



PANDORA ' S BOX

A NOVEL
by
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Chapter I

Dave Johnson was on the way to the Post Office after work that day. As he rode along, his thoughts were about anything, but the slip left by the mailman. Dave thought it was just another book and of no concern. He enjoyed reading and had subscribed to several book clubs over the last few years. The only thing that he didn't like about them was when the book was too large to fit in the mailbox. It meant leaving work early in order to arrive at the post office before it closed for the day.

He would have to work over the next day and make up for the lost time. Dave was a Forest Ranger for the State of Florida. For almost four years now he had been working in the Southwest Florida area. The job consisted mostly of suppressing forest or vegetation fires, while the rest of his time was spent giving lectures to adults and school children about fire prevention and safety. Part of his time also included training new rangers and assisting the foresters in whatever project they were involved in, from the planting of young trees to marking fully developed ones for harvest. Dave couldn't think of a better feeling than the putting out of a wildfire, knowing he was solely responsible for saving someone's home. Or even just stopping it from spreading any further, destroying the vegetation that had taken so long to grow.

He drove his car into the parking lot and parked beside a beat-up pickup truck. It wasn't that old but did look like it had been abused. From the outward appearance, the driver probably used it more in the woods than on a highway. Dents covered it from end to end. Even the winch on the front was full of dead vegetation. As Dave walked past toward the door of the post office, he couldn't understand how anyone would pay good money for a 4x4 truck then abuse it. Standing in line waiting his turn, Dave looked at the other people, trying to pick out who was the driver of the truck.

He settled on a young boy wearing Levi's and a tattered cowboy hat. When Dave reached the window and the postman headed into the back section to locate the package, he watched the boy go outside and climb into the truck. Dave even noticed the large puff of smoke that came from the exhaust when the engine started up. Anyone could recognize that the engine was in bad shape, the same as the exterior. The driver pulled into the traffic with the tires smoking, just as the postman slid the package across the counter. From the shape of the box Dave knew it wasn't a book. After checking the name on the outside, he carried it out to the car. Along the way, he noticed, the canceled postmark was from Cleveland. He turned it in all directions, looking for an address, but to no avail. No place was there any indication as to whom it was from. Even the handwriting gave no hint as to its origin.

After starting up the engines and adjusting the air conditioner, Dave decided to wait until he was home before opening the package. During the drive home Dave tried to figure out what he had ordered

from Ohio. Also, if it was from a company, why wasn't there a return address? When curiosity got the best of him, Dave pulled off to the side of the road. The spot he chose was relatively remote. It was a turn around on the dead-end road where he lived. It was still another two miles to the house. The thought that the package could be from someone he had known up north made him feel he should open it before he showed it to his wife. Just in case it was nothing more than a joke or something out of his past, no one here knew about, and he might want it to remain that way.

While he pulled his pocket knife out of its pouch, he hoped that this was just a case where his imagination had gotten the best of him. It had been, what felt like ages ago, when he left Ohio, hoping that the change would allow him a fresh start. Since moving here, he had never discussed his past. He hadn't done anything illegal in Ohio. It was just that no one seemed the same after his return from Vietnam. They wanted him to conform and get into their routines without allowing for any changes. From such things as when he wanted to quit drinking and they would say "It won't hurt you" to planning his every weekend playing cards and drinking or bowling without exception.

When his first marriage hadn't worked out for several reasons, the others kept saying "Don't worry you'll get back together" or you'll find someone else and settle down". To them, life was so simple, just set a pattern and not let it change, no matter what. Dave just couldn't adjust to their routines and could not get them to understand. He felt their lifestyle was too boring, and unlike what he wanted out of life.

He had cut the tape on the box now and slowly opened it up. At first all he could see was the crushed-up newspapers. As he removed a layer, he noticed it was the "Chronicle-Telegram", the local newspaper from his hometown.

Several layers down, he found a letter fastened to the hunting knife he had carried throughout Vietnam. Under it was another memento he had left behind, the Airborne wings with L.R.R.P written across the top. He remembered how proud he was on the plane coming back from Vietnam in 1968, he and the others on board had it made it out alive. They thought there would be a parade or at least a cheering crowd waiting for the plane to arrive. Little did they know that no one would be there. Let alone that they would soon be called "baby killers" and spat upon just for wearing their uniform. Being a Vietnam veteran became a closely guarded secret. Rather than be hailed as warriors or returning heroes, nobody even wanted to hear their version of what they saw and least of all, about the problems of the South Vietnamese.

Unfolding a letter that had been inside also, several photos fell onto the seat. Dave picked them up but couldn't recognize the faces at first. The more he looked at them, the more he began to notice familiar features in the faces. Even before he began to read the letter, he knew these were his children and the handwriting was his ex-wife's. The package now made him feel uncomfortable, and he knew the meaning of "Pandora's Box".

This package had suddenly unleashed his past into the present. Now he was torn between tearing up the letter and the curiosity of why she had written to him after 12 years of no contact at all. He paused long enough to light a cigarette and wished he had a bottle of beer or anything that would ease the nervous feeling that had overcome his body.

Finally, he opened the letter and began to read it, at least he would know why she had written.

Hello Dave,

I assume you got the letter and package, or you wouldn't be reading this letter. The photos are of your children. You have missed a lot by not being around all these years.

Let me start by saying the children still bear your name, even though the last time we spoke, I told you my husband, Bill, planned to adopt them at the earliest convenience. We never pursued it, for many reasons, mainly financial. Maybe you knew, maybe not but this brings me to the reason for trying to get in touch with you.

Since you haven't been in contact with your children or anybody else that I know of, even your own family, and certainly haven't made any attempt to pay support, you don't know what's going on here.

There have been quite a few changes around here. The worst of which is the increasing amount of drugs, from the pill to grass. Even the schools are being searched at least once a month. Every time they confiscate quite a bit, which brings up the subject of this letter. Your son got involved with the wrong crowd and took some pills. He's all right now, but they damn near killed him. He still won't admit who gave them to him, nor does it seem he's stopped taking them.

I swore I'd never ask you for anything, but now I ask that since you refused to pay support or see the kids. I decided to send you the things you cherished from Vietnam in the hopes of you coming up here and trying to stop the drugs from getting into the hands of your children. That is if they mean anything to you. If not, then I understand why you've never tried to get in touch.

*The mother of your children,
Edna Bullock
5619 Chestnut Ridge
Beldon, Ohio
Phone 404-555-1618*

Dave read the letter a second time. His feelings varied from guilt to anger. The guilt came from his not seeing his kids all these years and wondering if he had stayed around if this would have happened. He was angry because Edna had promised that her new husband would adopt the children and raise them as a whole family, the right way. Now that things were out of control, she wanted someone to do the dirty work. Her sending him the Vietnam items made it seem even more ironic. First, the country called him to perform his duty, then

treated him like dirt upon his return; then Edna never said anything until she needed him to at least 'do his duty' as she puts it.

He sat there trying to decide what to do next. On one side he felt compelled to pack up and go. On the other hand, he felt his current wife and lifestyle were the key factors now. After all, if Edna and her husband couldn't control the situation in their home, how could he. Especially if he were to return after 12 years? He wouldn't even know where to start or who to talk to for information. Dave pondered it over in his mind as he packed everything back up and continued on his way home. Dave had already decided not to say anything to his wife, Karen, at least until he had weighed all the issues and made up his mind. Leaving the package in the trunk would ensure no questions until it was time.

