relatives, responded to their ordeal. They were very supportive and understanding at first, but as time went on some began to seem irritated with their prolonged period of mourning. 'You should snap out of it!' was the impression they gave. One friend even scolded them, saying, 'You'd better count your blessings! You still have Jimmy and Jennifer! Think about them! You can't mope around forever, or they will think you don't love them. Be happy for what you *do* have. Some people don't have *any* children!'

That didn't help. It was actually quite discouraging, as it compounded their feelings of guilt. And getting over the loss of Jessica wasn't something they could simply decide to do. They couldn't tell themselves, 'We should get over it' and have it automatically happen. Logic wasn't involved, emotions were. Besides, it wasn't 'logical' to get over it, anyway. A child isn't something that can be replaced, like a light bulb. They did love their other children too--as much as they did Jessica--but they wanted *all* of their children. All but one was simply not enough.

Robert and Linda did find a common cause, a shallow and fleeing solace, in shifting some of the blame to the police. Why had they taken so long to respond? Why had the investigating officer been so calm during the whole thing? Maybe if the police would have given it a whole-hearted effort, and stopped and searched every car, things would have turned out differently. By the time the FBI finally got involved, it was too late.

They even blamed God. Why had he allowed their girl to be taken from them? Their minister had told them that 'God needed another angel in heaven.' They couldn't accept that. How could God need their daughter more than they did? Why would he be so selfish and cruel? They stopped attending church.

Not to be ignored are the sufferings of Jessica's siblings, Jimmy and Jennifer. They suffered because they had lost their sister. They suffered because of the effects the incident had on their parents, individually and collectively. They experienced much of the same feelings as their parents: confusion, disorientation, anger, depression; an emptiness, a void, in the household. And, as their parents did, they also suffered from feelings of guilt. Guilt because they had not been with Jessica to help her. Jimmy had been playing softball a few blocks away, and Jennifer was in a friend's house just across the street from where Jessica had last been seen.

Really, though, it was nobody's fault but Roy James Thornquist's. Sure, others may have been able to do something to prevent this terrible crime from being carried out--if only this had happened, and that had not happened, etc. etc. and so forth ad infinitum. But the only person who could truly be blamed was the man who raped and murdered Jessica

Tracy. He did it; nobody else had. The sin of commission was his. The omissions of others were simple mistakes, at worst--not sins.

With the passing of the years, the sharp, ever-present pain did subside somewhat. The pain was no longer *constantly* unbearable, without letup. There were even times when they could forget their pain--for a minute or two.

## CHAPTER TWO

Lashonia Sergeant Brant Swain has recovered from the injuries he received while tracking Katie Tilford's captor Roy Thornquist. Katie's bruises and scrapes have healed in the past two weeks, also. Physically, she's 'as good as new.' Otherwise, she's doing about as well as can be expected.

Swain has relayed the information to the FBI concerning Thornquist's ex-cellmate Johnny Calaveras, and the knowledge he may have concerning the whereabouts of the young girl Thornquist was suspecting of murdering.

The FBI has agreed to take over the investigation into Jessica Tracy's disappearance, but ask Swain to resume his communication with Calaveras to see what clues he may be able to glean from him.

\* \* \*

"Johnny, this is Sergeant Swain from Lashonia, Wisconsin. Do you remember me?"

"Yeah, I remember ya," Johnny says, in no way trying to hide the irritation in his voice. "Why're ya botherin' me again?"

"I want to follow up on our previous conversation concerning Roy Thornquist and Jessica Tracy, the girl he killed in 1986."

Johnny sighs. *I hope this is the last time this bozo calls me. Cops are always botherin' me. I don't do nuthin,' and they still keep botherin' me.*

"Johnny, I need you to tell me where the girl's body is."

"Lemme think. That was a long time ago, ya know. I mean, when Thornquist told me about it..."

"Take your time. Just concentrate."

"All right, it's comin' back to me now. I was sittin' on my bunk in the cell smokin' a Camel, an' he was braggin' about all the things he done what he hadn't got caught for," Johnny recollects.

"Go on," Swain urges.

"He said he buried this girl from New York or Jersey or somewheres..."

“New York.”

“Yeah, whatever. He says he raped her, and then he killed her, in the woods around there somewhere, not far from where he took her. And then he was going to bury her body out there in the woods where nobody would find it--because he knew his prints were all over her--and some tree-huggin' hippie come along and pitched a tent not two hundred yards away from him.

"The hiker didn't see him, I guess, but Roy took off. He was able to put the girl in his trunk without nobody seein,' and drove her down to Massachusetts or Mississippi or someplace like that.”

“And then what did he do?”

“He buried her body in some park or forest or something down there.”

“Can you remember the name of the place where he buried her, Johnny?”

“Nope.” Johnny thinks he's given the cop enough information. Besides, that's really all he remembers. He only heard the name of the place once, and he hadn't really paid much attention or expected to need to remember it.

“OK, Johnny, thanks. I appreciate your help. Now you stay away from those prostitutes over there--you don't want to go back to prison, do you?”

*Cops! How did he know I was plannin' on killin' another one of them stinkin' hookers here one of these days.* Johnny slams the phone down. It is true, though--he doesn't want to see the inside of a prison ever again.

# CHAPTER THREE

As Thornquist had spent the night in a motel in Schuylerville, New York--close to the Tracy home in Hudson Falls--the day before Jessica Tracy's disappearance, and his car had also been spotted both entering and leaving Green Mountain National Forest in Vermont on the day she disappeared, the search for Jessica's body had been restricted to that location.

Now, though, thanks to the work of Sergeant Swain, it is known that Jessica was not buried there, after all. Rather, her body had been transported elsewhere, where Thornquist had disposed of it. According to Johnny Calaveras, it could be found in a park or forest 'somewhere in either Massachusetts or Mississippi.' Most likely it was Massachusetts, as Thornquist had lived in Pawtucket, Rhode Island at the time Jessica Tracy disappeared. There is no evidence suggesting Thornquist has ever been in the deep South.

The search for Jessica Tracy's remains begin in the Franklin and Blackstone State Forests in Massachusetts. The search radius continues to expand, eventually taking in Myles Standish State Forest south of Plymouth. It is there that Jessica's skeletal remains are finally found, buried 3 ½ feet below the surface in the remotest part of the forest.

As they were in the search for Katie Tilford, and Thornquist himself, Search and Rescue dog teams are used. Kent Bishop and Brutus, his German Shepherd cadaver search dog, find the spot where Jessica was laid to rest just as Kent is about to call it a day. As the FBI digs up the remains, they don't know for sure that it is Jessica Tracy. The size of the skeleton is consistent with a six-year-old, though, and the skeleton has obviously been here for at least several years--the clothing the person was wearing has turned to shreds.

The next day, after the identification of the remains are confirmed based on dental records, the Tracy family is notified. Their daughter's remains have, at long last, been found.

# CHAPTER FOUR

Sixteen years have passed since Jessica was abducted, raped, and killed. Her siblings, Jimmy and Jennifer, have grown up and now have families of their own. To their children, Jessica is a mythical, mystical creature. They know she would have been their aunt, had she lived, but were never able to meet her.

When the Tracy family is notified of the discovery of their daughter, sister and aunt, they involuntarily relive the day Jessica disappeared in their minds and hearts. The grief and anguish feels the same as the day she was abducted. Only the uncertainty is no longer there, having been replaced by the knowledge that Jessica is never, ever, coming home again.

As the finality of it all sinks in, Jessica's mother yearns for the uncertainty she previously felt. The uncertainty which caused her so much pain for so long. Now they know, for sure. The certainty was supposed to provide some kind of relief when and if it came. But now they know, for sure--she's dead. Linda does not feel relieved.

Her daughter taken from her by someone who had no right to even breathe the same air she did, who shouldn't even have been allowed in her presence, or have even been allowed to look at her. Jessica should still be alive. When Jessica finally were to die, she should have died in a nice warm room in a big soft bed, surrounded by her husband and children and grandchildren. She should have felt comfortable and safe and loved. Instead, the last thing Jessica saw was that monster Thornquist! She couldn't see *us*. We weren't there. It is all so unsettling and disconcerting. Why? Why did it have to happen to Jessica? Why does it have to happen to anybody?

Mrs. Tracy will never know exactly what Thornquist did to her daughter. But that remaining bit of uncertainty *is* a good thing. Jessica's mom didn't want to know. Her imagination of it was bad enough--the reality of it may have been worse yet.

Robert Tracy also takes the news harder than he expected to. He has thought about it, of course--getting this call. The uncertainty of not knowing her fate had produced a mixture of fear and hope that permeated his life, night and day, day in and day out. Fear that she may be experiencing a living hell somewhere. Maybe she was some pervert's sex slave; maybe she had been taken to some foreign country and forced into prostitution. Those thoughts tormented Mr. Tracy at times and he, like his wife, had taken to seeking solace in the bottle.



The up side of the uncertainty was that she may yet be returned to them. He would rather have her alive than dead, no matter what had been done to her. When her skeletal remains are found, these feelings are replaced by the knowledge that she is not suffering, but also by the knowledge that she is not going to be returning to them.

Paul Matlin, Linda Tracy's father, gets the news that his granddaughter's remains have been found and identified. He politely thanks his daughter for the call and hangs up. Paul relays the news to his wife and Jessica's grandmother in a matter-of-fact tone, and retires to his study. A few minutes later, his wife finds him there, leaning against the bookshelf built into the far wall, covering his face with his handkerchief and crying inconsolably. Realizing his wife is in the room, he turns around, startled.

"Oh, Paul," is all she says, and moves toward him. They embrace.

After shedding the tears he has held back for the past sixteen years, Jessica's grandfather wipes his eyes with his handkerchief, sniffs, inhales deeply, and addresses his wife. "Betty, I want to forget this ever happened. I don't want to ever think about it again. I don't want to remember Jessica..." He breaks down again. When he recovers his composure, he continues, with renewed resolve. "I don't want to remember Jessica, or this incident, or that man, that...*Roy James Thornquist*. I don't care what happens to him. He can live. He can die. He can stay in prison, or be released. I don't care. I just don't ever want to hear that name again." He looks his wife in the eyes, and repeats, "I don't even want to think about *her* ever again. I don't want to remember."

\* \* \*

Robert Tracy gets a call from the FBI. It's Spencer Albright. After expressing his condolences, agent Albright says, "Mr. Tracy, I want to let you know where we stand with the murder of your daughter as far as Roy Thornquist is concerned. He is probably going to remain incarcerated for the rest of his life. If, however, he's ever released for any reason, we will charge him with your daughter's murder. We have an ironclad case against him now."

"All right, fine, Mr. Albright. Hopefully it won't be necessary, though."

"You know, don't you, that Thornquist pleaded insanity in the Tilford kidnapping case? And that he has, in fact, been diagnosed as being insane?"

"I hadn't heard--I didn't really follow the case that closely. It doesn't surprise me. However, what his mental state was or is, as far as I'm

concerned, is irrelevant. I mean, it should be obvious to anybody that someone who would do the things he did is insane. *Of course* he's insane--it's rather insane to think otherwise, don't you think? But what difference does it make whether he is or is not? Does it make him any less dangerous? My daughter isn't any less dead because he's insane!"

"Yes, I understand, Mr. Tracy. I'll keep you apprised if there are any changes in Mr. Thornquist's status."

Eventually, the Tracy's are able to begin to come to terms with their loss. They will never forget Jessica, and never stop missing her, but piece by piece, a little at a time, they begin the process of reassembling the broken pieces, the shards of their former life, and gradually start to feel like a family again.

## **PART III: THE VIGILANTES**

# CHAPTER ONE

As Jordan Wells sees the reports on television about the missing girl from Lashonia, Katie Tilford, he is struck by how much she resembles his own daughter Ashley.

As a billionaire and the wealthiest man in Wisconsin, Wells knows that he and his family have bulls-eyes painted on their chests. Being wealthy is reason enough for many people to hate them. And being wealthy make his wife and daughter potential kidnapping victims themselves. Wells could afford almost any ransom that might be demanded. Of course, he takes all reasonable precautions relative to his family's safety, but it's impossible to completely shield them from every situation that could conceivably expose them to danger. Unless they were willing to live hermetically sealed in their estate and arm themselves to the teeth. And even if he and his family *were* willing to live that way, it would provide no absolute guarantees regarding their safety.

Wells is disgusted at his country's pitiful response to dealing with human offal such as Thornquist. It's obvious that the politicians lack the will to take decisive action against these living blights on the American social landscape. *What can I do about it?* He doesn't ask himself this question in the sense of *There's nothing I can do about it. It's not my responsibility.* Jordan's father, from whom he had inherited and then expanded his great wealth, had always said, 'If you're not the solution, you're part of the problem.' Jordan asks himself *What can I do about it?* in the sense of *I will do something about it. What exactly is it that I can do about it?* Somebody has to; something needs to be done about the sexual predators so irresponsibly allowed to run free throughout the nation, especially those who prey on children, who more than anybody else should be protected from such loathsome beings. Decisive action, free of the burdens of bureaucratic delays and political wrangling, is needed. Wells feels he has the will, the mental toughness, and the resources necessary to implement a solution.

# CHAPTER TWO

WarmStorm is the name Jordan Wells chooses for his embryonic vigilante organization. WarmStorm will provide relief and refreshment to the nation, like that brought by such a storm to a parched region. On the other hand, WarmStorm will bring devastation to those who deserve swift elimination, as a summer hurricane does to an Atlantic seacoast village. For vermin like Thornquist, WarmStorm will prove to be a category 5 Hurricane.

The one employee in Well's empire who has earned his complete trust is Ward Spinnaker. Ward is not just a valued employee; he is also Wells' best friend. They have discussed just about every subject imaginable over the years, and while Spinnaker is no 'yes man,' they hold the same basic values and beliefs in common.

Nobody else is to know of the existence of this organization, save for those few that are allowed to be a part of it. Not even Jordan's wife will be made aware of it. She may not disagree with WarmStorm's charter were she to hear of it, but there is no need to burden her, or endanger her, with such knowledge. Jordan and Ward will run it, and engage carefully selected volunteers to carry out its missions.

"We need to find two sets of people," Wells begins, addressing Spinnaker. "First, those who feel the same way we do about ridding our great nation of this human scourge, and are willing and able to do something about it. Second, we also need to identify the 'worst of the worst' among those sexual predators currently 'on the loose' in America."

"Right," Ward concurs. "Both groups of people can be located via the Internet. I'll do a search of Internet newsgroup postings to find individuals who have taken a strong stance against sexual predators. I'll then see which of those pass background checks--we don't want anyone who has a previous criminal record, especially any who themselves have ever been guilty of these same types of crimes."

"Good thinking, Ward," Jordan commends. "I'm not familiar with Internet newsgroups, though. What are they?"

"What can I compare them to?" Ward wonders aloud. "I guess the best illustration that comes to mind is: Newsgroups are like electronic clubs where people with the same interests can send messages to, and read messages from, a group of people who share the same interests. There are literally thousands upon thousands of newsgroups, dedicated to virtually every subject imaginable: professions, hobbies, political

ideologies, sports teams, cities--you name it. There are butterfly collecting newsgroups, civil war memorabilia newsgroups, and everything in between and beyond.

“For example, somebody in the Ford Mustang newsgroup may ask the group if anybody has a ’65 Red Mustang with less than 100,000 miles on it for sale. One or more people may then answer that question. So you see, somebody, somewhere, sometime has carried on a newsgroup conversation about what should be done with sexual predators. These messages, or ‘threads,’ as the conversations are called, is what I’m interested in.”

“I see. I’ll leave all that to you for now, Ward. To get back to our criteria for inclusion in WarmStorm: We also want to avoid any that abuse drugs, as well as any that are ‘hotheads.’ A military background would be good--if they made it through boot camp without ‘going off,’ they will probably be the type who can remain cool in tense situations.”

“Also,” Ward adds, “They will have to be people who can be away from home for a few days without arousing suspicion. Self-employed businessmen would be best, as they should be able to come up with an alibi for visiting just about any city in their region. They can probably even conduct some ‘legitimate’ business while they’re there so as to ‘cover themselves.’”

“Excellent!” Jordan concludes. “Oh, and I think we should stick to an age range of say, from 25 to 55. We don’t want any of our operatives soiling their britches, or experiencing a heart attack, while carrying out their missions. Agreed?”

Ward nods in the affirmative.

“OK, we have a plan, then,” Wells continues. “If you’ll compile a list of candidates to join--”

“Will do,” Ward interjects. “And I’ll also assemble a list of the worst offenders, and you can pick from them who you ‘like the best.’”

“Fine. We’ll have our own ‘most wanted’ list. ‘WarmStorm’s most wanted,’ we’ll call it. OK, now that that’s settled, or is about to be embarked upon, anyway, there’s one more important aspect we need to discuss: What to do with these specimens once we have them.”

Ward waits for Jordan to continue; he knows his boss already has some suggestions. He’s never called for a meeting without first having a solid idea of how he’s going to implement his plans.

"What do you think, Ward? I don't want this to be about revenge; I want it simply to be about putting a stop to these people's vile activities."

"How about emasculation?" Ward suggests. "That would certainly prevent them from--"

"No, that won't work," Wells interrupts. "Castration, whether physical or chemical, is not enough, because the usual motives behind sexual crimes are power and hatred, not lust. They want complete control over their victims, and they want to hurt them. It's not really necessary for them to have a penis to do that."

"I'm not overly disappointed that I don't understand their psyche," Ward comments wryly.

"I only do," his boss points out, half-smiling, "because of having researched the matter." Regaining his serious tone and expression, he continues, "I certainly don't *understand* them on an emotional level any more than you do, my friend. I could never rape anybody, and I don't see how *anybody* could. And for a man to terrorize those weaker than himself--women and children--how cowardly can a person be?"

Wells pauses. "Any other ideas? As obvious a solution as it might seem on the surface, castration is out."

# CHAPTER THREE

“All right, then,” Ward continues. “How about exposure? We could blanket their neighborhood with flyers detailing who and what they are--what they’ve done. It would be kind of an extension of ‘Megan’s Law’\*. Megan’s Law on steroids, if you will. Potential victims would be forewarned, the subjects themselves probably wouldn’t dare commit any further offenses, and in fact,” Ward ponders, “maybe somebody in the neighborhood would take care of him for us.”

\* “Megan’s law” allows the release of sex offender information to the public.

“Not a bad idea,” Jordan responds, “but we don’t want to provoke somebody who is unprepared to deal with the consequences into any rash acts. What if some single mom takes a rolling pin, or a steak knife, to the guy, and ends up getting hurt herself--or imprisoned for murder or attempted murder? No, we can’t have that. Her children could be left in an even more vulnerable position.”

“Come to think of it,” Ward adds, “exposing our target in one community may just result in his constantly relocating to another. It would be impossible to keep up with the whereabouts of all these guys.”

“That’s probably true,” Jordan acknowledges. “Exposure *is* better than nothing. But we need to do something more proactive, more...decisive.”

Wells looks at his friend, waiting to see if he has any more suggestions. “I know this may sound a little bizarre,” Ward shrugs his shoulders and somewhat reticently begins. “But what about banishment?”

Wells raises an eyebrow, wordlessly urging Ward to go on.

“To one of the islands in your private chain. We could abduct them, and deposit them there, allowing them to fend for themselves--or not. We could see to it that escape is impossible.”

Wells mulls the pros and cons of the proposition. “I like that idea” he says, and moves behind his desk, on the edge of which he has been sitting, and drops down into his chair. He remains deep in thought for several seconds, then looks up at his friend.

“I do like that idea,” he reiterates. “But I’m afraid it’s not exactly the best solution. There’s a chance somebody may spot them from the air, or from a passing boat, and investigate. And, to tell you the truth, the way some



of them would die is not something of which we want to be any part. They would no doubt begin abusing and killing one another. And the worst and most vicious of them all would probably be the ones that would survive the longest.

“No,” Wells continues, “I’m convinced that the only way we can stem this plague without potentially causing as many problems as we solve, or defiling ourselves as a result of our involvement, is to see to it that these despicable people are ‘deleted’; eliminated; killed--however you prefer to describe it. It’s the only way we can absolutely ensure that they will never harm anybody ever again.”

“That really is the most logical solution to the problem,” Ward agrees. “But, if you want to kill them, why don’t we just hire ‘hit men’--contract killers? They would be certain to do the job in a professional way--‘no muss, no fuss’ so to speak.”

“Because I think we’re above that, Ward,” Wells calmly replies. “We--and by ‘we’ I mean all those allowed to become a part of WarmStorm--are not going to be killing for money, as a mercenary does. We’re not prostitutes. We’re killing only those who *deserve* to be killed. They *need* to be killed for this country’s parents to feel safe, and for their children to actually *be* safe.

“It will be a sort of social jihad--a holy war--that we will be waging. No, I don’t want our organization soiled by anybody who would kill simply for *money* regardless of whether the person they kill is good or bad, innocent or guilty. The ‘deletions’ made by our agents must be carried out with the firm conviction that what they are doing is for the good of the country. We are true super-patriots, Ward, cleansing our nation of human toxic waste. We have the fortitude and the foresight necessary to realize what needs to be done, and to do it. We are not criminals undermining the nation’s integrity.”

“Yes, sir.” Ward acknowledges. The boss *is* the boss. Personally, though, Spinnaker doesn’t totally agree with Jordan’s reasoning. It would be less risky for them, and give them a better chance for success, if they went ahead and made use of the services he had suggested. The end result would be the same; their goal would still be achieved. That was the important thing as far as he was concerned, not who did it and why they did it.

“I’ll get to work on the list of WarmStorm candidates, as well as candidates for our ‘most wanted’ list,” Ward says, as he heads for the door.

“Thank you,” Jordan replies. He then walks over to his friend at the door,

and extends his hand for Ward to shake. "Welcome to WarmStorm, Mr. Spinnaker. This is destined to be, I do believe, our most important and illustrious endeavor to date."

"I have high hopes for it, too, sir," Ward responds.

Ward's reserved manner and formality are not lost on Jordan. Wells strives to imbue his friend with the same confidence and enthusiasm that he feels by placing a hand on his Spinnaker's shoulder and concluding, "Ward, this is our chance to 'give back to the community.' We are going to add by subtracting," he smiles. "We add quality by decreasing quantity--*selectively* subtracting, or deleting, of course."

# CHAPTER FOUR

Ward goes to the google web site to search the archive of Internet newsgroup postings accessible from there. Narrowing his search criteria to postings which contain the phrase “sexual predators” or “Megan’s Law” or “vigilante,” Spinnaker scours thousands of messages that have been posted from people from all over the world, some of which date back to the 1970s. Normally, this type of work would be assigned to one of Wells’, or Spinnaker’s, administrative assistants, or to one of the many interns working for Wells Industries at any given time, but this work is far too sensitive to allow anybody else to perform.

After hours of research, which is comprised primarily of ‘false hits’ (newsgroup postings which only peripherally deal with that which Ward is seeking), Ward compiles a list of twenty-two candidates, all male. There were even a few relevant postings from females, but Ward feels that it is better to exclusively select from males for potential invitation to join WarmStorm. Women may not be emotionally or physically capable of performing the assignments. Especially considering who it is that WarmStorm is targeting, direct involvement in the ‘deletions’ could place them in grave danger.

Of course, such reasoning is ‘politically incorrect,’ but so is the organization itself—and nobody will ever know, anyway.

Those Ward selects have all gone on record as advocating ‘zero tolerance’ toward sexual predators. The mildest statement that Ward deems sufficient for inclusion on his list of candidates is this: ‘Sexual predators should be shown no mercy.’ At the other extreme, the hardest line taken is expressed in this way: ‘It is the duty of every citizen who is aware of the existence of a sexual predator in his neighborhood, even if said predator be residing in his or her own household, to execute him.’ The expressions made by the other twenty lie somewhere between the two in vitriol and/or specificity.

The next step, the next hurdle for these twenty-two potential invitees to Jordan Wells’ exclusive and top secret organization, is a background investigation. Such investigations are routine for any corporation the size of Wells Enterprises, Inc. Any time Wells considers hiring somebody, a background check is conducted first.

For a low-level employee, a standard check usually suffices; for somebody being considered for a management role or other ‘sensitive’ positions, a thorough background check is more appropriate. Therefore, requesting background checks, even for a group as large as twenty-two

people, isn't all that extraordinary for a concern the size of Wells Enterprises.

For that reason, moving forward with the process is just a matter of Ward contacting Private Investigator Jeffrey Wolfenstein and providing him with copies of the newsgroup postings in question. Spinnaker does not provide Wolfenstein with the actual textual content of the messages, as these are irrelevant as far as the P.I. is concerned. All he needs are the messages' headers. The headers contain information such as: the person's e-mail address, name, their Internet Service Provider, and the route the message took before it reached its final destination. Using the headers, Wolfenstein can determine the real identity of the posters and all their particulars.

Even if Wolfenstein's curiosity is piqued by the nature of this request, his livelihood is contingent on his maintaining strict confidentiality regarding his clients' affairs.

Spinnaker asks Wolfenstein for a thorough background check for all twenty-two people on the list. The results of these investigations will be voluminous enough that Ward can ferret out the information in which he's most interested without having to specifically ask for those tidbits from Wolfenstein.

\* \* \*

Many of the people on the list had not used their real names when posting their messages to the Internet newsgroups. For Wolfenstein, though, uncovering their true identity is practically child's play. As is true of any job, you just need to know the 'tricks of the trade.' What seems magical to the uninitiated is second nature to those who pursue the job on a daily basis, to those for whom the profession is their livelihood.

Within a week, Wolfenstein has completed his investigations. He has gathered all the data publicly available about each of the subjects, including some that is supposedly private. Also, he has interviewed past and current schoolmates, workmates, and neighbors.

On his initial examination of the reports, Ward notes that, of the twenty-two people on which Wolfenstein conducted background investigations, it turns out that:

- One is a female who masquerades as a male on the Internet
- Three are active drug users
- Two have criminal records
- One is now deceased, and
- Four live in countries other than the U.S.

That leaves eleven candidates. Ward takes the reports home with him, where he can examine them in the privacy of his den. He hopes that all eleven will 'pass muster,' but there are no guarantees that *any* of them will. They can't be too cautious when it comes to an operation as sensitive as WarmStorm.

At the end of a long night poring over the prodigious amount of documentation Wolfenstein has been able to gather, Spinnaker has decided that eight of the eleven are worthy of being considered for invitation to WarmStorm. As for the three he has rejected, one was termed by coworkers to be 'wishy-washy'; one was described by schoolmates as being 'all bark and no bite'; and another 'just smelled fishy' to Ward.

Spinnaker arranges to meet his boss for breakfast at a lakeside restaurant that offers outdoor seating and plenty of space between tables so that they can carry on a private conversation.

\*       \*       \*

"I think we've found some good men, Jordan. For now, we only have eight candidates. We may be able to locate more later."

"That's fine, Ward. I was hoping for more--after all, we've got an awful lot of work to do--but eight's a start. Don't give me the names, though. We'll run WarmStorm on a 'need to know' basis. You meet with the candidates, but don't tell them who you work for. I won't know them by name, and they won't know me, either."

"OK, that sounds prudent," Spinnaker says, putting down his coffee and picking up his knife and fork, starting in on his breakfast.

After a bite of French Toast and a sip of coffee, Ward starts to speak, but then stops himself. He puts his fork down. "I think we forgot something which should have perhaps been obvious," he says.

"And what is that?" inquires Jordan, cocking an eyebrow.

"It may be that not all of our hand-picked candidates are willing to join WarmStorm."

Wells is at first a little surprised at the thought that anybody who qualified would actually refuse a membership into their elite club. After all, those they will invite are men who have publicly shown themselves to be of the same mind regarding WarmStorm's mission as they themselves are. His surprise, though, is soon replaced by a slight embarrassment for

not considering that possibility himself. After all, not everybody will really be ready to 'put their money where there mouth is' when confronted with a genuine opportunity to do something about the problem. Some people are just not tough enough mentally.

"Yes, you're right, Ward," Jordan agrees. "We *should* have thought of that possibility. Why don't you determine which of the eight *are* on our side, and then you can go meet with them in person. In the meantime, there's something that you were planning on doing, but which I've decided I want to do myself--but I'll need you to show me how to get started with it."

"And what's that?" Ward wants to know. Jordan normally delegates virtually everything. He hasn't seen his boss show so much enthusiasm for a project since the early days, when Jordan took over the reins as CEO of Wells Industries from his father upon the patriarch's retirement. What task had caught his fancy to the extent that he wanted to do it himself?

# CHAPTER FIVE

Jordan satisfies Ward's curiosity by saying, "If you'll point me in the right direction, I'd like to assemble WarmStorm's 'Most Wanted' list myself."

Back at the office, Spinnaker shows Wells how to proceed with assembling his list of the vilest of the vile. Ward directs Jordan to point his Internet browser to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), and then enter "Sexual Predators" in the search box. Voila! That produces a page full of relevant web sites, the most helpful of which seems to be [www.sexualpredators.com/states.htm](http://www.sexualpredators.com/states.htm)

As they view the site, and then click the "Wisconsin" link, the two men are appalled to see that there are currently more than 10,000 registered sexual offenders in their state alone! In the entire United States, there are approximately 211,000 registered offenders and predators (an offender is defined as someone who has been convicted of one sexual offense; multiple arrests for sexual offenses deem one a sexual predator). Approximately 38,000 of those registered are predators. And not all sexual offenders are registered! Between 700,000 and 800,000 predators are living without registration. This figure includes people who were convicted of an offense as far back as the 1920's and are still living today. Registration was not mandatory, nor were records maintained, until 1996.

And it gets even worse: These figures only include sexual offenders and predators who have been caught and convicted. Many rapes are not reported, for various reasons. Additionally, many cases of child molestation on the part of family members--most often stepfathers and fathers, stepbrothers and brothers, uncles, grandfathers, but also sometimes female relatives, also go unreported--again, for a variety of reasons: shame, fear, misplaced loyalty, ignorance, etc.

As if that weren't enough, 'Megan's Law' only *allows*, but does not *require*, police departments to make sexual offender and predator information available to the public. In some cases, the police departments apparently lack the wherewithal to make the information public.

More than ever, Wells is convinced of the need to expand the size of WarmStorm as soon as he is able to do so. "I'm going to block out the rest of the day to compile my list," Wells informs Spinnaker. Jordan instructs his Chief administrative assistant to hold all calls and cancel all appointments for the day, no matter who or what it is.

Ward leaves Jordan to continue his quest for the nation's most vicious and deviant sexual criminals and returns to his office to contact the eight WarmStorm candidates.



# CHAPTER SIX

The two charter members of WarmStorm meet again that evening, long after the rest of the employees have gone home.

“How did it go today, Ward? How many of the eight have what it takes to join forces with us?” asked Wells.

“Five of the eight WarmStorm candidates shied away from offers to go beyond rhetoric,” Spinnaker reports to his boss. “They talk a good game, but I guess when it comes to action, they’d rather leave it to somebody else. One even threatened to turn me in to the FBI, but there are no worries there, as I made sure that it is impossible for them to trace my e-mail message.”

“So there are only three left?” Wells replies, a little incredulously.

“Yes; the three remaining candidates seem very eager to help. I’m going to meet with each of them--individually, so they don’t meet or even see one another. As you said, a ‘need to know’ basis is the most prudent course to follow. They won’t even know how many ‘teammates’ they have. As far as they will know they could be the only one, or they could be one of thousands.”

“That’s excellent. Good work, Ward. Now, Let me show you who I’ve come up with,” Jordan beams. He reaches into a desk drawer and withdraws ten sheets of paper. Each one contains a name, an address, a report detailing the person’s pertinent prior crimes, and a physical description.

Spinnaker scans the pages. Wells has them marked “WarmStorm Enemy # 1,” “WarmStorm Enemy # 2,” and so forth.

Enemy #1 is David Walnak, currently residing in Long Beach, California. Served 22 years for multiple counts of molesting children, both girls and boys. Also convicted for cannibalizing his last victim, an eight-year-old boy.

The man ranked second worst by Wells is Andrew Dickson of Chicago, Illinois. Served only 14 years, although convicted of molesting boys all throughout New England over a period of several years, and photographing some of these encounters. Also confessed to the murder of a boy whose body was never found. He helped run boys clubs in various areas, and served as a church camp counselor. These activities provided him with opportunities to take advantage of numerous children.

Third on the list is Jesse Bartlett of Brooklyn, New York. Served 7 years for two counts each of rape and murder. One of his victims was a 19-year-old mentally retarded woman. The other was a single mother, whose rape and murder were carried out in the presence of her two young children.