When Dave arrived home, he didn't have much to say, and Karen didn't push the matter. She just believed he'd had a bad day and would be better the next morning. After supper, Dave sat outside contemplating the situation in his mind, quite oblivious to the fact that he was smoking long enough to leave a pile of cigarette butts beside his chair. The first indication of how long he had been sitting there was when the mosquitoes brought him back to the reality that it was dark out. It was at that point Dave went inside and fixed a ham sandwich and opened a can of Pepsi, then sat down and stared at, more than watched the television.

It was close to 11 PM when Dave went to bed only after taking a long hot shower to hopefully ease the stiffness in his neck. Karen could see something was definitely wrong and asked, "Did you have a bad day, or did something go wrong? Since you've been home, you haven't said ten words, and now it looks like you can't get comfortable."

Dave figured he at least owed her a decent answer, so he said, "It sure was a bad day. My neck is so sore and stiff, I can't relax enough to get to sleep. Sorry if I've seemed short with you, it's just that I've had a bad day and a lot on my mind. Please don't push the issue, because I'd rather not talk about it now. But when I'm ready, I promise we'll discuss it." "Okay," answered Karen, "How about if I rub the back of your neck and shoulders? Come on, roll over so I can get started."

Somewhat reluctantly, Dave turned over on his stomach. He could feel just how stiff and tensed up he was, as soon as Karen started. His mind wouldn't allow him to forget the problems that made him feel this way. But her touch was so nice and soothing. He didn't realize he had fallen asleep until the nightmare of Vietnam caused him to sit up in bed, with cold sweat covering his body.

The nightmares of his buddies dying or being blown up around him had never really stopped over the many years. But they had subsided for the most part. He didn't bother to turn on any lights, only settled into his favorite chair and smoked a cigarette.

He stared into the sky watching the stars twinkle and the glow of the moon, mixed with the dew on the vegetation. The combination created an almost magical effect. He couldn't think of anything more

beautiful and relaxing. For a short moment he even managed to forget the decision that could change his life. The sound from a passing plane and its flashing lights quickly changed that. The roar of the jet engines even brought back the memories of the nightmare he had been awakened from. It wasn't hard to be reminded of jet fighters coming in for air support when things became too rough for the ground troops to handle alone. The glare from the landing lights reminded him of the flash from the fighter's miniguns as it would swoop down for an attack. A passing truck even provided the appropriate background noise of weapons being fired in the distance. To this day, the sounds were so familiar that whenever a helicopter passed nearby, Dave would have to look up to see whether or not it was a gunship or a Medi-Vac coming in to provide assistance.

They say 'time heals all wounds' but to Dave time seemed to have forgotten about him. The wounds were more mental than physical. Maybe it was magnified by the non-acceptance by society, with their not recognizing the past efforts of those who had served in Vietnam. To date, most veterans Dave knew rarely discussed what really occurred while there. Besides, most Americans didn't truly want to know. This covered everyone from relatives to the Veteran's Administration. Leprosy seemed to be a much more desirable topic than relating to Vietnam. Even the media constantly picked up on any military action and would throw in a statement like "This is Israel's Vietnam," or "Do you feel like our covert involvement, will lead to another Vietnam?"

The living room clock was now showing 4:30 AM, so Dave quietly made his way back to the bedroom, and carefully slipped between the sheets. He didn't want to disturb Karen's sleep because of another nightmare. He lay there with his eyes shut for quite a while, occasionally checking the clock to see what time it was. The last time he remembered showing on the clock before the alarm went off at 7 AM, was 5:17. He had at least gotten some sleep that night. His morning shower helped take the cobwebs out of his head and relieve some of the stiffness he still had.

Dave never had been big on eating breakfast, so after getting dressed, he kissed Karen good-bye before she entered the bathroom to begin getting ready for work. Stepping out the front door and moving toward his car, Dave quickly had the image of the package and its contents back in his mind. Even after sleeping on it, he still wasn't any closer to making a final decision.

The fifteen-minute ride to work seemed to take forever that morning. For whatever reason the traffic seemed to get on his nerves more than ever. After parking his car, Dave went into the dispatch office to check out the day's schedule. One of the other rangers had already called in sick, so that left Dave to give a tour to some school's class trip. All he had to do was show them a film, then take them for a tour of the equipment. Dave had done over a hundred before, but now those with less seniority handled it most of the time.

Once the room was ready and the film was set up, Dave went back to his car and took another look at the package. He still had almost an hour before the students were due to arrive. After taking another quick look at the photos, he took the knife out of its sheath and examined it. Dave remembered how sharp it had been while in Vietnam

and how he had used it to kill several VC in order to save his life or protect a mission. Now it was all dull and tarnished. At least the sheath was still in good shape. Closing the trunk, Dave carried the knife back to the garage area to try and clean up the blade.

Upon entering the shop Dave stopped by to see the head mechanic and let him know what he was going to do. "Bob", he began, "is it all right if I borrow a few tools? I have an old knife that I'd like to clean up and sharpen."

"Sure," Bob said, "let's see what you have there." Dave handed the knife to him unsheathed and Bob looked it over carefully. "You sure have a lot of work cut out for yourself. Let me know when it's cleaned up and you've a new edge on it. I happen to have a good oilstone in my desk, and you're more than welcome to use it. If nothing else, leave the knife in my drawer, and I'll fool with it in my spare time."

"That would really be great", Dave said. "I'll hit it with the wire brush then take a fine-tooth file to it before using your stone. By then the school group should be here, so I'll stick in your drawer for safekeeping." With that, the two men went their separate directions, Bob to the bulldozer he was working on and Dave to the workbench. He finished for the most part by the time the school bus arrived. All that was left was the final edge. After placing it in Bob's desk drawer, Dave headed over to greet the teacher and her students.

Once the initial greetings were concluded, Dave led them into the classroom and asked that they please be seated. After going through the explanation about what forest rangers in his area did, Dave started the projector. He had seen the film more times than he cared to admit. Taking a seat at the rear of the room, Dave looked at the faces of the children. He wished that he'd stuck the photos in his pocket so he could take another look at them. The one thing that he did notice was how innocent-looking the children appeared to be, and yet they were within one year of his son's age.

Dave turned the lights back on after the film had ended, then moved to the front of the classroom. Even as the question and answer period continued, Dave thought about how, if they were taking drugs, what would happen to them. He then considered what their parents would do if they found out someone was selling drugs to their children. After the classroom session was over, Dave led them outside to show the equipment used for fighting fires.

He singled out the teacher for a moment while the children looked over the trucks and bulldozers. When he was sure they couldn't overhear, he asked, "Excuse me, I have a question for you. It may sound strange but please bear with me. Do these kids get around people with drugs? Or is the problem in the school system here?"

Without blinking an eye, she answered, "Sure, but we try to keep it to a minimum. We've caught students younger than these selling everything from marijuana to various pills. If we could at least slow down the influx, maybe the kids would stop before it is too late." She paused for a few minutes then went on, only this time, her voice

was much softer. "Last month we had two kids die from an overdose, and several others turn up sick from what turned out to be bad stuff. Someone had put in too heavy a dose when mixing the drugs up. All we can do is try to teach them not to take a chance. The sheriff's department can't keep drug-sniffing dogs on the campus forever. Either the parents complain, or the money is not there in the budget for that kind of enforcement. Most of the parents won't listen anyway. All they say is, 'It's not my child,' until it is too late.

He noticed the class was getting bored and a little rowdy, so he thanked the teacher and led them behind the shop to show off other equipment. He watched how they played yet paid attention to everything said. After the tour was completed and the kids had been loaded into the bus, Dave remained in view and waved as the children hollered -Thank You- and -Good-bye- as the bus left. Even the teacher had taken the time to thank him and said good-bye. When the bus was out of sight, Dave went back to the shop, stopping only long enough to get a Pepsi out of the machine.

Inside Bob's office, Dave found Bob working on his knife while trying to finish his ham sandwich. Between bites, Bob would methodically move the blade back and forth, ensuring the edge would receive the proper care. Bob stopped momentarily and said, "Here, take a look at how far I've gotten just messing around."

Dave took the knife in hand and very carefully placed his thumb onto the edge and moved it crossways to listen for the sound it made. Bob had brought the knife very close to the edge he was looking for. "Pretty Good", Dave said, then handed the knife back to Bob. "You do such good work I ought to let you let you finish the job and buy you a six-pack for your trouble."

It didn't take a second thought for Bob. "Fair enough. Tomorrow you bring a six-pack of Busch, and I'll have it ready. I can work on it while I watch TV tonight. It'll help the commercials go by quicker."

At that moment, the intercom buzzed. Bob answered it, then quickly hung the receiver back up. "Get your truck and report to dispatch. They have a fire for you. Be careful."

"Thanks," Dave said and turned to leave. He quickly checked the fuel and oil levels and made sure the bulldozer was adequately secure in place. After starting up the truck's engine, he waited for all the gauges to register their correct pressures. The only thing he had to wait on was the air pressure to build up for the brake's system. When it finally moved into the safety zone, Dave pulled up to the dispatch office. He climbed out, leaving the engine running to warm up even more.

He had no more than opened the door when the dispatcher spun around in his chair and said, "We received a call from one of the towers saying they had a lightning strike near Felda. I've already had two other towers triangulate it out and have it narrowed down to this area." He pointed to the location on the large map, then put a cut out of a small fire symbol containing a small magnet on the back to hold it in place.

Dave wrote down the coordinates on a small note pad, then stuck it in his pocket. "Have they said anything about the fire spreading since they first saw it?" he asked.

After calling the towers back and asking about any spreading, the dispatcher acknowledged their responses and didn't have to give Dave an answer. The large speakers enabled him to hear that the fire wasn't spreading right now.

Dave went back outside and climbed into his truck and proceeded towards the area of the fire. He'd been working as a ranger for several years now and knew both the regular highways and the dirt trails all over the county. He picked up the microphone and said he was '10-51'. It was more to test the radio than to tell them what they already knew.

The trip took almost 45 minutes. Luckily, Dave found a dirt road with a gate that seemed to lead in the general direction of the smoke. There wasn't any lock on the gate, just a chain wrapped around it several times. After opening the gate, he drove down the path until he could see the flames. Once he had called the dispatcher to let him know he'd arrived, Dave closed up the truck windows and unloaded the bulldozer.

Fighting this fire wasn't that difficult. The wind even cooperated by staying to a minimum. Dave had no more than made a complete trip around the fire when a sudden downpour came and held the remaining fire inside his fire lines. He called in to inform the dispatcher that the fire was out. He also let them know that he would be away from the radio for a short time while he estimated the number of acres involved.

Dave had stepped it off and estimated 15 acres and was about to call it in when he noticed a series of poles with what appeared to be a camouflaged net fastened to the top. Dave walked over to see just exactly what it was. He hadn't seen anything like this since Vietnam. They used the same procedure to cover gun emplacements from the enemy. The closer he came the clearer it became. He had discovered someone's pot farm.

Without hesitation, Dave ran back to his bulldozer and called the dispatcher and requested the forestry investigator contact him immediately. Two minutes later, the familiar voice came over the radio and asked, "What's the problem?"

After the radio became silent, Dave answered by saying, "I've got a present for you. I'd like you to come out here as soon as possible and bring whoever handles the drug cases in this area with you. If the fire had spread any further, half the county would have been high from the smoke. Do you get the drift of what I'm trying to say? I'd rather not go into any more detail over the radio, 10-4."

The investigator quickly figured out what Dave was hinting at and as he ran out to his vehicle, he told the dispatcher to call the Hendry County Sheriff's Office and have a Detective Thatcher meet him

at the site, then let Dave know he was on his way and not to move or let anyone near the area.

Dave finished loading the bulldozer onto the truck while he waited. He sat in the cab section just in case anybody tried to reach him on the radio. He wasn't the first person to find a hidden pot farm, nor was he the first ranger to do so. During the time he sat there, the more his thoughts again moved towards the possibility of going north. If nothing else, he could use the time to see his children and some of his old friends. The pot farm only made his anger towards pushers increase, especially when he thought of children being sold drugs. Adults, supposedly, at least knew the risks they took, but to allow innocent children to use them, let alone selling to them and creating an unforgivable habit. Dave had pretty well made up his mind to try and go north. Finding this crop only reinforced his belief that he should at least see if there was anything he could do to help out.

Both the investigator and the detective arrived at the same time. Dave showed them the exact location and assisted them in checking out just how big an area was involved. The set-up even had its own irrigation system powered by a 5hp generator. Whoever it was had certainly been there for quite a while. The fiberglass shelter for the fertilizer and the stack of discarded beer cans showed an aging that would have taken at least a year.

Three hours had passed since Dave first made the call for the investigator until he was told to start back towards the shop. Even the U.S. Customs agent that came out told Dave not to discuss the find with anyone. The forestry investigator said he would take care of all the paperwork, and to refer anybody with questions to him no matter who it was.

The drive back seemed to go quicker than it usually did. Dave was preoccupied with trying to determine the cost of the trip. He knew he had enough vacation and sick time saved up so that part was okay. It was the cost of the plane tickets and motel bill that concerned him.

The biggest worry Dave felt was trying to explain to Karen that he was taking a vacation without her. Let alone why he planned on doing it on such short notice. How he would come up with the money was also a concern, but he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

Once back at the forestry site, Dave drove his rig behind the shop so he would be able to wash off the bulldozer. He backed the bulldozer off the truck and onto the concrete slab. After using the water hose, he left it to dry off. He then went to wash his hands and change into a clean shirt. He asked Bob if it was alright to leave the bulldozer there while he went up to the main office. Bob just shook his head in a quick yes motion, then went back to what he was doing.

In the main office, Dave asked the secretary, "Is the District Forester in? I want to speak with him if I may, that is, if he's not busy."

Rising from behind her desk and moving towards the inner office door she said, "Mr. Busch is in, but let me see if he can see you now." After giving a quick knock on the door frame, she disappeared from Dave's view, only to return a few moments later and say, "He'll see you now."

Dave no more than passed through the doorway when Mr. Busch greeted him. His hand was outstretched as he said, "Congratulations on both the fire and the find you made today. I talked to Ed on the phone and got all the details."

"Thank you," Dave replied. "I hope you still feel that way after I ask you for a favor. I'd like to take a short vacation for personal reasons, starting this weekend. I've checked my record and have more than three months sick-leave and a month and a half of vacation time saved up."

Looking somewhat confused, Mr. Busch sat back in his chair. He fumbled with several papers on his desk before saying anything. After all, it wasn't everyday one of his men asked for time off for personal reasons right after getting congratulated for a good job. Realizing Dave wasn't just going to give up and disappear, he looked up from his desk and said, "Can I ask you why you need the time off so suddenly? And just how long do you wish to take off?"

There was no way Dave could explain what the true reason was. "All I can say, sir, is that I request it for personal reasons. I have to go back north to take care of a family problem. As far as time, I'd like 30 days or a month; however you wish to put it."