“These demons incarnate should have all been executed,” Wells says, as Ward finishes reading. “We will see to it that justice finally prevails.”

“The world will certainly be a better place without these losers,” Ward agrees. “It’s hard to imagine any characters more worthy of deletion than them.”

“Yes, and these three,” Jordan points at the sheets in Ward’s left hand, which hold the pages he has already read, “are not *that* much worse than the other seven” says Wells, indicating the pages in Spinnaker’s other hand.

“These rankings are subject to change, too, Ward,” Jordan added. “More of these scum are being released every day, and some of them may displace those already on my list. For instance, Roy Thornquist holds a special place in my heart. If he’s ever released, he will immediately be promoted to the top of the list.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

Ward Spinnaker flies to Redding, California, and then rents a car for the drive west on Highway 299 to Eureka. When Ward arrives at Jason Kramer's place of business on the outskirts of Eureka late that afternoon, Kramer Photography Studio's proprietor switches off the neon "Open" sign on his shop window and invites his visitor to follow him to his private office in the back. Kramer gestures for Spinnaker to take a seat.

"Welcome to God's country, Mr. Sierra. Please, have a seat," Kramer gestures to one of the two seats across from his desk (Ward has used the pseudonym Charlie Sierra for his exchanges with the WarmStorm candidates).

"Thank you, Mr. Kramer," Ward responds, and sits in one of the seats often used by engaged couples when discussing plans for their wedding photos.

"Now, I'm sure you're a busy man, Mr. Kramer, as I am. If we can 'cut to the chase' here, I would like to tell you exactly why it is that I'm here."

"I'm listening," Kramer replies, leaning back in his chair.

"Mr. Kramer, I represent an organization which has been founded to alleviate pain and suffering by preventing repeat offenses of sex crimes. By that I mean our mission is to ensure that sexual predators who are released from prison are unable to add to their list of victims." Spinnaker pauses and looks into Kramer's eyes to see if he fully understands the import of his words. Kramer's face reflects no trace of confusion, but rather an impatience for Ward to continue.

He does.

"As you have expressed an interest in volunteering to help in our efforts, I would like to formally invite you to join our organization, which we have named WarmStorm."

"Mr. Sierra, I accept. I'd be proud to be part of such an effort."

"Great, welcome aboard, Mr. Kramer," Ward says, rising to shake Jason's hand. "It's probably unnecessary to tell you that we require strict confidentiality. You are not to divulge any information about WarmStorm's mission, or even its existence, to anybody. I will be your sole source of contact with WarmStorm. This may be the only time we

meet in person. Following this, we will correspond exclusively by e-mail.”

Ward pulls a small package from his inside jacket pocket and hands it to WarmStorm’s first operative. “On this DVD, you will find a customized e-mail computer program. This program will automatically encrypt all e-mail that you send to me, and decrypt e-mail that I send to you.

Memorize this password,” Ward continues, writing a seemingly random combination of letters, numbers, and underscores on a sheet of paper. “and then destroy that sheet. Use the password to access the program.”

“I understand,” replies Kramer. The new member is curious about the meaning of the organization’s name, and how many members it has.

Ward explains to him the first, but declines to answer the latter, explaining the ‘need to know’ basis by which WarmStorm is to operate. Albeit disappointed, the photographer says he understands.

“Now, Mr. Sierra, do you have an assignment for me?”

“I was hoping you would ask me that,” Ward replies. “As I think you know, Mr. Kramer,” Ward adds, “this is a volunteer organization. You must agree to work without remuneration.”

“Yes, of course. I wouldn’t do something like this for *money*,” Jason replies, a little offended at the suggestion that he might have the motives of a mercenary.

“However,” Ward continues. “All expenses *will* be reimbursed by WarmStorm. I don’t need receipts. Just include the amount along with an e-mailed report after completing each assignment. We will accept the following as proof that the assignment was successful: a hypertext link, or URL, to an online newspaper story relating the subject’s demise or disappearance. And by the way, we have no preference as to *how* you carry out your assignments--that’s up to you. All we really care about is that your subject is no longer breathing when you complete your mission.”

Ward retrieves another item from his inside jacket pocket: a small golden pin, on which is engraved a ‘WarmStorm’ insignia and the inscription ‘Meritorious Service.’ “Along with your reimbursement check for expenses incurred in the course of carrying out your assignment, you will receive one of these pins--one for each assignment completed. As we *are* a secret organization, we require that you never show these pins to anyone. If you need to wear it to prove to a future contact inside the organization that you are who you say you are, we require that you pin it in a concealed location--under a lapel, for instance. Or you can just carry it in your pocket on such an occasion.”

The pin is just a small piece of jewelry, which would not bring a lot of money if one were to try to sell it. But Jason wanted one--badly. Which, of course, was the response Jordan Wells was aiming for when he commissioned the pins from a jeweler in Argentina.

Finally, Ward relates to Kramer all he will need to know about David Walnak--why he needs to be deleted, what he looks like, where he lives, and when he can be found at home. As Jason occasionally travels throughout the country taking photographs to add to his portfolio, he can travel to Long Beach, or just about anywhere else, without raising suspicion.

\* \* \*

Spinnaker's visits with realtor Ian Panache in Concord, New Hampshire and Josh Daniels, a used car salesman in Dayton, Ohio, proceed along the same lines as his meeting with Kramer. They both readily accept invitations to join WarmStorm, and both of them have the same questions about the organization they have just joined as the photographer Jason Kramer had.

Pedophile Andrew Dickson of Chicago, Illinois (WarmStorm enemy # 2) is assigned to Josh Daniels, the used car salesman from Dayton, Ohio.

Ian Panache is assigned WarmStorm enemy #3, serial rapist Jesse Bartlett of Brooklyn, New York.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

David Walnak had to register with the state of California as a sex offender upon his release from prison in 1999. He is monitored electronically 24 hours a day. Additionally, the parole officers assigned to his case can drop by his residence unannounced at any time in order to check up on him.

Jason Kramer uses this knowledge to his advantage. After arranging for his assistant to run his studio for a week, he drives down the California coast from Eureka to Long Beach, stopping along the way to photograph the sea stacks that dot the northern California coastline, the seals around Morro Bay, the mission at San Juan Capistrano, and various other things that capture his fancy along the way. In this way he has a photographic record of his having performed 'legitimate' business while on this trip.

Arriving in Long Beach, Kramer prepares for his 'visit' with David Walnak. In order to get into Walnak's apartment, he plans to bluff Walnak into thinking he is a parole officer checking up on him. He doesn't want to raise any suspicion with any neighbors who may see him enter the apartment, and so he wants Walnak to invite him in voluntarily, rather than breaking in or forcing his way in at gunpoint.

Jason locates a motel close to Walnak's apartment. Just in case there's trouble--for example, a visitor interrupts them, or Walnak sees through the artifice--he stuffs his revolver into a shoulder holster. If a visitor arrives while Jason is with Walnak, and said visitor sees Kramer, he may have to postpone the mission. If Walnak questions the veracity of his claim of being one of his supervising parole officers, he may have to use the gun. He doesn't want to have to use the gun, though--that would be too noisy, too messy, and he would have to flee the scene, which in itself would attract attention. He hopes nobody notices him, or at least that nobody pays close attention to him, either at the motel, traveling to and from Walnak's apartment, or entering and leaving the same.

Kramer has checked into the Pink Flamingo under an assumed name--Walter Morris--and pays cash for his stay. On his drive down the coast, he had stopped in San Luis Obispo at a liquor store and purchased a fifth of Jack Daniels.

Freshly shaved and showered, Jason takes one last look in the mirror before leaving for Walnak's apartment. He thinks he looks like a scared rabbit. He forces a smile. "Now that," he mutters under his breath, "just

looks plain stupid.” He exhales loudly. *I’d better calm down, or at least manifest some semblance of confidence once I get there. Maybe the walk over will calm my nerves.*

Jason takes several deep breaths, pats the gun beneath his jacket, and double-checks his satchel to be sure he hasn’t forgotten the bottle of Jack Daniels. All is ready. He leaves his room and departs the motel from the back door so that the front desk personnel won’t notice him leaving. After going through the alley behind the motel, he cuts back over to the street. Five blocks to go. His heart is beating faster than normal, and it’s not from the exercise. Kramer is accustomed to making photographic forays into the northern California forests and mountains. This short walk on level terrain seems like running a gauntlet, though. He feels as if he’s walking upstream through a raging river, and he imagines people in every house along the way peering out their windows at him, knowing what he’s planning. Maybe they’re calling the police right now, reporting a suspicious character walking through their neighborhood. This isn’t the best neighborhood; I could even be accosted myself before I get to Walnak’s. What if the police stop me? How would I explain the gun? Not only would they find out who I am, I will have failed my mission and embarrassed myself and my entire family.

Jason fleetingly contemplates calling the whole thing off. *I could just say I changed my mind, that I don’t disagree with them, I won’t turn them in or anything, but I just can’t do it.* But Jason knows that if he does that, he will look wishy-washy to WarmStorm, and he will feel like a quitter. And he’s never been a quitter. *I can do this,* he reassures himself. *Just be cool, Jason. Be cool, man. Take some deep breaths. When he opens the door, look him in the eye. Talk in a low, slow voice. Remember what you’re going to say, and don’t rush through it. You’ve got no reason to regret this, or turn back now. Walnak is the scum of the earth and deserves to die. I’ve opened my big mouth and gotten myself into this situation. But it’s true—I really do feel that way about these guys. It wasn’t false bravado. They do deserve to die, and I’m going to do my part to rid society of low-lives like David Walnak.*

Jason’s stomach churns as he sees the street sign. *This is it. I’m here. Walnak’s apartment complex, the Standish Arms, is on this street.* He stops and takes several more deep breaths. Again, he pats his gun, and lifts his satchel in his hand, shaking it to hear and feel the bottle as he jostles it. *OK, here I go. This is it,* Jason tells himself. In the middle of the block, he sees the apartment complex, looks up to the balcony and sees #17, Walnak’s apartment.

## CHAPTER NINE

The curtains are drawn most of the way, but Jason can see that there's a light on inside. *What will I do if somebody is in there with him? I hadn't thought of that. I thought about somebody coming after I was already in, but I hadn't thought of what to do if somebody was already there. I know: I'll note the name of one of his neighbors on the mailbox in the lobby, and then ask for his neighbor, pretending to be some kind of salesman or something.*

Kramer walks into the apartment building's vestibule. There isn't anybody there. So far, he's been lucky. Nobody was in the alley. The few people he saw on the street seemed to have very little, if any, interest in him. He looks at the names on the mailboxes. #16 seems to be empty, but Grant and Jackovich occupy #18. They are probably either two roommates of the same gender, or an unmarried couple. He's going to guess that Grant is a male, and ask for Mr. Grant if Walnak has company, pretending he knocked on the wrong door. Walnak may call him an idiot, but it's better than being found out. He'll stand away from the door, and a little to the side, so that if Walnak *does* have company, they won't get a good look at him.

*OK, it's now or never,* Kramer tells himself. For some reason, he's not quite as nervous as he was just a few minutes before. He exits the lobby, climbs the stairs to the second floor balcony, and walks slowly down to apartment 17. He's giving himself time to slow his breathing down. He reminds himself again to speak slowly, and in a deliberately lower than natural voice. Arriving at the doorway, Jason takes a step back and a half step to the side. He wonders if anybody inside has noticed him yet. He takes another deep breath. *Two more long, deep breaths and I'll knock.* Suddenly, the door opens.



# CHAPTER TEN

David Walnak gives Jason a penetrating and challenging stare. “Yeah? Whaddaya want?” Walnak asks. Kramer’s heart skips a beat, and he hopes the fear he feels isn’t showing in his eyes.

But then a bitter anger begins to well up in Jason’s breast. *This man is despicable. He’s a no-good parasitic loser, and he’s trying to intimidate me? As if I have no right to be here? He should show some respect for his superiors. It’s true, he doesn’t know who I am--yet--but he should just assume that everybody else is better than he is, and show proper deference. He should assume that they are, because they are. We are better than him. I certainly am.* His anger overrides the fear he had felt. He hasn’t seen any other motion in the apartment, nor has he heard anybody move around.

“I’m officer Mark Renault,” he begins. “I’m new to the area, and I’ve been assigned to check up on you.” Kramer doesn’t know whether Walnak will see through his ruse or not. *How authentic do I sound? I don’t know how the officers normally dress. I assume they come alone, but I’m not sure. I assume they wear a suit, but I could be wrong about that, too. I don’t know what exactly they say when they arrive like this. Maybe WarmStorm should provide us with training, or at least information, on these sorts of things.*

To Jason’s surprise, Walnak seems to accept him as being ‘the Real McCoy.’ Kramer tries to mask his mild surprise as the child molester and cannibalizer reluctantly invites him in. Kramer looks Walnak in the eyes to try to discern if Walnak is at all suspicious. Either Walnak is a very good actor, or accepts him for being who he claims to be. *I don’t know if I really played it that well, or Walnak really is that stupid.*

Kramer’s confidence is buoyed by how things are going thus far. “Is anybody else here, Mr. Walnak?” he inquires. He detests showing this breathing barfbag respect by referring to him as ‘Mr.,’ but he assumes that is how the parole officers probably address him while making these unannounced visits, so he wants to remain as plausible as possible.

“No, sir. No, officer. You can see for yourself if you want,” Walnak says, gesturing to the rear of the apartment.

Kramer stares at him for a few moments. “No, that won’t be necessary,” he replies--and then adds “Mr. Walnak.”

Kramer points to the dining room table. “Have a seat, Mr. Walnak. This

may take awhile.” Walnak looks at him a little quizzically. He shrugs his shoulders, barely perceptibly, and takes a seat. Kramer sits opposite him, and glances to the window out of the corner of his eye to make sure he won’t be visible to any passersby who may peep through. He’s safe--the refrigerator is between him and the window. A nosy neighbor would see Walnak only.

Jason pulls out a notepad and pen. He acts as if he’s going to write, and then pauses. He sighs and drops his pen and notepad back into his satchel. He looks at Walnak. His expression has changed. He smiles sheepishly. “Look, David. I’m really tired of writing. It seems like it’s always the same thing. I ask the same questions, and get the same answers. Bla bla bla bla bla. I’ll just fill out the report later. You’ve been a good boy, right? Right. OK, that takes care of that. But they don’t expect me back at the station until 5 O’Clock, when my shift is over, so I have another hour and a half to kill.”

Reaching back into his satchel, Kramer produces the bottle of Jack Daniels. Walnak’s eyes betray his consternation.

“What is this, some kind of trap? You know that one of the conditions of my parole is that I can’t drink!” Walnak protests.

“Yes, of course I know that,” Jason lies. “But this is not a trap. A man should be allowed to wet his whistle now and then, don’t you think? If you won’t say anything about this, I won’t either.”

Walnak is still a little nonplussed, but he’s not one to turn down free booze--not even from a pig like Renault. Kramer sees that Walnak’s defenses have been breached.

“Got a couple of glasses?” Kramer asks, gesturing to the cupboard.

They don’t match, but Walnak does produce two glasses--a juice glass and a Mason jar. He slides the juice glass across to ‘Renault,’ and sets the larger one in front of himself. *This idiot is playing right into my hands*, Kramer marvels. *This is going to be child’s play.*

For the next hour, Kramer continues to pour small amounts of whiskey into his own glass while filling Walnak’s container to the rim. When there are just a few ounces left, he picks up the bottle, holds it up to his face, and swishes the liquid around, presumably gauging the amount remaining. He shrugs his shoulders and smiles. “You may as well finish it off,” he says, and dumps the rest of the whiskey into Walnak’s mason jar.

The liquor alone might have been enough to cause Walnak to pass out.

After all, he's imbibed at least four times as much as Kramer has. But Kramer hasn't relied solely on the whiskey. Not knowing how well Walnak is able to 'hold his liquor,' Jason had, in addition to the whiskey, also purchased a packet of over-the-counter sleeping pills during his trip south. Having ground these to powder in his motel room, he had placed the pulverized barbiturates into an empty 35mm film canister. It is simply a matter of waiting for Walnak to leave the room in order to use the restroom--which he does about two-thirds of the way through the bottle. Jason removes the canister from his pocket, pops the top off with his thumb, leans across the small table, half-rising in his chair, and dumps the contents into Walnak's jar.