Mr. Busch answered, "I'll respect your statement about it being for personal reasons. You've always been a good employee, and if you have as much time as you say, it certainly shows that you don't take any time off unless it's necessary. Let me check on the work schedule and I'll try to give you my answer before quitting time today. I can't see any problem in honoring your request."

Dave thanked him and left the office. He went back to the shop to reload the bulldozer and fuel up both before parking the rig back on the ready line. Once that was done, he removed a Pepsi from the vending machine then sat down in the small room. The rangers had fixed it up and picked up some old furniture from the flea market. The sofa had a few holes in it and the chair had to have new legs made. Even though the items were used, it was sure nice to have a comfortable place to relax during lunch or after a fire. Someone else had brought in a chess set, while another supplied a radio, making the entire room rather relaxing.

About an hour later, another ranger came in and joined him. Jim had been on another fire in the opposite direction from Dave. The two of them sat there for a while without saying anything. The peace and quiet was always nice after fighting a fire. Jim finally spoke, "Care to try a game of chess or two?"

Dave nodded and helped set the pieces in their correct places. Whoever had played last never bothered to reset the board. As the game progressed, Dave asked, "Well, how many acres was your fire?"

Jim replied, "About 25. It was all easy stuff. Hardly any of it was in heavy material. How about you? I heard you call for the investigator. Find something?"

Dave knew better than to say anything even to Jim, so he replied by saying, "Just some signs that someone had been there recently. Besides, Ed needs something to do. He hates sitting in his office. Mine was only 15 acres, about three-quarters of it was in heavy timber. I got lucky and a quick downpour finished it off."

It wasn't too much later that someone came over the loudspeaker telling Dave to report to the main office. Dave finished the last of his soda and tossed the empty can into the trash barrel as he headed out the door. He still wasn't totally sure if he really wanted to go back up north or not. Should Mr. Busch tell him he couldn't have time off, that would at least give him an excuse not to go.

The reverse happened. Mr. Busch said, "Well, I've checked the schedule and made all the necessary adjustments for you to receive the time off. I'll only ask two things of you. Since this is already Wednesday, finish out the week. Second, and most importantly, remember if there is anything, I can do to help resolve your problem, let me know, and I'll do what I can."

"Thank you, but it's just something I have to work out myself. There is one thing though, if you would arrange it so my wife could pick up my check while I'm gone. She's never met my family and with her working, she'll be staying home. If I happen to get back sooner or if things are worse than I expected, I'll give you a call. Hopefully, it won't be a month and I can get back to work and save time for an occasion I can enjoy."

"The check is no problem," he began, "If she has any problems, just tell her to call and ask for me. You just remember if you need anything, even if it's only someone to talk to, I'm here. Now, go over to the dispatch and make sure all your fire reports are up-to-date and have all the information listed correctly."

"Yes, Sir," Dave said. "And thanks again for your assistance. I'll get on the reports right away." Outside Dave breathed a sigh of relief, then headed over to the dispatch office to double-check his reports. He spent the rest of the day working on the radio, helping out the dispatcher and completing his reports.

The drive home didn't seem to take as long as usual. Maybe it was the fact that he had to tell Karen he was leaving. Hopefully, when that time came, she wouldn't put up too much of a fuss. The trick was getting her to understand about him going alone. So as not to upset her, all he planned on telling her was he just wanted to see a few relatives and old friends. After all, he hadn't been back during the last few years. The only contact had been the exchange of Christmas cards. The only exception occurred if someone died. Even then it was only a short note.

Once home, Dave saw Karen hadn't arrived ahead of him. She must have decided to take care of some shopping or an errand of some type. He went from room to room and opened all the windows. Any breeze, no

matter how slight, could help push the stale air out. Next, he went into the spare room and after moving several cartons out of the way, located the suitcase he planned to use for his trip. Laying it upon the bed, he opened it up and began thinking of what items would be necessary for the trip.

The first thing to be placed inside was the camouflage shirt from the cedar chest. It wasn't the original he had worn in Vietnam, but he had obtained all the same patches and sewn them on. Dave generally only wore it on hunting trips. It had plenty of pockets and felt quite comfortable. Besides, it was a nostalgia item to him and reminded him of his old friends in Vietnam.

Next, he put in his address book. Most of the names and addresses were probably out of date, but it would at least give him a starting point. Hopefully, if he required anything while up there, someone might be able to assist him one way or another. Dave carefully checked out each item of clothing as he placed it inside. All that was left would be the knife from Bob.

After closing it up, he went back into the living room and proceeded to compose a list of things he needed to have done before leaving. He also made a list of expenses for the trip. The total came to over \$2,000. That amount would allow for everything. He already had \$800 in his savings account for a start. He set that list aside and went back to do what needed to be completed. Checking the plane schedules, motel room, etc.

Hearing Karen drive into the yard, Dave flipped the note pad shut and went outside to greet her.

"Hi, I've got groceries." Then she reached across and unlocked the car door to the passenger side. Once inside they spent the next few minutes putting the food away. When that task was completed, the two of them sat down to eat the food she had brought home from McDonald's. Dave looked over from where he was sitting and said, "I got a letter from Ohio. It came yesterday."

"Oh yeah, who from?" as she went back to eating her hamburger. Dave hesitated and took a short breath, "My ex-wife...She sent me a photo of the kids." He watched her face for any change in expression, but none occurred. After all, Dave had told her about her and his past, just so there would never be any surprises.

There was a tone of bitterness in her reply. "What made her write to you after all these years? She never made any attempt before this; I suppose she wants money now."

Dave didn't want to start any arguments. "No, she didn't come right out and say money was the reason. But she did say the kids were never adopted, so their still legally mine."

"I'm going to say something and get it over with. I'd like to see them, so I've made arrangements to take some of my vacation time at work. I'd like to go. I haven't been back in all these years. So, I don't know how it will go. To be honest, I'm starting out with the intention of not telling anyone I'm there. Only when and if I

feel the time is right, will I let anyone know."

"The kids certainly don't know me, and I imagine no one else will since, A) None of them have seen me in all these years, and B) By not telling anyone I'm back, they won't be looking for me. You have to understand; it's just something that I have to do and on my own. Can you follow what I'm getting at, and how I feel about doing it on my own?"

Karen had finished eating her food and just gathered up all the wrappers. She didn't say a word until she returned from the kitchen with another soda in hand. Sitting back down, she looked straight into Dave's eyes and said, "Okay, I think I can understand your reasons...But what about the cost? There can't be over \$1,000 in our joint account. My own savings account is down to 6 or 7 hundred. What about your account?"

Surprisingly to Dave, it seemed that Karen was going to accept his going north alone. He told her the amount in his bank account and how much he estimated would be required for the trip. She immediately offered him the money from her account and the joint savings. But he replied, "For now, I'd like to try and come up with the money without using your account or our joint savings. Even though you say the money is as much mine as it is yours, I still feel this is my project and am going to try and come up with the money myself."

Karen answered, "It's up to you, just remember the money is there should you decide to use it. What about my helping pack your clothes and make any reservations you need? I'll check around with different airlines. Sometimes you can get a special rate."

Dave still wasn't sure how to handle the ease in which she had agreed that the trip was okay. All he could do was hope she was truly sincere and as understanding as it appeared. "I've already packed what I felt I would need. I would appreciate you going through them and just double-check everything for me. If you will take care of the plane reservations and picking up the tickets, that will leave me enough time to take care of a few matters before I do leave. Try and make the reservations for Sunday morning or early Monday. The drive from Cleveland used to take a couple of hours, so that will leave me enough time to rent a car and a motel room before it's too late in the day."

"Tomorrow after work I'll probably be home late. I'm going to take a few things into town and see if I can get a few bucks for them. I know you put a sentimental value on most things, but I don't. My two best pistols ought to get me another 500 hundred bucks. That with the 8 hundred in my savings account will get me close to what I need. For the car rental, it's okay with you, I'd like to use my credit card and make the payments after I'm back. You're sure this trip is still okay with you? I realize it may seem strange for me to want to go back after all these years."

"You're right," she said. "I'd rather you came up with the money without selling any of your possessions. But that's up to you, and no, it doesn't seem strange to me about your wanting to go back. I've expected you to do just that long before this. I do understand your

wanting to go alone. Even you said you didn't know how the trip would go. Just make sure you call me every few days and let me know how you're doing. As you know, I'll be concerned about how you're doing and how everyone reacts to your being back."

"Don't worry, I already planned on calling every few days." He tried to reassure her as best he could. "I'll call as soon as I'm in and give you the phone number where I'll be staying. Please don't worry about me. I grew up in that area and know how tough it can be. I don't plan on making any trouble. All I want to do is take a look around. If I get up the nerve, I'll call my ex-wife and ask about seeing the kids. Maybe I'll even see a few old friends, possibly even a relative or two. The kids certainly don't know who I am, even a photo of me would have to be several years old and I have changed quite a bit." The two of them discussed some of the good and bad aspects of his proposed trip.

Afterwards Karen went into the spare room and repacked the suitcase. She never did like the way Dave packed things. He always managed to get everything wrinkled whenever he did it. That night neither one of them slept well but didn't want to say anything to the other for fear of upsetting them. It was raining the next morning, so that didn't make the new day any brighter.

Dave stopped on the way to work and picked up Bob's six-pack and had them double bag it. All either of them needed was to have the state find alcoholic beverages on the job and they'd both be out of work.

Bob had done an excellent job on the blade and had even taken saddle soap to the sheath. Dave gave him the paper sack and Bob quickly locked it up in his truck's toolbox. The rain continued all day, so Dave helped Bob in the shop since it was too wet for anything else.

The gun shop gave him a little more than he'd expected for his pistols. It seemed the demand had increased lately for good used guns. Just for the hell of it, Dave decided to stop by a used car lot where he knew the owner fairly well. He had planned on it being a friendly visit, but when he climbed out of the car he heard, "You want to sell that toy of yours, I'll make you a good deal."

Even before he looked up, Dave knew it was Harry's voice. Harry had been trying to buy his car for a long time. He knew Camaro's always brought a good price, and Dave's was a 1970 in great condition. He had taken the time to restore it one piece at a time. Even the engine had been rebuilt by himself to ensure a good job.

Dave was more joking than serious when he answered. "Sure \$3,000 and it's yours." He felt Harry would never pay that much. After all, he only had a little over \$1,200 invested minus labor.

Harry didn't even hesitate. "Take me for a ride around the block."

"Are you serious?" Dave asked as Harry went around to the passenger side and climbed in.

"Darn right I'm serious," Harry said after they were both seated. "I've had too many people looking for Mustangs and Camaro's to let it slide. I'm in business to make money, so I go where the market is the best."

After the drive Dave pulled into the car lot near the front door because of the rain. Inside the two of them discussed the details over a soda. Harry was serious, and they settled on a price of \$2,200. He even agreed that Dave could wait till Saturday before dropping off the car and title. Dave asked if it would be all right to take the check to the bank beforehand to have the cash for his trip that weekend. Harry agreed. He knew Dave well enough to trust him, and they would meet again that Saturday morning at the lot.

Even after cashing the check, Dave couldn't believe he'd sold his car. But right now, the money was more important. Besides, he could find another car after he returned from the trip. The money eased his mind. At least that would no longer be of concern. All he had to do now was explain it to Karen. He was sure that wouldn't set too well.

By the time Saturday came, Dave, with Karen's help, had made all the necessary arrangements. She even accepted his selling the car and made a few suggestions about getting another when he returned. The only planned use of a credit card would still be for a rental car because they had found out no one would rent a car for cash. It would also allow for more leeway in his pocket money. Karen had picked up a money belt rather than have Dave carry all that cash in his wallet.

They spent the evening discussing the what-ifs should something go wrong at either end. Dave still hadn't told her the whole reason behind his going. He felt it would only make her worry much more than necessary. He still wasn't sure if he could do anything, or would for that matter. There probably wasn't anything he could do. At least he would see his kids, even if it was at a distance. Only when the time came would he know for sure.

Chapter II

The view from a plane always fascinated Dave. Massive clouds billowing in all directions opening so he could see the terrain below. Each time he was amazed at how the farmland seemed to be painted ever so neatly. This trip he noticed how the farther north the plane went, the darker the clouds were above the cities. Maybe it was his awareness from working on the ecological side with forestry. It could just be he was spoiled from looking at the bright blue skies of Florida over the last few years. Dave was glad he lived there with the beautiful warm winters and the almost constant breeze. The only time the sun was even dimmed was during the heaviest thunderstorms.

As the plane came into the Atlanta airport for its final approach, the airport seems encased in a bubble of pollution. When the air pressure was equalized, the smell was far from the air of Florida. He tried to convince himself it was only the airport and not the city, but he knew in reality it was the city with its factory smells.

After a brief stop, the plane was airborne again. It took several minutes for the air conditioner to remove the foul odors of Atlanta's busy airport.

The final leg of the journey into Cleveland was a bit bumpy. The pilot had explained it as air currents. Flying never had bothered Dave. There had only been one incident that even brought a concern to him. That was the last flight out of Vietnam by helicopter. Ten minutes out of Bien Hoa the pilot had said they were receiving enemy fire from below. The helicopter made several passes over the same area before continuing on its way. The entire time Dave kept telling the door gunner that he was on his way home and this was not the time for them to be looking for VC.

The car rental agency was very co-operative. They even gave him a map of Cleveland and the surrounding area. The only problem was that all the highway names had changed, and the numbers were unfamiliar to him. Dave ended up getting lost and asking directions from several service stations before finding his way to the turnpike. At least it was still the same. Just to be safe, he asked the toll attendant which exit was for Elyria. Dave made it off the exit without any difficulty and found the motel Karen had made reservations for him.

Driving into the parking lot, he noticed how the exterior had deteriorated over the years. The last time he had seen the motel it had been one of the better ones in town. Even as he tried the key in the lock on the door, the lack of care was evident. It took several moments of wiggling the key before it finally opened. Inside the walls showed their age and the room smelled musty. After turning the air conditioner on full blast, Dave sat down on the edge of the bed and picked up the phone and waited for the desk to answer.

Dave asked the young lady to please dial his home phone of (941)555-1573 collect. After assuring Karen that the trip had gone quite well so far, he hung the phone back up and laid back onto the bed. Dave needed a short rest before going out to find a place to eat and have a look around at the town.

It was already dark out when Dave woke up. He quickly took a shower and changed clothes before leaving. Driving down the main street was quite saddening as most of the buildings showed signs of neglect. While many had been torn down or simply boarded up, most of the bars were still there, changing only in name and not location. Dave had put a pair of old denims and a light jacket to hopefully blend in with the crowd. The dress code, as it be, never changed among the bar crowd - only the faces.

He chose a place he knew used to serve a fairly good hamburger. Inside the smoke-filled room he saw that most of the faces certainly seemed a lot younger than he was. Dave stopped at the counter and asked if they still served food. After it had been established that they still did, Dave placed his order and pointed to an empty booth where he would be sitting near the pool table.