Kramer himself has imbibed enough that all the fear he had felt has now vanished. He is relaxed; cocky, even. The photographer and incipient assassin is already starting to inwardly celebrate his success. He wonders how soon he will receive his WarmStorm medal (he thinks of the pin as a medal).

The alcohol and the sleeping pills have compounded each other's effects. The huge dose of both, taken together, may be enough to kill Walnak outright. But Jason isn't going to rely on that being the case. He looks over at Walnak, with a self-satisfied grin. He waits. He doesn't have to wait long. Walnak's eyes have gone cross-eyed. His head begins to weave; he's fighting to stay conscious, but is losing the battle. And the war. All of a sudden, Walnak slumps forward. His head bangs against his tabletop with a thud. His right arm sweeps across the table, knocking his empty mason jar to the floor, causing a dull clinking sound. To stop the noise, which may attract attention from neighbors or passersby, or which might even awaken Walnak, Kramer sticks out his left foot to prevent the jar from rolling further.

Jason waits a few more seconds, staring coldly at Walnak. The parolee is breathing, but with long and drawn out breaths. "He's 'dead to the world'", Jason whispers softly. *OK, here goes.*

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kramer digs around in the bottom of his satchel without looking. He locates the disposable plastic gloves by feel, and then pulls them out of the satchel and onto his hands. He rises, walks into the living room, and picks up a sofa cushion.

Seeing some movement in the dining room out of the corner of his eye, Jason whirls around. As his whole body tenses, his eyes widen and he reaches inside his pocket for the gun.

THUMP!

"Whew!" Kramer sighs, as he sees that Walnak, still comatose, has fallen on his back to the floor. *I hope nobody heard that. I'd better get out of here, quick, in case somebody comes to see what it was.* Jason takes a step toward the door. Then he stops and reconsiders. *I have to finish this; it'll just be another minute. I don't think a minute will make the difference between my getting caught or not.*

As Kramer heads for the dining room, he catches himself tip-toeing. *This is kind of silly. What an amateur. I'm sneaking up on an unconscious man.* He walks the next two steps--softly, but no longer tip-toeing, and bends down over Walnak's head. He takes the sofa cushion firmly in both hands, and presses it down on Walnak's face.

Kramer's heart is racing. Will Walnak come to and put up a struggle? For several seconds there's no indication that that will be the case. But then Jason notices Walnak's left leg kick outward, kicking the glass he had previously knocked to the floor. The glass spins across the dining room floor. Walnak now seems to have regained consciousness, at least partially, and is frantically trying to land a blow on Kramer with his left knee. Jason straddles Walnak. He viciously knees his despised opponent in the groin and then draws up both knees and digs them into Walnak's stomach, simultaneously pressing down on the cushion with his left forearm. He pins Walnak's right arm with his left elbow and keeps the degenerate's left arm at bay with his own right arm.

Walnak tries to bite Kramer's arm through the cushion. The bite doesn't even cause pain, let alone draw blood, but it spurs Jason to an even more violent attempt to cut off Walnak's air supply. He ferociously knees the struggling man in the stomach and, as Walnak opens his mouth wide--to gasp for air, to yell out, or to try to get a better purchase on Kramer's flesh with his teeth--drives the cushion further down into Walnak's mouth with his left elbow while desperately pummeling him in

the nose with his right fist. As Walnak lifts his left arm in an attempt to shield the blows to his face, Jason plants his right elbow on Walnak's throat and leans forward to put his entire weight into it.

Walnak gags. He makes one last attempt to save himself, by trying to 'buck' his assailant off of him. But Kramer's tenacity, born of rage and fear, is too much for Walnak. Nothing is going to stop Jason now--not even if somebody were to walk through the door right at this moment. Walnak's body convulses, twice. And then his struggling ceases. His body goes completely limp.

After waiting several seconds without relaxing the downward pressure on his enemy, Jason removes the sofa cushion from Walnak's face. *What a disgusting pig*, he thinks, as he sees the crazed look on the man he has just killed. His glassy eyes are staring upward, his mouth agape.

Kramer stands up. He walks back into the living room, and places the sofa cushion back where it was. Returning to the kitchen, he picks up his satchel and looks around to make sure that he's not leaving behind any clues to his having been here. The only things out of the ordinary--besides the gruesome-looking body, that is--are the glass on the floor and the empty whiskey bottle on the dining room table.

The bottle, and the juice glass from which he had been drinking! His fingerprints are all over both of them! He picks up his glass and drops it in his satchel. The bottle is a problem, though. Removing it would certainly look suspicious. The autopsy would certainly reveal that Walnak had consumed a large amount of whiskey, and if there were no whiskey bottle to be found... *Anybody that drunk in a bar would certainly be noticed, and he would probably be noticed returning to his apartment in that condition*, Kramer reasons. *I have two options*, he concludes, irritated with himself that he hadn't thought this whole thing through better. *Either I leave the bottle here, and take the risk of them finding my fingerprints on it, or I take the bottle with me, in which case they will certainly suspect foul play instead of the accident that I had hoped it would appear to be. I don't have a criminal record, so they probably won't be able to match the fingerprints to me...however, if they ever do suspect me, they'll take my prints then, and I'll be sunk.*

Kramer picks up the bottle and carefully places it in his satchel. He looks around one last time, satisfying himself that he has left nothing behind that might link him to the incident. He walks to the window and looks out. As he doesn't see anybody coming, he opens the door, closes it behind himself as noiselessly as possible, and leaves.

At the bottom of the stairs, Jason strips off the gloves and drops them into his satchel. He returns to the Pink Flamingo, showers, changes back

into his 'regular' clothes, and leaves. He doesn't even want to be in the vicinity when the body is discovered.

\* \* \*

The trip back up the coast is rather uneventful. Again, Jason stops to take photographs in various locations. At a roadside rest stop near Santa Barbara, he disposes of the bottle. Behind a Carl's Junior in Big Sur, he drops the glass in a dumpster. In Fort Bragg, he finally gets rid of the gloves by flushing them down a toilet. Jason is very uneasy the next day, literally looking over his shoulder everywhere he goes.

\* \* \*

Over the next several days, Jason gradually calms down, but can never quite shake the feeling that someday he may be found out. When he receives his WarmStorm pin, though, he admires it with pride. He wishes he could show it to somebody, and regale them with the story of his adventure. But he had promised to keep WarmStorm secret, and there really isn't anybody he can trust *that* much, anyway. His exploits will have to remain between himself and Charlie Sierra.

Walnak's body is discovered two days later when a real parole officer stops by. Peering through the window, he sees Walnak's feet at the edge of the dining room floor, and calls for an ambulance. The autopsy reveals the cause of death to be the combined ingestion of sleeping pills and a large quantity of alcohol. At first, the death is assumed to be a suicide. But then, a detective notes that no empty bottles of alcohol were found in Walnak's apartment, and nobody at any of the local bars recalls having seen Walnak. Moreover, the coroner had discovered a variety of wounds on the body; apparently, Walnak had been involved in quite a struggle. After a more thorough search of his apartment is conducted and Walnak's bite marks and traces of his vomit are discovered on the sofa cushion, the death is reclassified as a homicide.

Suspicion is focused on Walnak's surviving victims, and his victims' families. John Tutwiler, the father of the eight-year-old boy who was raped and cannibalized and who, in an angry outburst at the trial had threatened Walnak's life, comes under special scrutiny. His claim to have been in Mexico on business at the time of the murder is corroborated, though. Thinking Tutwiler may have hired somebody to kill Walnak, his bank account's activity is monitored to see if any suspicious withdrawals are made, but nothing comes of this, either.

Some time passes and no further leads are forthcoming. Nobody in the area recalls having seen anything out of the ordinary the day Walnak was killed, and none of the usual police informants in the area have any

information to provide. Having other work to do, and due to the fact that Walnak isn't exactly the kind of person whose death causes a public uproar, the homicide investigation is eventually classified as 'Unsolved' and is more or less forgotten.

Despite his initial pride in earning the WarmStorm 'medal,' Jason Kramer loses interest in performing any more missions. Not wishing to be contacted by 'Charlie Sierra' any more, he deletes the customized e-mail program from his computer.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

Josh Daniels had served two tours of duty in Vietnam. His first experience on entering the southeast Asian country had been traumatic. Rather than getting gradually accustomed to the situation there, he had been immediately thrown into battle.

Following the Tet offensive, Josh had had a hard time reconciling the thought that a mere one week earlier he had been drinking beer with his high school pals back home in Dayton, Ohio, and now he had seen comrades fall and had killed a few of the enemy himself. Emotionally, he was at a crossroads. He could either allow himself the dubious escape of slipping into insanity, or he could adapt himself to his new circumstances and deal with them as rationally as possible.

Daniels is a survivor. He hardened himself to the task at hand, and applied himself to being the best soldier he could be. Josh wanted to get the job done as quickly as possible so that he could go home without regrets. Volunteering for dangerous assignments whenever they arose, he experienced many close calls.

One incident in particular stands out in his mind: he was up in a power pole doing guard duty on an overcast night. A group of Viet Cong soldiers passed by beneath him--far too many for him to pick off by himself, and he didn't know how many others might be following close behind them. Just as they were passing by, the clouds parted. There was a full moon that night. If just *one* of their number were to glance up, he would have been spotted, which would have meant certain death for him. Daniels cradled his machine gun in his arms, ready to take out as many of them as he could before they got him. He was sure he would soon be making the trip home--in a box. But the Viet Cong soldiers passed by without any of them happening to look up at him in his precarious perch.

Finally, the United States' involvement in Vietnam wound down, and Josh came home. He looked up his old friends, but they didn't seem to have much in common any more. Their lives seemed rather shallow to the veteran. He had changed, had grown up; they had not seemed to.

In the intervening years, Josh has channeled his considerable energies into building a business. Over the course of those years, his used-car venture has expanded from an empty lot on the poor side of town to a number of locations throughout the city. He is doing quite well for himself.

Although well hidden beneath the surface, Daniels represses quite a



supply of repressed anger. He would scoff at the thought if it were presented to him, but he is still in mourning after all these years. Mourning, not just for many of his fellow soldiers whom he came to trust with his life, and to love as brothers, and who had been cut down in Vietnam, but also for his own lost innocence.

Josh does a good job of controlling himself, though. Nobody who knows him recognizes the latent potential for violence he hides so well. And he doesn't analyze himself. He doesn't know why he sometimes feels such strong anger. It's just the way he is, he tells himself. His way of dealing with it is to ignore it.

Part of Josh Daniel's aggression is expressed in his relentless drive to grow his business ever bigger. He is never quite satisfied. Enough is not enough, because enough is always what he has now plus a little more. Competition in business isn't quite enough to assuage his suppressed hostility, however. He needs another outlet to vent his aggression.

The thing Daniels hates more than anything else is bullies--people who take advantage of the weak or defenseless, especially children. In Vietnam, Josh had once killed a fellow U.S. soldier. He had come across him raping a young Vietnamese girl. Daniels had kicked the man in the neck, which had caused the rapist to roll off the girl, and given his victim opportunity to escape. Daniels then stood on the man's head with one foot and dispatched him with his bayonet. Nobody saw it happen; the girl was long gone by then. He disposed of the body in the jungle nearby.

Daniels still has it in for rapists, especially those who rape children. Josh knows that 'Charlie Sierra' is a fake name. It doesn't really bother him that his contact doesn't reveal his real name to him, but he does wish that he would use something other than 'Charlie' for a first name.

When Daniels asks 'Sierra' about the size of the WarmStorm organization, it is just out of curiosity. Even if he were the only member, he would still be more than willing to perform any operations assigned him, as he feels it is a noble and just cause.

Daniels decides that Chicago is about due for a visit. Surely he can find some good deals on cars there. He will attend the auction, and maybe a couple of estate sales. The only 'special' accoutrements he takes with him on this trip are a hunting knife, a pair of handcuffs, a gas can, and a twenty foot length of rope.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Josh stays in Chicago parts of four days. After attending to business during the day, he stakes out Andrew Dickson's house up until the early morning hours. For two days, Dickson follows the same pattern: he rises around 11 a.m., and then leaves his house around 1 O' Clock in the afternoon. Dickson then parks across the street from the school, watching the children on the playground, and talking into a tape recorder. Just before 3 O' Clock, Dickson stashes the tape recorder under his seat and drives to his place of employment--a meat processing plant two blocks away from the school. Following work, Dickson drives to a run-down looking bar a few blocks away and stays there until closing time.

On the third night, or actually in the early morning of the fourth day, Daniels is waiting for Dickson in the alley next to the bar at 2 a.m. Two men come out of the bar and walk west. About a minute later, a man and a woman depart the dive. They get into the man's car and drive away. Finally, Andrew Dickson emerges. As he begins to pass the alley, walking east and passing Daniels moving from right to left, Josh steps out, grabs Dickson's left arm with his right hand, and presses his knife, held in his left hand, against the half-drunk man's throat.

"Sing out, or try to run, and I'll cut you once for every kid in that school," Daniels says, his voice flat, measured, and ostensibly emotionless. Dickson tenses, and seems to consider his options. Fight or flight? Or submit? This is not simply a mugging, nor is he a random target. This guy obviously knows who he is. A parent of one of those sweet little kiddies over there at the school? Feeling the point of the blade against his throat, Dickson decides it's prudent to capitulate.

Josh marches Dickson through the alley and up to the passenger side of his Buick. Daniels normally takes either his Mercedes or his BMW when traveling on business, but such a car in Dickson's neighborhood would surely have attracted attention, and for that reason Daniels has opted for the Buick.

"Grab the gloves from off the top of the front tire," Daniels demands. Dickson complies. "Put them on." Dickson does that, too. "Now, open the door and get in. Dickson sits down in the passenger seat. Josh presses the hunting knife to his throat again. Latching onto his opponent's right wrist with one hand, and keeping the knife at his throat with the other, Daniels continues, "Slide over--you're driving." Dickson does that, too. "Start the car." Again, Dickson does as he is told.

After telling him, step by step, the necessary directions, the two finally arrive in the Iroquois County Conservation Area around 3:30 a.m. Daniels directs Dickson to park the car in a cul-de-sac leading into the woods. Josh handcuffs Dickson's right hand to the steering wheel, removes the keys from the ignition and drops them in his shirt pocket, exits the car, retrieves the length of rope, a gas can and hose from the trunk, walks around to the driver's side door, and opens it.

Daniels places the key to the handcuffs in Dickson's left hand and tells him to unlock the cuffs. Naturally, Dickson does so. Again pressing the point of his knife against Dickson's throat, he warns him not to make any noise "or I'll slice you into bacon strips, you filthy pig."

Next, handing Dickson the hose and gas can, Daniels orders him to kneel down at the back of the car and siphon some gas out of the tank. Accompanied by a little sputtering, which draws Daniels' ire and earns Dickson a kick in the back of his leg, enough fuel is eventually siphoned to satisfy Daniels.

"OK, up! Stand up, Dickson." The pedophile has no choice but to do as he's told. "Lift your hands up--as high as you can reach."

*What, does this joker think he's Marshall Dillon or something?* Dickson wonders. He considers wheeling around to attack this wannabe combination of judge, jury, and executioner. He doesn't feel the knife on him now; this is the opportunity he's been waiting for. Just as he is about to spring into action, though, Daniels deals him a wicked shot with his fist directly below his right armpit. While Dickson is writhing in pain on the ground and gasping for breath, Josh jumps on Dickson's back, wrenches his hands behind him, and handcuffs his hands together. Josh then pulls a neckerchief from his back pocket and gags his foe, pulling it tight and tying it in a knot behind his head. Dickson grunts, desperately trying to make as much noise as possible. Daniels rolls Dickson over on his back and buries the knife blade in Dickson's left thigh, eight inches above his kneecap.

Dickson wheezes out a high-pitched groan of agony. "Shut up, you weenie!" Daniels hoarsely whispers right in his face. "Now get up, and walk. That way," he barks, pointing further into the woods.

Every time Dickson stumbles, both in an attempt to buy himself some time and because of the pain in his throbbing and bleeding thigh, Josh punches him in the kidney. That only happens twice before the condemned man resigns himself to his fate and plods on, ignoring the pain as best he can.

Once they are out of sight from the road, Daniels starts looking for a

suitable tree. He wants one with a sturdy branch eight or ten feet off the ground. It doesn't take long to locate one fulfilling that criteria. Josh sets the gas can down, and orders Dickson to lie down on his stomach. After dropping to his knees, Dickson hesitates, uncertain just how to get to his stomach, as he has no way to break his fall with his hands tied behind his back.

Growing impatient, Daniels kicks him in the small of his back to knock him forward and onto his stomach. Daniels then cuts off a few feet of rope and binds Dickson's ankles together. As he did to the rapist in Vietnam, Daniels then stands on Dickson's head with one foot. He ties a noose in the length of rope while holding his knife between his teeth.

Once he's ready to proceed, Daniels scans the area. Nobody's around. Not that he could really explain himself if there *had* been somebody there. He throws the rope around the tree trunk, and then goes to slip the noose around his adversary's neck.

Dickson begins to roll around around on the ground, rolling first this way and then that, trying to avoid the inevitable. He is terrified. He hasn't been the *victim* since he was a young kid. Ever since he was thirteen, he's been the victimizer, the one to be feared. He begins to tremble violently. Daniel delivers a ferocious kick to Dickson's side, breaking a few ribs in the process. A high-pitched whine is all that is heard from Dickson. He breaks down in tears, knowing he is about to die. Josh grabs him by the feet and drags him back into position by the tree.

"Quit your blubbering, you damned coward. I'm only giving you what you deserve--I'm going to put you out of your misery, and ours."

Slipping the noose over Dickson's sweaty neck, Josh pulls it snug. After bracing his feet and getting a firm purchase on the rope, he pulls it taut.

"Good riddance, baby raper," he says, and winches Dickson's head off the ground. He hears his opponent wheezing. Daniels pulls with all his might, and jerks the body up into the air. He hears Dickson's neck crack. He ties the free end of the rope to a low branch opposite the one on which Dickson is hanging. Breathing heavily from the exertion, Daniels picks up the gas can, unscrews the top, and hurls the contents onto the erstwhile pedophile. Finally, Daniels uses the last drops to saturate the rope itself. Without even glancing again at Dickson, he strikes a match and tosses it against the dead man's chest. Dickson's body bursts into flames. Daniels jogs back to his car, gas can in hand. He throws the gas can in the trunk of his car and drives back to his hotel.

\* \* \*

That night, Josh dreams of the GI rapist he killed with his bayonet. When he awakes at dawn, he is strangely calm. Rarely has he felt this relaxed since returning to 'The World' from Vietnam. He enjoys a leisurely breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Gradually, his mind returns to matters pertaining to his business. He arranges for the cars he has purchased in Chicago to be delivered to Dayton tomorrow. He then drives back home, stopping along the way to visit his parents in Greenview, Ohio.

\* \* \*

When the charred body is discovered in the woods the next day, the police detectives are perplexed. They wonder if the murder is the work of a cult. After Dickson's employer initiates a missing person's report two days later, a positive identification is made on the basis of dental records. As was the case with David Walnak in Long Beach, the detectives surmise that the most likely suspects are to be found among Dickson's former victims or members of their families. All such investigations lead to dead ends, however, and the detectives eventually drop the case in favor of more recent and promising ones.

Daniels is able to sell the cars he acquired in Chicago for a fair profit. He feels his trip to Chicago was a resounding success. He cleaned up one small corner of the world--every little bit counts--and he made some money, to boot. You can't beat that.

Receiving the WarmStorm pin in the mail, Josh lifts a metal box down from his closet. Opening the lid, he looks at the medals he received for his participation in the Vietnam war. He picks them up, one by one, and examines them, turning them over in his hands, viewing them from various angles. *I should've gotten one for killing that rapist*, he muses. Placing the WarmStorm pin inside the box with the others, he closes the lid and returns the box to its spot in the closet.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Josh ponders the impact of his deed. *How many people does that make? I killed what, 38 in Vietnam? 39, counting the rapist? What's another one--a drop in the bucket. That was so long ago, though. Why, really, did I volunteer to do it? There are so many deviants in this country that it would take an army of us working 24X7 to wipe them out. It's just a drop in the bucket. But--why not? Combating the problem a little is better than doing nothing at all.*

Josh Daniels decides that he'll answer the call when and if 'Charlie Sierra' contacts him again. He feels it's his duty. But he won't be volunteering.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Although conceived in France, Ian Panache has lived his entire life in the United States. His mother, Helen Pogue, a Briton, married Antoine Panache after meeting him while on holiday in the south of France.

Ian was selected for inclusion in WarmStorm as a result of his incessant and vitriolic Internet newsgroup messages condemning the lack of resolve shown by the government in dealing with sex offenders. His high school sweetheart Tiffany Worley had been brutally raped outside a disco in Manchester, New Hampshire in 1992, when she was a sophomore. During the several days Tiffany was in intensive care, Ian rarely left her bedside. Following her recovery, Tiffany became ever more withdrawn, and eventually broke off her relationship with Ian. He was devastated. Tiffany now resides in a home for the mentally disabled, and hadn't even seemed to recognize Ian the last time he visited her there.

Panache feels that all rapists should be executed. No exceptions.

The man who raped Tiffany was never identified, let alone captured and convicted. Ian oftentimes fantasizes about solving the mystery himself and exacting revenge on the culprit.

A business major in college, Ian recently started his own real estate agency after working as an agent for Myers & Swanson for four years. As such, he has the freedom to travel throughout New England on business without his presence anywhere at any time raising suspicion--making him the ideal candidate for WarmStorm's operations in that region of the country.

Ian plans on using a utility van to abduct WarmStorm Enemy #3, Jesse Bartlett. He doesn't want his regular vehicle to be seen around Bartlett's brownstone on Cranberry Street in the Brooklyn Heights section of Brooklyn.

Bartlett is a regular visitor to a pornographic movie theater on Manhattan's 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, namely the Pleasure Palace Cinema. Bartlett often goes there after his shift at the bakery ends.

In preparation for his mission, Ian first pays a visit to an exotic animal store. He avoids eye contact as much as possible and converses as little as possible with the sales clerk. Panache is sure that sunglasses, a floppy hat, and a false moustache are more than enough to make him unidentifiable in the event he ever becomes a suspect. But he doubts any suspicions will ever be cast his way. The salesman seems totally bored

with him and his purchases, as if it's the most normal thing in the world for a stranger to walk in to the store and purchase a variety of poisonous insects and snakes.

Next, Panache stops at a Home Depot and purchases twenty-five 50-lb. sacks of lime.

The final item Panache has equipped himself with is even more exotic than the creatures in the terrariums: a soundproof container 5' tall and 3' in both width and depth. The sides are thick glass. On the top, Ian has constructed a 1' square 'trap door,' as he thinks of it. Actually, it is a simple sliding lid. He has constructed it so that he can place an object on top and then slide the lid away, causing the bottom to 'drop out.' Whatever is placed on the 'launching platform' falls into the soundproof box below. Ian congratulates himself on having taken shop classes in high school. Both the carpentry and metalworking courses came in handy while fabricating this container.

The day finally arrives; the one that Ian has selected. He hasn't felt so good in years. His singing in the shower has never been so heartfelt. Panache is still a lousy singer, but his heart is in it. He can barely wait.

Arriving in the vicinity of the Pleasure Palace Cinemas, Panache parks his utility van in a lot near the junction of Broadway and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. He walks down to the cinema and waits outside. Ian had watched Bartlett leave for work this morning, so not only does he know what Bartlett looks like, he also knows what clothing he's wearing today. With that big angry red birthmark right in the center of his bald spot on the top of his head, the 5'8" Bartlett is a dead giveaway even from behind.

As Ian waits, he watches the people walking by. He tries to guess which ones will turn into the Pleasure Palace, and which will walk on. He doesn't do well. Many staid and 'respectable' looking people walk right in as if it's their second home; other people whose sleazy appearance cause him to expect them to lasciviously drool as they view the provocative photographs flanking the entryway don't even give them a glance. Panache finally gives up. He's restless, and tired of standing in one place.

Panache looks across the street. Then up the street. Then down the street. Ho-hum. Ian does not like standing around and waiting. He looks back at the Pleasure Palace Cinema doors. Quite a crowd of people is just now coming out. He sees a man walking down the street, away from him, with a red birth mark in the middle of his bald spot. It's got to be Bartlett. Panache catches up to him, approaching from the side so he can make sure it really is his intended victim.

It is.

“Hey, mister!”

“What?” Bartlett says, stopping and turning to face Ian.

“I was just in the Pleasure Palace with my girlfriend and her sister. My girlfriend’s sister wants to meet you.”

“Yeah? Where is she?”

“They’re heading for the van already. She’s a little shy. She usually waits for men to approach her, but...Well, anyway, we’re having a party at the house. She wanted me to invite you.”

“I don’t know,” Bartlett says, pondering the surprising offer. “What does she look like? She’s not a porker, is she?” Bartlett asks, wrinkling his face.

“Oh, no--she’s *fine*, just like her sister,” Ian winks. “I’ll tell you what--why don’t you come and meet her right now?”

Bartlett considers. He’s got nothing else going tonight. “Sure, let’s give ‘er a look” he replies.

“Her name is Candy. She’s the blond. My girlfriend is the brunette. Introduce yourself to Candy right off--don’t pay much attention to my girl--and you’ll be in luck.”

“OK” Bartlett says. *What have I got to lose*, he asks himself. The two men make small talk in the elevator on the way to the fourth level of the parking garage.

“Did you watch the Yankees last night?” Ian asks.

“No, I don’t watch baseball much” Bartlett responds.

Soon they reach the van. Ian unlocks the passenger door and gestures with his thumb to the back.

“She’s back there--go introduce yourself” he whispers. Bartlett climbs in, and Ian reaches under the seat.

“Hey, what’s goin’ on here! There ain’t nobody back here!” Bartlett roars, turning around. Panache quickly closes the door behind himself and blasts Bartlett with the stun gun, who goes down in a heap as if someone has taken his legs out from underneath him. Ian flips on an overhead light. Bartlett can see the terrariums above him on the driver’s side wall.



He sees an evil looking black snake slithering around in one of them, sticking its tongue in and out. “Hey, what the...” Bartlett squeaks, squeamish as he is about snakes. Ian didn’t know that about Bartlett; it’s an added bonus, as far as he’s concerned. Another blast with the stun gun, and Bartlett is down for the count.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Bartlett comes to, Ian is sitting on the driver's side wheel well, aiming the stun gun at his head.

"Get in the box, Bartlett," Panache says, indicating the wood and metal contraption with a nod of his head.

"How do you know my name, punk?" Bartlett asks.

"None of your business," Ian replies, cocking the gun. He repeats, slowly emphasizing each word: "Get...in...the...box!"

Bartlett gets in. Panache latches the box and padlocks it. Bartlett begins yelling at the top of his lungs. Ian is standing right in front of him, and can barely hear him, due to the box's virtual soundproof construction. Panache feigns surprise and cups his hand behind an ear, turning the ear halfway towards the box. Bartlett keeps yelling, his face red with anger and fear. Ian smiles at Bartlett and shrugs his shoulders as if to say, 'I can't hear you. Oh, well. Too bad.' And it's not a fake smile that adorns Ian's face, where only the lips are smiling, but not the eyes. Panache *is* truly happy; he's enjoying himself immensely.

By the time they reach Montauk Point at the tip of Long Island, Bartlett has been yelling and hyperventilating so much that he has used up almost all of the air supply in his cage.

Panache spots a remote location to park his utility van. He can hardly wait. *This is great! This is going to be so awesome,* he tells himself.

Ian practically jumps out of the driver's seat, and moves to the back of the van. Bartlett is slumped against the back of the box, breathing shallowly.

"You fool--you've got to be economical with your oxygen supply!" Panache says, after sliding the 'trap door' open and putting his mouth up to the hole. He leaves it open so more air can enter the box.

Gradually, the influx of air rejuvenates Bartlett. He waits for his tormentor to put his face close to the opening at the top of the box again.

"Wake up, sleeping beauty," Ian taunts. Bartlett lunges upward, trying to punch the punk kid. Panache has good reflexes. In addition to that, he's on an adrenaline high. He dodges out of the way of the fist, and in the same motion slams the lid shut on Bartlett's hand. Ian increases the

pressure on Bartlett's hand, and the jagged edges on the metal lid dig into the captive's flesh. He screams in pain. His natural reflexive reaction is to pull his hand back toward himself, but that only exacerbates the situation for him--he screams again, louder and higher pitched this time. Some blood from Bartlett's hand squirts on Ian's shirt. Panache opens the lid just enough for Bartlett to move his hand away, and then slams it shut again. "Man, you're messy," he scolds his captive.

Bartlett is writhing in pain, holding his mangled hand underneath his armpit in an attempt to stanch the flow of blood.

"That'll teach you to keep your hands to yourself," Panache says, mockingly shaking his finger at Bartlett.

Panache turns his back on Bartlett, looking over his collection of terrariums. He begins to hum, and then starts pointing to first this terrarium and then another. "Eeny meany miney mand, catch a rapist by the hand. Let's see... How about if we start with the fire ants? No objections? OK, fine." Ian takes the terrarium from the shelf and tips it on its side, so that all the insects fall against the glass on one end. He tips it upside down on the sliding panel, and the ants fall upon it. He quickly slides the panel open, allowing the fire ants to fall inside. Bartlett tries to brush them off. One bites him on the hand, and another on the ankle. The pain is indescribable. He tries to stand up, and his head smashes against the top of his cage. A third bite to the stomach sends Bartlett falling to the floor. He crushes one of the ants in his fall, but just manages to make another one angry; being not altogether in a friendly mood to begin with, the ant bites him on the side. Bartlett kicks his legs out in pain and frustration.

Panache, who has been watching the goings-on inside the cage with a bemused expression, steps up to the cage and slides the lid away again. "Hey, it took me a long time to build this home for you. Don't wreck it!" he teases. "That was just a 'preview of coming attractions'--a 'harbinger of things to come.' I bet you can't wait for what's next! If you get bored, just get up and leave.

"No? OK, then I assume you're ready for the next round. OK, let's see. Who gets the next shot? Let's give the scorpions a go." Using the same methodology as he had with the fire ants, the four scorpions fall on the already terror-stricken and pain-racked man. Again, his attempt to brush them off earns him a sting on the hand. A blood-curdling scream escapes Bartlett's mouth. Panache is having the time of his young life. He cups his hand to his ear. "What? I can't hear you. Oh, you're not having enough fun? You want more? You're a real thrill-seeker, aren't you? All right, I'm here to help. I aim to please!"

Panache stands back to view his little experiment. "Now you look almost as bad on the outside as you must on the inside", he comments.

"All right. Who wants the next shot?" he asks, turning back around to his collection of venomous creatures. "Do you want to bite the bad man?" he asks the rattlesnake, sticking his face right up to the edge of the glass. He holds the terrarium up to the glass so Bartlett can see it. The tortured man's eyes are closed. Ian holds the terrarium there for awhile, waiting for the rapist to open his eyes. When he doesn't, Panache gets angry. He kicks his foot against the box. "Hey, wake up, you stinkin' jerk!"

Bartlett opens his eyes partway. Ian holds up the terrarium, showing the contents to his adversary. "I'd like to introduce you to your new roommate. This is Ronny the Rattler. He's a pretty nice guy once you get to know him." He upends the terrarium over the top of the box, causing the snake to fall onto the lid and contract into a coil. Ian holds its head down against the lid with a corner of the terrarium. The snake begins to rattle. Ian slides the panel open, and the snake drops in. Surprisingly, 'Ronny' doesn't strike right away. It lands right on Bartlett's right leg, and he shakes it off. The snake slithers into the farthest corner away from the man, and coils again. The snake has begun rattling again, but not as rapidly and loudly as before. Bartlett makes himself as small as he can against the opposite end of the box. The snake gradually stops rattling. Panache tries to provoke the snake by tapping against the glass right next to it. The snake tries to strike out at him, but hits the thick glass instead.

Ian is disappointed that he has only one toy left. As far as he's concerned, this is just beginning to get fun. But Bartlett is almost dead already. "OK, I've got to give this last critter his fun before it's too late," he thinks aloud. He opens the lid a crack so that Bartlett can hear him. "Hey, Jesse, old buddy! This will hurt a little. Suck it up and be a man! You can take it!"

The water moccasin wastes no time, biting Bartlett on the elbow before it even hits the bottom of the cage. Bartlett screams again, even louder than the last time. One more bite from the venomous snake, this time on the neck, and Bartlett stops breathing for good.