While waiting for his food, Dave watched the pool game in progress. The smell of marijuana became more evident. It was a smell that needed no introduction. Looking around he became more aware of how many people were smoking the wrinkled joints. The thing that disturbed him the most was how casually it seemed to be accepted and openly flaunted. He knew people who smoked it back in Florida, but not so openly in a public place.

Dave sat there eating his sandwich, smiling ever so slightly whenever someone looked his way. He searched the crowd for a familiar face. The only thing he detected were certain features that appeared in some individuals. The last winner at the pool table began calling out "Next", but to no avail. Dave stood up and said, "I'd like to try, but be nice. I haven't played in a while."

"No problem," the boy said with a gigantic grin. "You do know it's five bucks a game and the winner breaks?"

"Sounds a little high," Dave said, "but I guess it won't hurt. I suppose I have to rack too?"

"Yep," was the only reply. The boy moved into position to break the balls. After Dave racked the balls, he chose a cue stick from the rack on the wall, over half of which either had no tips or were so crooked it was pathetic. He finally settled on one with a slow curve and a solid tip. The boy bent down and eyed up his first shot, pausing only long enough to nod at someone near the bar.

Five games later the boy was starting to call Dave a hustler. He hadn't won a single game and several people had moved closer to improve their view. Dave felt he was just lucky. It had been a long time since he'd played. But he had been very good and as far as he was concerned this boy was not a good player. Dave knew better than to continue winning if he wanted to stay around. He turned to the boy and said, "Listen, I got lucky and you can have the table back. I'm

going to quit while I'm still ahead." He turned toward the cue rack and reached to put the stick in its holder. Suddenly he recognized a sound that always stayed in the back of his mind. He quickly turned around to locate the source of the haunting click.

"Hold it fool!" the boy yelled out. "You ain't hustling me and walking out with my bread."

The light from above the pool table reflected off the steel of the switchblade. Two others had moved into a position behind the young boy, while the rest of the crowd moved back. Dave looked straight into the faces of all three. He could see the sweat glistening on their necks. Even though they acted tough, he knew fear was still in their minds and making them nervous.

Dave's voice never faltered as he spoke. "I want you to listen very carefully. If necessary, read my lips. You put that toy away and I'll promise not to shove it up your ass. Make sure your two playmates understand, in whatever language they speak, that they better go sit down or I'm liable to get angry. And believe me, you won't like it if I do."

The two in back slowly moved away while the boy in front started to lower the knife. Then, without warning, he lunged forward at Dave's stomach. Reacting almost perfectly Dave turned sideways and grabbed the boy's wrist, shoving it downward. This caused the boy to tumble into the wall and drop his knife onto the floor. Dave reached down and picked up the knife and shoved it deep into the wall with a sideways motion snapping off the blade. Finally, he tossed the handle to the bartender, while keeping one eye on the boy still sitting on the floor.

Slowly the boy started to rise when someone stepped over and put a foot on his lap. The action caused him to flop back to the hard-dirty floor.

"AH--AH-AAHHH, I don't think you want to do that now, do you?" Dave didn't recognize who it was, but right now any help would be greatly appreciated.

The bartender moved among them with a baseball bat in hand. He grabbed the boy by the shirt collar and jerked him clean off the floor. Heading towards the door he told the boy not to come back again or he would call the police. Dave still stayed on the defensive while the other two moved from where they were standing and headed to the door. The stranger held his hands up and slowly moved closer to Dave.

Still leery of the stranger Dave said, "Thanks for your help," while watching for any sudden movements.

"No problem," was the reply, "Aren't you Dave?"

"My name's Dave, but who are you? I don't think I know you."

"I guess you wouldn't, he said, "My brother is Colin Jones. You used to visit our house when I was smaller. It's been a long time

since anyone's heard from you. Everybody took it for granted that you were dead. Let's find a place to sit down and I'll buy you another of whatever you're drinking."

The two of them moved over to an empty booth and sat down. "I'll have a Pepsi." The stranger identified himself as Danny and ordered a beer for himself and Dave his Pepsi.

Remembering just who it was Dave said, "I guess it has been a long time. The last time I remember seeing you, you barely came up to my belt. I think you've grown a little since then. Before I forget, thanks for your help over there. But I could have handled it. After all he didn't seem so tough. What's your brother doing these days?"

"Colin's laid off from U.S. Steel right now. I've been working as a carpenter for a local contractor. Both of us are married now and have children. Colin's got three and I've got two myself. What brings you back? It certainly isn't the view."

"I don't know if you remember or not," Dave began. "But I have a couple of children, too. I came back to see how they're doing. I may not let them know who I am, but I got tired of not knowing what they're like. I thought they'd been adopted when I left, but I found out differently just recently. What the hell happened to this town, let alone this place? I sure don't remember the people being like this."

Danny didn't even hesitate, "Most of the big factories closed up or shut down for what they called a major layoff. That left a lot of people out of work with nothing to do. The drugs were already around and it became a way to make money. Especially for those who used up all their unemployment and didn't have any place to reapply. Shit. Half of them wouldn't even have considered being involved in crime 6 years ago. Now anyone of them will take the risk for a few bucks. At least in jail they know they'll get three squares and a bed. Besides, most of the time the bad guy gets away. The cops have more than they can handle. If it's not easy to solve, they set it aside hoping something will come up on its own."

"What the hell are you doing in here then?" Dave asked. "I came in here because I didn't know things had changed, but you should know better."

"Habit," Danny replied. "I still come in every so often looking for guys I went to school with. I just got used to stopping after work and never quit. I don't come as much as I used to. Tonight, was a fluke. Usually it's Friday when I stop by. Luckily, I did. It gave me the chance to meet you again. Listen, why don't you come over to the house tomorrow night. I'll call Colin and we'll all have dinner together. Where are you staying so I can get in touch with you? If you need anything while you're here, just let me know and I'll try and help. Right now, I better get home to my wife before I get in trouble there." Danny quickly wrote down his name and address on a book of matches, then slid it across to Dave.

"Thanks for the offer." Dave was grateful and decided to try it. "I'll be over about six-thirty, OK? I'm staying at the Slumberland,

room 212. If you do call and if I'm not there at least leave a message so, I'll know you called."

The two men walked outside where they parted company. Dave took a drive through town before going back to his motel. The darkness revealed how many streetlights were broken, plus the number of businesses who were still in the downtown area with double locks and steel bars for security. It wasn't until just before he reached the motel that he passed a police car. Inside there were two men. The passenger kept his eye on Dave until another call must have come across the radio, because suddenly the lights came on and they sped off into the night.

Early the next morning Dave put the items he would need for the day into the trunk and drove out to the area his children now lived in. The scenery was still somewhat familiar. The only major difference was the addition of a few more homes, plus several small gas stations already closed up. Those that were still in business showed signs of having their names changed. Dave kept checking the mailboxes to see how close he was to his destination. Only about every sixth mailbox had any numbers on it.

After reaching several mailboxes with higher numbers, Dave went a short distance further before finding a suitable place to turn around. There was another gas station near the area of the correct number he was looking for. After parking the car off to one side, he went inside to purchase a soda and survey the area. Not recognizing anyone, he returned to the car and sat inside. From the number on the service station Dave settled on two houses directly across the street, as being the place, he was looking for.

He spent most of the afternoon watching for any activity from either house. Both had children running around their yards, but the distance was too great for him to make out their faces enough to match the photos. It was close to four-thirty when he decided to drive to the nearest store and purchase a pair of binoculars. By five o'clock he was back, only this time he parked a little further down the road, in the parking lot of a furniture store. From its outward appearance, Dave assumed it had been closed for quite some time. He left the car beside the building with the hood open, just in case anyone did notice him they would assume he was there with car trouble.