"You are a continual disappointment to me, Jesse," Ian sighs. "I was hoping you had a little more stamina than that." Panache stands there, hands on hips, inspecting his handiwork. "Not bad," he concludes, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Bending himself to the task, Ian pushes the box to rear of the van. After making sure that none of the creatures are close to the lid at the top, Ian

opens a 50 lb. sack of lime and empties it into the box. It takes twenty-one more sacks before the bloated, discolored body is completely covered with lime. Ian then drives to the pier and backs up his van, as close as he can get to the edge. Opening the van doors from the inside, he is finally able to topple the box by pushing on the top of it with all his might, rocking it back and forth until he finally shoves against the top of it as it is at its forwardmost rocking point. The momentum thus created carries the box containing the dead man, reptiles, and insects out of the van and off the end of the pier. Jesse Bartlett's submersible coffin disappears into the Atlantic Ocean with a deep 'sploosh' sound. Some drops of water, as if springing up from a trampoline, land on Ian's face and shirt. He imagines they are, not drops of seawater, but giant, heavy, thick drops of blood. He revels in the feel of them. Finally, he closes the van doors and drives back home to Concord, New Hampshire.

When Jesse Bartlett's brother stops by to visit him in his Brooklyn Heights brownstone that night, and he isn't there, he thinks it strange but doesn't contact the police. The next evening he comes by again, and finds the police are there. Jesse's employer had asked them to check up on him. Jesse rarely missed work, and never without calling in. Entering the house, the police find nothing amiss, and no signs of foul play. His body is never found, and Jesse Bartlett is classified as a missing person.

Ian e-mails the link from the New York Times regarding Bartlett's disappearance using the software program that Ward had given him. Within a few days, Ian receives the WarmStorm pin in the mail. He opens the packet, looks inside, and without so much as taking the pin out to hold or examine more closely, tosses the packet into his sock drawer.

A few weeks later, Ian Panache purchases Jesse Bartlett's house at an estate sale at a bargain price. He can't wait for his next WarmStorm assignment.

## **PART IV: THE ROGUE**

# CHAPTER ONE

Two weeks after its first three operatives have been given their assignments, Jordan Wells and Ward Spinnaker meet to discuss WarmStorm's progress. All seems to be going well. All three of their operatives (Kramer, Daniels, and Panache) have reported the success of their missions via encrypted e-mail messages to 'Charlie Sierra.' Spinnaker has responded by sending them the WarmStorm pins that they have earned.

WarmStorm enemies 1-3 have been deleted. Now, it's on to the next round: former WarmStorm enemies 4-6, which have now, through attrition, been promoted to numbers 1-3. The second trio have simply displaced the first, and their slots, in turn, have been filled by those previously beneath them.

Wells instructs Ward to contact the WarmStorm 'veterans,' providing them with the necessary details for their next assignments. The data provided includes the enemy's description, whereabouts, and--for motivational purposes--an account of the crimes that they have committed.

\* \* \*

Ward sends out the e-mails August 21<sup>st</sup>, a Tuesday. By the following Monday, he still hasn't heard back from Jason Kramer. Daniels has acknowledged his next assignment and indicated he would fulfill it on his next business trip to Detroit (WarmStorm enemy #5 lives in Lansing). Panache has also replied, saying he would 'take care of it.'

Spinnaker decides he had better go check on Kramer. Is he all right? Away on vacation? He hasn't 'gone soft,' has he? In his role as Special Assistant to the CEO, Ward has official business in San Francisco that he needs to tend to, anyway. After taking care of his duties at Wells Industries office in Daly City, Spinnaker takes a regional flight to Redding and again makes the drive west on 299 to Eureka.

Arriving around 7 p.m., Ward finds Kramer Photography Studio closed for the day. Driving into town, he stops at the Kwik Trip to use the pay phone. Not wanting the call to be traceable to him by using his cell phone or a calling card, Spinnaker inserts some change into the device and punches in Kramer's home number.

Jason's young daughter answers the phone. "Hello, Kramer residence."

"Hello, is your daddy home?" Ward inquires.

"Yes. Who is this?" she asks.

"Can you tell him Charlie Sierra is on the phone, please?"

"Sure!" she responds, and Ward hears her high-pitched "Daddy, Charlie C. Area is on the phone for you."

"Oh, great," Kramer mutters under his breath. Following two deep breaths to calm his nerves, he takes the phone from his daughter. "Thank you, honey. Now why don't you go help mommy with dinner, OK?"

Covering the phone's receiver with one hand and holding it at arm's length, Jason clears his throat. He then presses the phone against his ear and says, "Hello?"

"Jason? This is Charlie Sierra."

"Hi, Mr. Sierra," Kramer replies, in an annoyed tone.

"I'm here in town, Jason. Don't worry--this conversation won't be traced. I'm at a pay phone," Ward assures Jason.

"What do you want?" Jason asks bluntly.

Spinnaker is a little taken aback at Jason's apparent bitterness. "You haven't replied to my e-mail, Mr. Kramer, and we need to talk--in person; we can't do this over the phone."

"About what? Listen, I, I'm busy... We're just about to have dinner."

"All right, I can wait until afterwards."

"I'd really rather not," Jason says, whispering so that his wife and daughter won't hear his end of the conversation. "I'm retiring from WarmStorm. I don't want to do it anymore. I just... I just can't do it anymore. I thought I could, but I can't."

Ward is disappointed, but not shocked. *So he has gone soft. The big question now is: Will he renege on his agreement to maintain secrecy?*

"That's your prerogative, Mr. Kramer. But we still need to talk," Ward says.

"No, Mr. Sierra, I don't want to talk to you anymore. I even deleted that



program from my computer. And, and..." Jason stammers. "I don't even remember the password to it. What is it, now? Um... I don't recall. That's right, I don't remember it. Please--just leave me alone. I want out. I'm retired--for good."

Now it's Spinnaker's turn to take a deep breath. "All right, Mr. Kramer. As I said, it's your decision. I just hope you remember our agreement--about your not compromising our organization under any circumstances."

"Yes, *that* I remember," Jason replies. "You don't have to worry about that. I won't talk. I'm not *against* you, I'm just trying to forget. Just let me be, *please*."

"All right, then," Ward acquiesces. "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Kramer. Good luck."

Ward hangs up. Jason breathes a sigh of relief, and gingerly places the phone back in its cradle.

"Who was it, dear?" Jason's wife asks.

"What? Oh, it was a telemarketer," Kramer lies.

"Wow, you were on the phone a long time. He was really persistent, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was; but I think he finally got the point. I don't think he'll call again."

"That's good. Are you ready for dinner?"

Jason has lost his appetite. But he doesn't want his wife to get suspicious about the call – he had just mentioned how famished he was before their daughter summoned him to the phone.

"Yes, I most certainly *am*," he lies again.

# CHAPTER TWO

Before departing for his drive back to Redding, Ward calls his boss, Jordan Wells, on his cell phone.

“Jordan, I’ve got a little bit of bad news. Kramer wants out. He can’t take it. He wouldn’t even talk to me.” Wells is a little surprised, and quite disappointed. Now they’re down to two operatives. Progress is going to be slow if they don’t recruit some more agents.

“All right, Ward. If he can’t deal with it, we don’t really want him anyway, do we? He’d probably end up compromising the whole organization sooner or later. But...he’s not going to talk, is he?”

“No, I don’t think so, Mr. Wells. He assured me he wouldn’t, and I get the impression he just wants to put the whole episode behind him.”

“Well, okay then. We’ll just need to replace him with our next batch of recruits.”

“Yes, sir.” Ward replies. As difficult as it has been to find the three, he’s not overly confident that acceptable and willing members will be easy to find. Trustworthy vigilantes are certainly not ‘a dime a dozen.’

Spinnaker arrives in Redding just after midnight. He spends the night in a motel there, then flies to San Francisco for his connecting flight to Milwaukee the next day.

Ward has just boarded the plane and taken his seat when he gets a call on his cell phone.

“This is Jordan. Have you seen the national news this morning?” Spinnaker’s boss sounds very distraught. Ward has never before heard quite this tone in Wells’ voice.

“No, I haven’t. Why? What’s up?”

“Can you talk freely?”

“Not really; I’ve just boarded.” First class was already filling up with several pairs of curious ears sitting all around him.

“OK, Ward, listen. There’s bad news. Really bad. What time does your flight arrive? I’ll meet you at the airport.”

“Let’s see; 2:15.”

“I’ll see you then,” Wells says, and hangs up.

*Have we been found out? Ward wonders. Have the police solved one of the murders? Has Kramer betrayed us after all? Or Daniels? Or Panache?*

\* \* \*

During the flight, Spinnaker listens to news radio on the headset provided by the airline, but he doesn’t hear anything out of the ordinary--nothing, at least, that would greatly upset his boss.

“Ward!” Jordan says as he meets his confidant at the arrival gate. “Come on with me in my car; I’ve arranged to have one of our interns get your baggage and drive your car to the office for you.”

“OK,” Ward responds, curious about the reason for all this. “What’s up, Jordan?”

Jordan glances at his friend. His eyes reveal his nervousness. He shakes his head and says, “I’ll tell you when we get in my car.”

Jordan’s chauffeur opens the door for Wells Industrials’ CEO, and then crosses to the other side and does the same for Spinnaker. A sound-proof plate of glass separates the driver and passenger compartments.

Wells takes a deep breath and turns in his seat to face Spinnaker. “I guess we were wrong about Ian Panache,” he begins.

“Uh, oh. How do you mean?” Ward wants to know.

“I shouldn’t mince words, my friend. We *were* wrong. And I take full responsibility. The whole thing was my idea. Now it is *I* who have innocent blood on my head.”

“What do you mean? What’s happened?” Spinnaker persists, almost frantic now.

“Panache has gone off the deep end. After his assignment, he killed three people in his home town.”

“Sex offenders?” Ward hopes the victims weren’t innocent citizens.

“No. They were apparently just people he didn’t like for whatever reason.” Wells answers.

Ward is now as worried and distraught as his boss. He feels responsible, as he is the one who recruited Panache.

“Who did he kill?” Ward asks, almost breathless.

“Two men, and a woman. One man was a former employer, the other was somebody he attended high school with. The woman was an old schoolmate from elementary school.”

“Has a motive been determined, or do these murders appear to be arbitrary?” Ward asks.

“They don’t know yet. But the fact that he knew all his victims personally would seem to indicate that these were not random attacks,” Wells answers. “And Ward,” Jordan continues, “That’s not all.” Mr. Wells looks down at his feet and grimaces.

“What? Tell me.”

Wells hesitates, looks out the window, turns to his friend, and takes a deep breath before responding. “He raped the woman before killing her.”

Spinnaker covers his face with his hands. He groans, lets his hands fall back to his knee, and stares, dazed, out the window. “Here we are, trying to put a stop to that kind of thing, and one of our own members does it!”

An awkward silence ensues. Both men realize that they, individually and jointly, are partially responsible for everything WarmStorm, and its members, do.

“I thought he hated rapists,” Wells comments, wondering what went wrong with their selection process.

“He claimed to,” Ward responds sadly, and adds, “He has good reason to.”

The most important information has been relayed. Wells lets Spinnaker ponder the situation awhile. When Ward is ready, there are other things to discuss.

Staring straight ahead and speaking in a monotone, Ward asks, “How was Panache caught?”

“In the act, practically,” Wells responds. “A neighbor of the woman saw him enter her house, and called the police. When the police arrived fifteen minutes later, it was already too late to help the woman. Panache tried to escape out the bedroom window, but didn’t make it.”

“How could I have been so wrong about him?” Ward asks aloud. “In retrospect, maybe he did seem a little over-eager...” he answers his own question.

Wells puts his hand on his friend's shoulder. “What could you do, though, Ward? After all, we weren’t looking for people with an ambivalent attitude toward WarmStorm’s mission.”

Jordan finally divulges the piece of information that he knows sounds the death knell for their secret organization.

“Ward, Ian Panache was wearing his WarmStorm pin when he was captured.”

# CHAPTER THREE

Ian Panache has no regrets as he looks back on his mission. On the contrary, he can't wait to do it all over again. Which he does, in his mind, over and over again, replaying the events of that night on Montauk Point.

Soon, though, fantasies are not enough. He doesn't want to wait for another assignment. That could take weeks. Or months! He decides there are others who deserve to die, too—and not just rapists. He, Ian Panache, is special. He always has been, but his affiliation with WarmStorm, and the ingenious way in which he carried out his mission, have taken him to the next level. He should be shown respect. He is important, and powerful. You mess with Ian Panache, you're messing with WarmStorm. And WarmStorm cannot, and will not, be stopped.

*Who deserves to be my next victim?* Ian asks himself. In his mind he reviews people who have angered him, or failed to show him the proper deference, in the past. There have been plenty, but three stand out in his memory as deserving of special consideration:

Dan Garibaldi, who fired him from his job assembling computers. Garibaldi's excuse for firing him was that he had been late to work too often. But he'd only been late a few times. As if nobody else was ever late. What about that girl that Garibaldi liked? She had been late more often than Ian had. Yeah, he's one. He needs to find out you can't mess with Ian Panache; not and get away with it, that is.

Another guy who needed a comeuppance was Bill Silgan. In high school, Silgan beat him up one day after school for no reason. And he had cheated at that. He had hit Ian when he wasn't ready for it. He didn't stand a chance after that 'surprise attack.' Yep, he's got to be made an example of, too.

Ian thought. Who else? I know! Lisa Rodriguez! She's married now, but she's still Lisa Rodriguez to me. She laughed at me when I asked her out to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade dance--in front of a whole bunch of other kids, too! I'll show her! Nobody can 'dis' me and get away with it!

\* \* \*

Daniel Garibaldi's body was found in a dumpster behind his place of employment. He had been shot in the head with a .357.

William Silgan was discovered floating face down in his pool. He had also been shot, right between the eyes, with a .357.

When Panache knocked on Lisa Terwilliger's door, she didn't recognize him. After all, it had been 14 years since they'd been in eighth grade together, and had hardly even seen one another in high school. Ian had brought some Rohypnol with him, expecting that she would remember him, and at least invite him in and offer him a glass of water or something. He had planned on slipping the 'date rape' drug into her glass and 'taking advantage' of her after she passed out. Then, of course, he would kill her.

Since Lisa didn't recognize him, though, not even after being reminded of the incident where she rejected and embarrassed him, he simply overpowered her. Telling her she was getting her just due for disrespecting a personage so great as 'Ian Panache, WarmStorm agent extraordinaire,' he raped and then strangled her. It was at that point that the police had knocked on the door and, trying to slip out the window, Panache had been apprehended.

On finding the WarmStorm pin on Panache, the local police in Concord, New Hampshire assume WarmStorm is a terrorist organization, and that Panache must have received the pin for killing Garibaldi, who was killed on Saturday, August 18<sup>th</sup>, three days before both Silgan and Terwilliger.

Based on that assumption, the Concord police contact the FBI.

Panache admits to all three murders, but at first reveals nothing about WarmStorm. He claims that the pin is just something he found in a house somewhere that he was showing to some potential buyers. He liked the looks of it, so started wearing it. "Why not? It's a good conversation starter," he had said.

Ian wants to talk to 'Charlie Sierra,' but doesn't know how to contact him. His only connection to him is via the custom e-mail program on his home computer. Sitting in his prison cell, he reasons that Sierra will probably find him. One way or another, Sierra will visit him here, or somehow get word to him. Panache wants to make a deal.

Ian is right. Two days after his arrest, a guard approaches his cell and tells him, "Your minister's here to see you, Panache."

*My minister? I have no minister, Ian wonders. My mother and father traded off between taking me to the Anglican and Catholic churches when I was a kid, but then they finally gave up on it. I haven't been to any church in years.* On his way down the hall to talk with the minister, he realizes. *Of course! It must be Sierra!*

His deduction is correct. Despite the dire circumstance in which he finds

himself, Ian laughs when he sees Sierra. He's wearing a false mustache, a large and gaudy cross around his neck, and is carrying an over-sized black Bible in his hand as if it were a football. Panache sits down across from his 'minister.' A plate of glass separates them.

"Praise the Lord!" Ian says, grinning.

"Go to hell, Panache. This is no time for levity or frivolity. You're in *serious* trouble." Ward tells him.

"So I noticed," Panache replies, still grinning. And then his grin vanishes. "I'm not the only one in trouble, Sierra. The FBI has been talking to me. Not just these 'town clowns.' The F-B-I! YOU guys are the ones that could really be in deep doo-doo here. This is what I want: WarmStorm obviously has money behind it. A large organization has got to be backing it. I don't know who, and I don't really *care* who, but a big organization like that has got to have high-powered lawyers. I've got a deal for you: You get your lawyers to get me off, and I won't expose WarmStorm. If you don't help me, the whole world will know about WarmStorm."