The binoculars served their purpose and allowed him to determine exactly which house it was. He even caught a glimpse of Edna. Even though she had put on at least thirty pounds, he could still identify her. Checking his watch, Dave saw that it already six-fifteen, so he returned to the car and drove to Danny's house. This time he didn't have any difficulty locating the right house. Both the name and number appeared on the mailbox.

Before he was all the way out of the car, Danny and Colin had come out to greet him. Colin looked slightly different with a mustache, but for that matter, Dave had grown a full beard since their last meeting.

Aside from Danny having grown taller, it seemed only months had passed instead of the years. Once the introductions to the respective

wives and children were over, they all sat down to eat. Afterwards the three men went down in the basement to talk about all the things that had occurred during the passing years while Dave was gone.

Finally, the subject changed to why Dave had truly come back to the area. When Dave explained the letter, he had received from Edna, both Colin and Danny acknowledged concern about the drug problem. They were very worried about how their own children might be affected. Neither of them knew of any solution, except to 'take care of anyone' who even tried to sell drugs to their family.

When Dave asked exactly what that meant, their reply was to make sure whoever it was knew to stay away from the Jones family, even if it meant beating it into them. That was when Dave took the initiative to ask them outright, "Do you know anyone involved in the drug trade? Just maybe I can get a lead to the inside. Then I can use what the army taught me to at least put a dent in their business. If nothing else, I might get lucky enough to make them move to another area. Or make sure the cops catch them red-handed."

The two brothers looked puzzled at first. Then Colin said, "Yeah, I know a couple of dudes who are dealing. They keep trying to get me involved in helping, especially after my unemployment ran out. I could mention to them about how broke I'm getting see if they still offer me a job."

Danny jumped in with, "I know where the planes make some of the drops at. I found it while I was out hunting one day. They didn't see me hiding in the woods nearby. At first, I thought it was a game warden, so I hid. I didn't want to get caught hunting out of season. They get on us hard."

"Okay then," Dave began, "let's do this. Danny, you get a map and show me where you saw that plane land. Colin, you find out about the people you know. But remember this, if they get suspicious, you can get hurt bad, so be careful what you say. Just maybe, if we find out when a drop is going to occur, we can surprise them. Tomorrow I'll check out the area where Danny saw them and tomorrow evening, we'll meet at my motel room to see what information we all have. It's probably a long shot, but what the hell have we got to lose? Besides they can't call the cops and complain."

They spent almost an hour going over the map Danny had pulled out and working out stories for their wives. They certainly couldn't tell them the truth, so it was decided to keep the story of old friends just getting together. Dave and Colin, with his family, all left at the same time after thanking Danny and his wife for the meal.

While driving back to the motel, Dave thought about what he was getting the two brothers involved in, and just what the consequences would be if they were caught. He knew the smugglers played for keeps, but he had learned to play for keeps against the VC. The part that worried him the most was Danny and Colin. All they had ever been were hunters, not the hunted.

Dave was glad to see the morning sun. He'd spent the last two hours sitting in the chair of his motel room. The nightmare that woke

him up seemed like only yesterday, not years before. His patrol was being pursued by the VC, and every time they felt it was safe, Charlie would cut loose with automatic weapon fire. It took them over four hours to reach safety and carrying the wounded hadn't helped make the journey any easier. Only after reaching the base camp did they find out it was a whole company of VC chasing them.

Even his heart slowed down to a normal pace as the sunlight shined through the window. When he first woke up the sweat covered his body, and his heartbeat as it did when you ran the last hundred yards, only to collapse from exhaustion, causing the medics to carry them the last few feet into the compound. Now he was about to try and beat the odds again, being outnumbered and willing to take on the enemy. Only this time he also knew the back roads and trails. He'd spent most of his younger days hunting and camping the area they were using. Hell, he knew spots in the river a man could cross on foot. There were a few small islands in the river that weren't even on the map.

Dave drove out to the location Danny had marked off on the map. He remembered what the area had been like before, but now he needed to see if any changes had occurred. The only change he could see was the area was now covered in weeds, not the rich farmland it had once been. He drove down a dirt path as far as he dared. All he needed was to get stuck out here in a rental car. Finally, he parked beneath several huge maple and pine trees, walking the rest of the way in.

Eventually, he located the makeshift landing strip Danny had described. Dave found several small marijuana plants sprouting where seeds had fallen from the bales. Examining the area further, he located where the trucks came in through the woods. There were even current signs where several vehicles had waited, hidden by the overhead growth of the foliage. Cigarettes and plastic cigar tips that couldn't have been more than a few days old were scattered on the ground where several people had waited for a long period of time.

During the time Dave was exploring, Colin had driven out to the tavern at the intersection of route 57 and 76. He knew the two men always stopped in for lunch between eleven-thirty and one o'clock Monday through Saturday, with very few exceptions. Colin no more than stepped inside and was waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness when he heard, "Colin, over here." Colin recognized the voice as that of Tony, one of the two men he was seeking. Moving in the direction of the voice, Colin could see both men seated in a booth. Tony was sliding against the wall and motioning for Colin to sit down.

"Hey how you are doing?" Tony began. "Can I buy you lunch or at least something to drink?"

"I'll take a beer," he replied. "How you doing Stan? Haven't seen the two of you in a coon's age. Still trying to make a million bucks?"

Stan grinned and sat back as he took a sip of his beer, then said. "Nah, gave up on the first mill and started on the second. This time I'll make it. You still out of work? We're still looking for help if you've changed your mind."

"I'm not really sure," he said. "The money part sounds good, but it still makes me leery when I think about getting caught. All I need is a record and then I'll never get a decent job again. Let alone what my old lady will do if I go to jail."

"Don't worry," Tony quickly cut in. "If you do get caught and it's your first time, all you get is probation. Besides, we have a good attorney working with us."

This time Stan spoke, "Tell you what. Tomorrow's already set up. But Monday why don't you just ride along and see how easy things go? Then you can make up your own mind. We plan everything out to the last detail, so even if something does go wrong, nobody gets caught. Meet us here Monday for lunch and we'll give you a meeting place. It will be a location where we can pick you up for that night."

Without hesitation, Colin answered. "Sounds fair to me. I'll think it over this weekend and let you know Monday. Here right?"

"Yep, here at lunchtime," Stan said. After finishing his beer, Colin thanked the two men and left. Outside, he breathed a sigh of relief while he unlocked the door to his car. Feeling that things had gone well, Colin headed back to town to run a few errands before going home.

That evening the three men met in Danny's garage. While Colin explained the meeting with the two men, Dave was busy making notations on the map and a list of items that would be needed. Danny went to the small refrigerator and brought out a dish of sandwiches and some cold beers. Even Dave was willing to have a beer. Hopefully, it would put him more at ease.

After Colin had finished his explanation, Dave went on to explain the notations he had made on the map and what he found that day. Then Danny said, "Both of you have something to do. What about me? I'd like to do something to help out."

"Don't worry," Dave began. "I've made a list of things we'll need, most of which you'll have to make." He reached across the table and handed the list to him. While Danny looked over the list and several sketches Dave had made, Dave went on to say, "Now let's look at it openly. They said everything was set for tomorrow. So, let's assume they're planning to use the same place I looked at today. I would imagine they have several drop zones to keep from being detected. If nothing else to keep people from reporting a lot of suspicious activity to the cops."