"Look, Panache, you weren't authorized to--" Ward responds.

"No, *you* look here, Sierra. That's my only and final offer. See that camera up there?" he gestures with his head. "All I have to do is say my 'minister' is my WarmStorm contact, and your face will be all over the news. Somebody will recognize you, don't you think? I know Charlie Sierra may not be your real name, but your face *is* your face, even with that false mustache. If I don't get a lawyer within three days telling me Charlie Sierra sent him, I'm going to spill my guts to the FBI. Also, if I'm found guilty, the same thing will happen. I'm not going down alone."

Getting up to leave, Ward closes his Bible, which he had opened to a random page. "We'll let you know" he says somberly, and signals to the guard that the visit is over.

As Ward walks out of the visiting booth, Panache stands up and points at him. "Remember, Sierra, three days!"



# CHAPTER FOUR

The distress he feels is evident on Jordan Wells' face as he meets with Ward Spinnaker in Wells' office. As has usually been the case when they have their informal WarmStorm meetings, it is after regular business hours; all the other employees at Wells Industries corporate offices have gone home. The 'rank and file' are having dinner with their families, seeing a movie at the theater, attending their kids' soccer games, out dancing, or anything else that might help them to recover from this day and prepare for the next.

"It would be an understatement to say I've created a monster," Wells remarks. "Obviously, I can't turn back time. If I could, I would. Now, we must decide how to proceed from this juncture."

Spinnaker maintains silence, allowing Jordan to continue talking.

"As I see it, Ward, we have three choices. There are three different scenarios that can be played out here. I want your input, of course. If I'm missing something, or have failed to evaluate all the variables correctly, let me know."

"Sure; go on." Ward responds.

"All right, scenario number 1: Our lawyers help Panache get off, and we then assign Josh Daniels to kill him once he's released. After all, Daniels raped Lisa Terwilliger. He's both a traitor and an avowed enemy of WarmStorm."

"OK; I'll hold my judgment until the end. What's scenario number two?" asks Ward.

"Number two: We don't help Panache, and he divulges all he knows about WarmStorm. He only knows you, but you would be identified soon enough--after all, you're not exactly Mr. Invisible in the business community--and a connection with Wells Industries would be assumed. We, that is Wells Industries, officially deny any such connection. The publicity for Wells Industries obviously will be terrible, even with a denial. Worse yet, Kramer would probably also talk. Now that Panache and WarmStorm are in the news, Kramer might talk anyway, no matter what we do. It's not a very good scenario, but I just want to brainstorm a little, and then we can discuss all of our options."

"Of course; I understand," Spinnaker says. "Go on. Number three?"

Wells takes a deep breath, looks at the floor, and then directly at his closest friend.

“Scenario three is this: We hire contract killers to kill everybody with knowledge of WarmStorm--Panache, Kramer, and even Daniels. If we opt for this scenario, we need to act quickly--before any of them talk. It will have to be coordinated so that they are all deleted at the same time. If any of them get suspicious, it will probably provoke them into making a confession and exposing WarmStorm. This, Ward,” Jordan says, “is probably your only hope of avoiding being personally implicated.”

Both men are silent for what seems to them like a long time. The only sound to be heard in the cavernous office is the ticking of the grandfather clock, which Jordan, along with so many other things, inherited from his father.

“What do you think, Ward? Is there a fourth scenario? Do we have any other viable options?” Jordan asks, his eyes almost pleading. He knows there are none.

“No, I’m afraid those *are* our only options, Mr. Wells. I must admit,” he continues, “scenario three is a little tempting. We could carry it out and pretend nothing happened. In a few short days, things would be back to normal. We might even be able to revive WarmStorm in time--under a different name, of course.”

Wells raises his arm, palm out. “No, that’s not an option. I’m done. I won’t make that mistake twice.”

Ward responds with an understanding nod and repeats, “As I said, scenario three *is* tempting. But I just can’t have it. Three innocent people have already died. I can’t agree to two more innocent people dying--Kramer and Daniels, that is--just to save my own neck.”

“So scenario three is out,” Wells intones, as if talking to himself. He knew Ward Spinnaker would reject his only opportunity to escape. But he felt he had to give him the option, anyway.

“Yes,” Ward says, “and I’d have to say that scenario number one is not really an option I can endorse, either. Ian Panache is precisely the type of person we wanted to eliminate, not assist in any way. Besides, as you said, Kramer may very well talk anyway. In that case, we would look even worse than we already would if our lawyers help somebody like Panache.”

“I agree; you’re right. Option two is not a pleasant prospect, but it’s all we really have,” Wells admits.

“I will be identified by Panache, and maybe by one or both of the other agents, too,” Ward continues. “The only way out for me is to flee the country. I can hole up on your private island chain. I’ll write a letter denying that Wells Industries, or you personally, had any knowledge whatsoever of WarmStorm or my involvement in it. It was a personal project, and I acted alone. Wells Industries will take a PR hit, but it should eventually blow over.”

Jordan Wells is overwhelmed. He couldn’t ask for a more loyal employee and friend. He could never have asked Ward to make the sacrifice he is going to make, and he knows he can never fully make it up to him. But he will do his best.

“What have I gotten you into, my friend?” Jordan asks rhetorically. “I had no right to get you involved with this. Obviously, I had no inkling things would turn out this way, but still—I had no right. I’m so sorry. It would be presumptuous of me to even ask your forgiveness. An error this grave can not really be forgiven, can it?”

Ward is silent. He is resigned to his fate. The hopes he had for his career, for his family, have not been merely postponed—they’ve been canceled. Finally, though, he responds. “*We* made a big mistake, Jordan. “I didn’t have to go along with it. Don’t be so egotistical. WarmStorm was *our* organization, ours together, not just yours. *I’m* the one who scouted and recruited Ian Panache. I wasn’t cautious enough, and now I have to ‘pay the piper.’”

“You’re a good man, Ward Spinnaker, don’t ever forget that. *We* made a colossal mistake with WarmStorm, but our motives were good. We’ve done a lot of *good* in our lives thus far, too--think about the charities and foundations we support and fund, not to mention the tens of thousands of people we employ. I am a part of that, and *you are, too*, my friend. And you will continue to be a force for good. I know that. I know *you*.”

Wells paces over to the picture window overlooking the huge corporate parking lot. He remembers when they broke ground on this site. Ward was with him then. And before that. Long before that. He remembers hiring him. When they were both a lot younger. When they were both young. They go back a long, long way.

Jordan returns to the exact same spot in the middle of his office and tells Ward, “I hope it goes without saying, but I’ll provide you with everything you need, Ward. You won’t have to worry. Life on the island will be as comfortable as I can make it for you. In time, I’ll arrange a new identity for you, and you can start over again somewhere. If you decide to return to the United States, we might have to do something to alter your

appearance a little. Of course, I'll take care of that, too. Wherever you decide to go, your family can join you there. Don't worry. I'll arrange everything. In the meantime, they'll be well taken care of, also."

"Thank you," Ward says.

"Don't be ridiculous, Ward. It may be a cliché, but it's really true: It's the *least* I can do."

The two men shake hands, and try to smile. They both know that they may never see each other again. Wells cannot visit his friend, for it would compromise Ward's safety. The FBI will be closely watching Jordan Wells for a long time to come.

# CHAPTER FIVE

That night, Ward takes from his office the few things he needs. The few things he *wants* is more accurate. A few mementos, a couple of pictures. He prepares e-mail messages for his subordinates, giving them some final direction regarding the distribution of tasks. Some of his own tasks he delegates, others he leaves for Jordan to delegate for him.

Spinnaker writes the letter taking full responsibility for WarmStorm and absolving Wells of all knowledge of or complicity in said venture, and leaves it on his own desk.

By the time Ward arrives home, it is almost midnight. His twin boys are in bed. He sits in a chair at their bedside, watching them sleep--just as Tom Tilford had done when Katie was in the hospital. Finally, he kisses Brandon and Christopher goodnight, and goodbye. When they wake up in the morning, daddy will be gone. Daddy's gone a lot; but this time, he doesn't know how long it will be before he will see them again. It won't be here, not in the house they've shared these past 10 years, since the twins were born.

Ward's wife Melissa is used to him coming home late at night. She doesn't wait up for him any longer. If she did, there would be too many nights when she only got three or four hours of sleep.

Ward wakes her up. "Honey, I've got to talk to you," he says. She detects in his tone of voice that this is not something that can wait until morning.

"What is it, Ward?" she asks, sitting up in bed.

"I have to leave for awhile," he begins.

"What? What do you mean, on business?" she asks, knowing, though, that it must be more than that.

"No... I have to leave the country."

"Ward, what is going on? What's happening?"

"Please, honey, just let me finish. I'll try to explain it... I got involved in a misguided...social...experiment, let's call it. I guess I'd better just be blunt, or this will take all night. Remember the girl in Wisconsin who was kidnapped, Katrina Tilford?"

“Yes,” Melissa responds warily, confused as to what that has to do with Ward, and her.

“You might remember that the man who kidnapped her was a sex offender,” Ward says. “He’d been released from prison. I started an organization, and called it WarmStorm. Its purpose was to proactively prevent such people from having the chance to do such things to little kids, like our boys, ever again.”

“You started a *vigilante* group?” she asks, incredulous.

“Shhh. Don’t wake up the boys, honey,” he whispers. Thinking about his boys, Ward's eyes begin to mist. The thought of his taking an active role, let alone a leading one, in such a venture now seems bizarre to him also.

“But to answer your question--in a word, yes. And WarmStorm--that's what we...I mean *I*, named it--has already been active. Warmstorm has killed three of the worst sexual predators in the country.”

Melissa claps her hand to her mouth, and shivers at the thought of it. Trying to imagine her husband’s involvement in such a thing, her eyes grow wide.

“Ward! Ward, I can’t believe it. You--” she whispers hoarsely.

“Yes, but that’s not the worst of it,” Ward says. “One of the agents turned rogue and killed some innocent people. He’s going to identify me. Three days from now. Keep the boys out of school next week. I’ll be all over the news. I’m sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry I am. Not that the first three were killed, but that the second three--the innocent ones--were. And that you and the boys have to go through this.”

Melissa is, understandably, stunned. To say her world has been turned upside down would almost be an understatement. Earlier today her biggest problem was mediating an argument the twins had had over a toy. Tomorrow, and the next day and the next, it will be dealing with the negative and persistent media attention, and trying to be both mother *and* father to her children. And being without Ward.

“Where will you be? How can I reach you?” Melissa asks her husband.

“I can’t tell you, honey,” Ward responds. “That is to say, I won’t tell you, because you’re better off not knowing. When the media ask you, and the FBI--yes, I’m sorry, the FBI--tell them you don’t know. And it will be true. They’ll believe you, I think. Even if they don’t, you can pass a polygraph test that way. Our house will probably be watched, our mail intercepted, and our phone line tapped. I won’t be able to visit, and I won’t be able to

call or write.”

Melissa is again holding her hand over her mouth, and shaking her head ‘No.’

“Melissa,” Ward continues, “When it’s safe--in a few weeks, or at the latest a few months, I’ll get word to you. We’ll get established someplace new, maybe somewhere in South America. We’ll have to start all over again, with new identities. It will be tough, but at least we’ll be together.”

“Ward, what about the boys? What do I tell the boys?” Melissa’s voice is shaking.

“Just try to shield them from the media as best you can. Maybe they should stay with your mother for awhile. Tell them I had to go on a trip. Tell them I love them. And I love you.”

Ward and Melissa hold each other tight, and cry. Ward’s tears are caused by the anticipation of being far away from his family for an indefinite period of time. Melissa cries for her loneliness, too, but also out of fear and confusion. They both cry for each other, and for the twins.

Finally, Ward breaks the silence. “We have enough money for you and the boys to get by, don’t worry about that.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that, Ward.”

Melissa tries to comprehend the chain of events which has brought them, the ‘ideal American family,’ as many had thought of them, to this situation.

“Why, Ward, Why? Why did you take it upon yourself? Don’t you have enough to do, at work and at home? You don’t have to be responsible for the whole world, you know.” Melissa has never understood why some men feel they have to change the world. Her father was the same way.

“I thought it was the right thing to do, Melissa. I...” he can’t finish. He breaks down, and holds his wife in his arms—until his wife falls asleep; for he knows it will be a long time before he is able to do so again.

When Melissa awakes in the morning, Ward is gone.

# CHAPTER SIX

Ian Panache is livid when the three days expire and he has not yet received a visit from a lawyer identifying himself as being sent by Charlie Sierra. In fact, the only lawyer he has had contact with is the court-appointed one, who doesn't seem to really care one way or the other whether Ian is found guilty.

Panache expects to at least receive another visit from his 'minister.' Having watched his share of television as a child, he half-expected the lawyer to arrive right at the last moment, in 'the nick of time,' just as the three days were about to expire.

It doesn't happen that way, though. The next day, after alternately steaming about his abandonment and worrying about his predicament, Panache asks for the FBI agent who has been interrogating him, Richard Kovach, to be called in.

Agent Kovach meets Panache in the jail's interrogation room. "What's up, Panache?" Kovach asks curtly. He doesn't like Ian, and he has grown impatient with the impudent young man.

"I'm ready to talk."

"OK, I'm ready to listen," Kovach responds, retrieving a notepad from his attaché case.

"The murders of Garibaldi, Silgan, and Rodriquez were not my only ones. I also killed Jesse Bartlett of Brooklyn, New York. He was my first assignment from WarmStorm. WarmStorm is an organization that was formed to do *your* job--keep Americans safe from sexual predators."

"By taking the law into your own hands and murdering them?"

"Yes, that's about the size of it. If you guys don't have the guts to do it, somebody has to. WarmStorm's sole intent is to kill paroled sexual predators--rapists, and so on," Panache explains.

"I know what a sexual predator is, Panache. You're well on your way to being classified as one yourself."

Ian glares at Kovach. "Look, Lisa Rodriquez got what she deserved. That wasn't really *rape*--it was justifiable...I don't know what you'd call it, but it was justifiable. People need to know they can't mess with WarmStorm or its members."



*Just what I need, agent Kovach tells himself. Another nut case. "Tell me more about WarmStorm. Who's behind it?" Kovach inquires.*

"I don't know who's behind it. My contact went by the name Charlie Sierra. He was in here just a few days ago, disguised as a minister."

*Good, as long as this twerp's telling the truth, we should be able to identify him after finding him in the surveillance camera archives, Kovach thinks. We can determine from the records when Panache received a visit from a 'minister,' and the rest will be child's play. 'Charlie Sierra is obviously a bogus name, but we'll find out soon enough who he really is.*

Panache tells Kovach all he knows: how he was recruited, how and when 'Charlie Sierra' contacted him; the specifics of their conversation at the time, what his assignment was, how he was to report the success of his mission using encrypted e-mail messages, and the significance of the WarmStorm pin.

At FBI headquarters, a connection is made between the information Panache has provided and the unsolved murders of the two sex offenders from Long Beach and Chicago. The cases are reopened. Kovach briefs the police departments in those cities about WarmStorm, explaining that the perpetrators of the murders in their cities may be affiliated with that organization. Police departments throughout the country are alerted to report any murders or attempted murders of registered sex offenders to the FBI immediately.

It has only been a few days, but the lime in which Bartlett's body was encased has done a quick job of decomposing his body, and even his bones. As the box is not waterproof, sea water has seeped into the box.

It doesn't take long for the divers contracted by the FBI to find the box Panache used to imprison and torture Jesse Bartlett. While it is being raised to the surface, though, the box breaks apart, and its contents – mostly lime, but also pieces of decaying flesh and bone as well as remnants of the creatures used to torment Bartlett--spill out onto the floor of the Atlantic ocean. The only thing left in the box as it is hauled on deck is a bit of lime at the bottom. The lid, though, still contains minute amounts of Bartlett's blood on its jagged edge where his hand was caught.

\* \* \*

At Wells Industries, the CEO must act as if he would if Ward were simply late for work. He waits until 10 a.m., and then has his senior administrative assistant call Ward at his home. When Wells is relayed

Melissa's response (that she doesn't know where her husband is, and is worried about him herself), he decides he had better speak with Melissa personally. After all, isn't that what he would do as a concerned friend in such a situation?

Melissa Spinnaker does not have to fake the concern in her voice when she speaks with Ward's employer. She knows more than she reveals, but the anxiety is very genuine. Mr. Wells assures her that everything will be fine, he's sure of it, and that he will do all he can to help. He's going to contact the police and insist that they waste no time in ascertaining Ward's whereabouts.

Jordan feels dirty for the duplicity used against his friend's wife, the artifice into which he has maneuvered himself. Wells considers how he is going to word it when he contacts the police, and whether he should employ Jeffery Wolfenstein's services. He doesn't *really* want Wolfenstein to find Ward, of course--he's not really lost, not as far as Wells is concerned. He just wants to proceed as he would if Ward really *was* missing. *If I were truly ignorant of Ward's current whereabouts, what would I do? Assuming that state of affairs, what would the police expect of me? What must I do to prevent Ward's wife from getting suspicious?*

Ward Spinnaker's photograph, taken from the jail's video surveillance archive, is recognized by one of Kovach's coworkers at the FBI field office. Coincidentally, the FBI agent and Spinnaker had attended Marquette University together, and had even played on the basketball team together and had been in the same fraternity.

As Wells contemplates his next move, the FBI arrive at Wells Industries with a warrant for Ward Spinnaker's arrest. Ward's administrative assistant contacts Wells, who then contacts Jordan.

"Mr. Wells, the FBI are here with a warrant to arrest Mr. Spinnaker!" she tells him, her normal restrained tone of voice having been replaced by an unmistakable tone of panic. Ward answers by flying out of his office and down the hallway.

"What's going on here? This has got to be a misunderstanding!" Ward yells at Kovach, who is accompanied by another FBI agent--but not the one who attended college with Spinnaker.

Both FBI agents recognize Jordan Wells. After all, he is the wealthiest man in Wisconsin, and Wells Industries the number one employer.

"I'm afraid not, sir," Kovach responds. "Mr. Spinnaker is wanted for conspiracy to commit murder. We have a warrant for his arrest."

Just as was the case with Melissa, Jordan doesn't have to feign the affect this has on him. Although not shocked by the charge, he is nevertheless struck by the starkness of the phrase. 'Conspiracy to commit murder.' It chills him; he is a part of this, too. He knows, in fact, that he bears even more responsibility than Ward does.

But nobody must ever find that out. For the good of the country, his employees, his company, his family, and himself, his involvement must never be known by any others save Ward and himself. Ward understands that, too. It's just the way it has to be.

"What is your name?" Wells demands of the FBI agent.

"Mr. Wells, my name is Richard Kovach."

"Mr. Kovach, on behalf of my good friend and trusted employee Ward Spinnaker, I am going to implicate *you* personally, *and* the FBI, in a defamation of character lawsuit. My lawyers will prove Ward's innocence regarding whatever it is of which you are accusing him, and then see to it that--"

"Mr. Wells, with all due respect," agent Kovach interrupts, "we have very good reasons for suspecting Mr. Spinnaker. He has not been found guilty--yet. But we do have solid grounds to have him arrested. Can we speak with you privately?"

Wells' years of experience in business negotiations stand him in good stead. He is able to maintain his false bravado, his bluff, quite easily. He gruffly and somewhat sarcastically invites the agents into his office.

"Ward Spinnaker," Wells takes the offensive, "is not only innocent of these ridiculous charges, but he may be in danger himself. He hasn't shown up for work today. I called his wife, and she doesn't know where he is. She says he left for work at the normal time this morning--"

Kovach interrupts Wells again. "Mr. Wells, two of our agents are speaking with Mrs. Spinnaker right now. I assure you, we *will* find him." Wells doesn't think they will. He hopes not, at any rate.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

It is Ward Spinnaker's administrative assistant who discovers the letter her boss left behind on his desk. Not certain of what to do, but knowing she can't simply ignore it without getting herself into trouble with somebody--Mr. Wells or, worse yet, the FBI--she asks to see Jordan Wells. When she is called into his office, she hands Mr. Wells the letter.

Jordan reads it, feigns shock and, after handing the letter to agent Kovach, collapses into his chair, head in hands. After Kovach's partner has also read the confession, they resume their conversation with Jordan Wells, who must now sheepishly admit he may have been wrong about Spinnaker.

On concluding their interview with Jordan Wells, the two FBI agents are not certain whether Wells is himself involved with WarmStorm. They doubt it, though, as a man like Wells would have 'way too much to lose' getting involved in such a risky venture. After all, Wells didn't succeed in business, and continually expand his personal fortune, by making foolish decisions. Had Spinnaker acted alone in founding, funding, and organizing WarmStorm? It's feasible. But he, too, had a lot to lose in such an endeavor. Why had he done it? What was his underlying motive? Where is he now? If he was not the sole organizer of WarmStorm, has he been kidnapped, or even been killed, by members of WarmStorm to prevent him from talking? Is he in hiding somewhere? Kovach is determined to find out. That is, after all, his job.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

Jason Kramer is not dealing well with his past involvement in WarmStorm. He should have known better. What business does a photographer have traveling around the country killing strangers? *They do need to be killed--they should be killed, but is it my responsibility to do it?* Jason muses. *No, it isn't--why should it be? What if I'm caught? Where would my family be? I need to play it safe--for their sake. I would never be able to explain this to them, or make it up to them if I end up in prison. If only I'd kept my big mouth shut on the newsgroups. Or realized sooner that getting involved would be a mistake. I can't undo the past. What I did, I did. But no more. From now on, I'm just going to live my life as quietly and as unobtrusively as possible. My responsibility is to be a husband, and a father, and a photographer. I'm not cut out to be a Rambo type. I guess I acted more like Don Quixote. And it's time to get back to reality now.*

Kramer has suffered from nightmares ever since he returned from Long Beach. It had seemed so strange to come home from such a momentous event and have to act as if he had just been away on a normal business trip. And his wife and daughter don't seem quite the same as they were prior to his exploits in Long Beach. Even their house has changed, exuding now a brooding, almost mocking atmosphere. Fear of being detected is his constant companion. Like the droning note of a bagpipe, it is always there, just below the surface. Thoughts of being exposed as a cold-blooded murderer permeate his thoughts. His relationships with his wife and daughter are adversely affected. His business suffers. He has a hard time concentrating. Adding to his woes are chronic indigestion. He can't tell anybody about what he's done; if he were to confess the root cause of his troubles to his doctor, he would risk arrest and imprisonment. If he were to unburden himself by revealing to his wife the full details of his itinerary while in Long Beach, he would burden her down even more. Which would, in turn, further augment his own burdens. Who knows? She might even turn him in herself if she found out.

*If they do catch me, I will tell them whatever they want to know. But they probably won't catch me. After all, if they were going to, they probably would have by now. And who knows that I did it? Only Charlie Sierra. And why would he tell? Unless he was caught. Maybe they already know, and they're playing cat and mouse, just biding their time, waiting for the perfect time to nab me.*

Finally, on Tuesday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, Jason Kramer reads the story in USA Today about the murders in Concord, New Hampshire, and the torture

killing of Jesse Bartlett by Ian Panache. A photograph of 'Charlie Sierra' accompanies the story. Jason sees that Sierra's real name is Ward Spinnaker. He is a fugitive from justice, and the FBI is requesting information from anybody with knowledge of his whereabouts. Jason becomes very jumpy and irritable. His wife begins to fear for his sanity; some of his clients wonder if he may have gotten involved in hard drugs.

The next day, the newspaper reports the possible connection between WarmStorm, Ian Panache and the murders for which he has confessed, and both of the other unsolved WarmStorm cases: Andrew Dickson in Chicago, and David Walnak in Long Beach. *It's only a matter of time, and they'll have me*, Jason reasons.

Kramer suffers a nervous breakdown while at home mowing his lawn on Saturday, September 1<sup>st</sup>. Kramer's doctor attributes his breakdown to stress caused by his faltering business and deteriorating home life, and prescribes Valium.

# CHAPTER NINE

Josh Daniels takes the news rather calmly. *'Charlie Sierra' and WarmStorm have been exposed. So his real name is Ward Spinnaker, and he is--or was--a principle employee of Wells Industries, Inc.* Daniels assumes that it was probably Wells Industries that provided the financial backing for WarmStorm. Or then again, the backing could have come from some business or organization with which Spinnaker had connections. After all, someone in Spinnaker's position would have close ties in a number of corporations.

At any rate, Daniels isn't overly concerned about being personally implicated as a member of WarmStorm. After all, he had left no clues behind when dispatching Andrew Dickson. Even if Spinnaker were to identify him as one of WarmStorm's operatives, it couldn't be proven. Naturally, being named would cast doubt on him and cause embarrassment for his family and possibly have some adverse effects on his business, but he won't be found guilty. And why would Spinnaker rat on him anyway?

*I guess this is the end of WarmStorm, Josh concludes. Actually, I'm not all that disappointed. I'm experiencing Déjà vu here. This is just like Vietnam. A futile exercise. Our motives may have been lofty, but things got messed up. Things really got messed up, that's for sure.*

For the first time since returning from Nam, Josh Daniels examines his feelings about the war, the world, and his place in it. He has avoided confronting his feelings for years, opting instead to take refuge in work. Work, work, work. Work to provide. Work to prove yourself. To prove your mettle and stamina and acumen. Work tenaciously, without ever letting up, so you don't have to stop and think, to meditate on what's really important in life.

*What has all this really brought me?* Josh asks himself. *I would rather be rich than poor, that's true. But am I truly happy? My life is OK; I can't complain. But the last time I can truly remember really being happy, just flat-out happy to be alive, was back in school--before Nam.*

Josh Daniels spends the rest of the afternoon communing with himself, formulating a new personal philosophy. Not one foisted on him by others, or one that dictates how he is supposed to think based on affiliation with one political party or another, or how Wall Street, Madison Avenue, or Hollywood would have him view things.

Josh reaches into his closet, and takes down his box, the one containing

the WarmStorm pin and his Vietnam medals. Getting out his fishing tackle box, he conceals the box containing his war mementos inside it.

\*       \*       \*

Daniels drops his line into the Stillwater River near Deweese Park and savors a beer, keeping an eye on his fishing pole. He hasn't been here lately; he hasn't gone fishing in quite some time, come to think of it. He used to fish here with his buddies back in high school. They had had good times out here drinking beer, fishing, and talking about girls. And yes, occasionally about the war, the world, and their place in it.

*That really wasn't so long ago, Josh thinks. Yet it seems, in a way, as if eons have passed between then and now, even as if it were a different world altogether. Strange.*

Josh picks up the box containing his medals--those from Vietnam, and the WarmStorm pin. He holds the box below the surface of the river, thinking of his buddies in Vietnam. Many of them never came back. Not alive, anyway. Some of them had even died in his arms. Of those who had survived, he had seen very few of them in the years since his return. But a bond remained. If they needed him--for anything--he would be there for them. And he knew they would reciprocate if need be. He's not turning his back on them, or their memories. He's simply letting go.

Daniels doesn't want the medals anymore. He watches his fingers release their grip. The heavy box sinks straight down and out of sight, to the bottom of the Stillwater.

*I won't forget what I've done. But I don't need the reminders. I received those medals for killing people, and for getting hurt while in the process of hurting others, Josh thinks. What a strange thing to be 'decorated' for. It's better not to kill. Ever. Under no circumstances should people be coerced into a situation where they are expected to do so. What would the world be like if everyone were to resolve to 'just say no' to killing others, regardless of the cause? There would be no more war, no more killing. The world would be a better place.*

When Josh returns home, he gives some of his old high school buddies a call, inviting them to come fishing with him one of these days--to drink a few beers and catch up on old times.



# CHAPTER TEN

When it comes to matters involving WarmStorm, Jordan Wells no longer has anybody with whom he can consult, as Ward is now safely ensconced on his new island home. There is only one final piece of 'business' to conduct regarding the covert organization he and his confidant had founded: dissolve it. But there's nothing to *do* to make its dissolution official--nobody to contact, no letter to be dictated, no press conferences to call, nothing to be notarized or authenticated, no archives to be preserved for the ages. Ward knows already. Kramer quit. Panache overstepped his commission and then turned traitor. The only one left is Josh Daniels. He will figure it out soon enough. Their man in Dayton had doubtless heard about the events surrounding Panache, anyway, and was bright enough to deduce that, since their organization had been compromised, they would no longer operate. At any rate, he would receive no more communiqués from Ward.

The aftermath of the campaign that Wells had begun with such gusto and enthusiasm was devastating: innocent people have been killed, and the lives of others indelibly, and permanently, altered. On a personal level, Jordan's reputation would suffer, and his company would take a hit, also. He didn't know if he would ever again see the most loyal friend he had ever had.

*We accomplished some good, but was it worth it?* Wells asks himself. *If killing Walnak, Dickson, and Bartlett prevented the killing of one or more children, I'd say we came off ahead of the game. But there's no way to know that. Would they have struck again? Probably, but who can say for sure? I'm afraid we've won only a Pyrrhic victory this time. We rid the earth of three vermin, but the cost to do so has been enormous. Enormous! But we followed our convictions, even when the course we took up was an unconventional one. We were practically forced into doing so by the woeful inadequacies of the so-called 'justice system.' What a joke! People getting away with...*

Jordan Wells blushes. It is not something he does often.

*What we did was not murder*, he thinks, as if arguing with himself. *What WarmStorm did was not murder. We killed, we didn't murder. There is a difference between killing and murdering. Panache killed Bartlett--although I must admit, the methods he used aren't what I had in mind for our operatives-- but he murdered the others.*

All of a sudden Jordan Wells feels very weary. He collapses into his plush leather chair. *Here I am, trying to convince myself that all we did was just*

*make a mistake, that we lost a single battle. But there's more to it than that. I have made a colossal blunder. This is not something that can be undone, or rectified. I can't bring back Garibaldi, Silgan, or Terwilliger any more than I can bring back my own father. I can, and will, see to it that their families are taken care of, but that won't bring them back. It is obscene to even argue that money could take the place of a human life. There is no relation between the two things.*

*What would my father say if I could bring him back now? He would, rightfully, be ashamed of me. He would probably crawl right back into his crypt. While it is true that the courts, the legislators, and probably many other segments of society have failed to keep our children safe from sexual predators, I must admit, as much as it pains me to have to do so, that WarmStorm was no better. Maybe worse.*

*So what is the answer--rehabilitation? No, you can't force people to learn something they don't want to learn. People will only change if they really want to change. And the will to change has to come from within. Logic is not enough, neither are threats. Some may be amenable to being rehabilitated. But I'm afraid it would be very few. Is legislation the answer? Similar to rehabilitation, goodness cannot be legislated. Laws are not enough. We can do a little bit of good here with education, and a little bit there with deterrence, but it's not enough. There's simply too much to do. Things are too broken. I am the CEO of one of the world's largest corporations, and I am clueless as to how to solve this problem. I thought I was onto something, but have only made things worse. I can no more cause a lasting change than the janitors who come in here at night to mop the floors and scrub the toilets.*

*This is an unusual state of affairs for Jordan Wells. A decisive man by nature and training, he doesn't know what to do now.*

*What is my next move? he wonders. After a pause, he considers another tack altogether. Maybe I'm not thinking creatively enough. I've been looking in the wrong places for answers. I've had a mental block; have not been open-minded enough. There has to be an answer. There simply has to be. It's obvious that we humans cannot solve our own problems. It's simply beyond our capabilities. Haven't we proved that as we've grappled with these problems, without solving them, over the ages? Down through the decades, centuries, and even millenniums, every conceivable form of government has been tried--and failed. Only the degree of failure has differentiated the one from the other. Some governments are indeed better than others (who can deny that Switzerland is a better government than Nazi Germany was, for instance), but not even the superior administrations can solve the problems caused by sex offenders, not to mention the myriad other problems mankind faces. Like a frog trying to fly, it just can't be done--we are incapable of solving the problems we've*

*brought upon ourselves.*

In a logical sense, Wells is satisfied with his own arguments. Who could dispute them? Over and over again, people are fooled into thinking--or fool themselves into thinking--that only if they get 'their man' into office, things will improve, and basic problems will be solved. But even if progress *is* made in one area or another, that miracle worker eventually dies or is succeeded by another who undoes much of the good he was able to bring about.

*There must be another way. A solution from a source I've never before considered, maybe. I've got to find it. I've never given up before, and I'm not about to now. There must be an answer to our fundamental problems. I have to believe a better world, with better people, is possible. I will search for it until I find it.*

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