After a short pause, he went "Danny, since we're here, make a list of any weapons you have in the house. Just for the hell of it, tomorrow night one of you and I will drive out there and see how they conduct a drop. We'll set up for an ambush, but if it looks too hairy, we won't use it. Now, I don't have anyone to answer to here, but you do. So, decide which one of you will go along. In the morning I'll stop by a radio shop and pick up two good walkie talkies and extra batteries."

Colin interrupted, "Listen, since I'm not working, how about my being the one to go with you. I'll meet you at your motel in the morning and we'll spend the day getting ready. I'm bored with sitting around the house. It'll be nice to have something to do."

Dave no more than agreed, when Danny asked them to follow him into the basement. Sitting at his workbench, the two men watched as Danny began piling weapons onto the floor in front of them. Dave motioned for him to stop and said, "All I said was for you to make a list. You didn't have to dig all this out."

"No problem. It's a damn sight easier to pull the stuff out than to make a list. This way you can see what's here. Remember this is a hunting family," Danny replied, then moved over to a wooden cabinet and unlocked the door before stepping back.

Inside Dave could see exactly what he wanted. He immediately stood up and moved over to the locker and removed the item that caught his attention. It was a crossbow, very similar to the one he had used in Vietnam. Aside from the string being slightly frayed it looked fine. He brought it up to his shoulder several times to get the feel of its balance.

Danny reached inside and removed a quiver full of arrows with a new string taped to the side. "I like it too, but it's illegal to hunt with here. But I do a lot of target shooting whenever I can."

Dave said, "This is exactly what I need. It's quiet and accurate. I'll take this and the forty-five automatic. If push comes to shove, the forty-five will make them think I have a cannon. Do you have any extra clips and a box of shells for it?"

Showing a big smile Danny reached deep inside again, coming up with two extra magazines and a box of ammo. "Anything else you need?"

While Dave and Danny struggled with the crossbow replacing the frayed string with the new one, Dave asked, "What about you, Colin?"

"I'll get my three-fifty-seven and my compound bow. That will keep us armed the same. Just in case I'll stick my thirty-thirty in the trunk. How's that sound to you?" Colin asked.

"Sounds fine to me," Dave replied. "If we get a chance, I'd like to find a place to practice a little before we go out there."

"Don't worry," Colin began. "I know a good place where no one will complain about the noise. I'll keep everything in my trunk over night. That way you won't have to worry at the motel."

"Fine. Then all we have to do is hope things go off as planned." Turning to Danny, Dave said, "Do you think you can have some of the items on the list ready by tomorrow night? Do you need any money to cover any expense?"

"Probably! It should be a slow day at work. I shouldn't need any money. If I don't have it here, I can swipe it at work. I even have several one-pound cans of gunpowder and all you have is one on

the list. I take it you'll stop by before going out there tomorrow night."

"I hope so," Dave replied. "I would like to be there at least an hour before dark, that way we can be all set up and be waiting when and if they arrive. I would imagine they won't even come near the place until one hour before the plane comes in. Just as a guess, I'd say probably around midnight, after most people have gone to bed for the night. No one would be ambitious enough to see what's going on if they did hear a noise. Especially if they're doing this as often as it appears."

Once everything was loaded into Colin's trunk, they left Danny's to go home for the night. Neither Colin nor Danny slept well that night. Dave entered his motel room and methodically laid out all the clothes he would need for the next day, then took a hot shower, and went to bed where he slept the entire night.

He woke up refreshed the next morning. After putting a few items into his camouflage shirt, he finished getting dressed, then wrapped his knife inside the jacket and carried it down to his car. Back in his room, Dave sat watching the television while waiting for Colin to arrive.

It was a little after nine when he heard a knock on the door. Dave opened it, and as Colin entered, Dave asked, "Any problem with your wife about being out tonight?"

"No, I told her we were going camping for old times sake. She's used to that. Danny and I still try and go at least once a month."

Dave checked the room one last time before leaving, just to make sure he wasn't leaving anything behind. Outside he said, "Listen, we'll put everything in my rental, might as well use it...I'm paying for it whether I use it or not. Besides, nobody knows my car like they do yours, especially when it comes to tonight."

"Makes sense to me," Colin replied. "I don't think anybody would want my car. It's too beat up except for a demolition derby." He moved around to the trunk and waited till Dave had opened his before transferring the weapons from one to the others. All they needed was for someone to call the authorities.

Colin gave Dave the directions to a pawn shop, hoping they could get the walkie talkies cheaper than at a radio store. Luckily, they did just that. Dave purchased one twenty-three channel and a six-channl. Colin went into the drugstore next door and bought two sets of new batteries. Dave was busy removing the back covers so he could switch several transmit and receive crystals around. He'd found out purely by accident that you could reverse the crystals in two radios and end up with a channel totally different. Not even a tunable radio receiver could locate the transmission frequency.

They drove out to the abandoned gun club Colin knew about. They scrounged the area until they had several tin cans to use as targets. Dave had noticed a sign with "Hay for Sale" and stopped to purchase two bales to use as backstops for the arrows. Even the farmer was

surprised to see someone tie hay to the top of a new car. He kept that look on his face as the two drove out of sight.

Dave decided to shoot the crossbow and regular bow first just in case someone did complain about the noise. He set the bales up with a folded newspaper in the center for a target. He stepped off several spots to shoot from starting at 25 paces, then 50, 75 and finally 100, marking each one in the dirt. Colin got at least one arrow from each line. At the seventy-five pace mark, he fired three. That was also where Dave joined him. Colin hit two out of three with the third barely missing. Dave, on the other hand, hit three out of three with the arrows going all the way into the feathers. Both men gathered up all the arrows and put them with the bows into the trunk.

Both men moved up to the first line. Colin was to fire his pistol first. Four of his six shots hit the two cans he aimed at. The second try brought his score up to five out of six barely missing one shot. "Okay Dave, let's see if you still shoot like you used to."

Dave showed no signs of emotion as he spoke. "Would you like to put five bucks on it? You reload and we'll each take two cans, winner takes all." He pulled the receiver back, causing a round to be chambered. Easing the hammer forward, he turned to see how Colin was doing.

"Five bucks it is, I'll enjoy taking your money. I'll fire first. That way you'll see there's no way you can win." This time Colin took his time aiming, but he still missed his third and fourth shots. Emptying the shells from his pistol, he said, "All you have to do is hit five out of six to win. Four will tie it up, and we'll have to go again."

Now Dave had a smile slowly growing on his face. Cocking the hammer, he brought it to the ready position. Every time he fired the cans jumped, all in a row. Three cans still lay visible. The last three shots came so fast Colin couldn't believe it. All he could see was the cans suddenly jump into the air, almost at the same time.

"Bullshit!" was all Colin said as Dave moved towards the car. After placing the weapons into the trunk, Dave held out his hand for the money. Colin began reaching for his wallet, when Dave said, "Keep it, I couldn't take your money. Besides I've had more practice than you."

Colin remained at the gun range, while Dave drove up the road. He would stop every so often to establish what kind of distance could be obtained with the radios. He turned the car back around almost a mile up the road, deciding that would be more than ample distance. After picking Colin up, Dave drove to a chicken place to pick up a bucket for that evening. Dave was feeling very pleased about how well everything had progressed, almost too well. The only real test would come that night if the bad guys used the drop zone.

Danny still wasn't home from work when they arrived at his house. His wife came outside and said, "He called and said he'd be a little late. The garage is unlocked and you're to go inside if you

want."

Colin told her "Thank You" and motioned for Dave to follow him inside. On the workbench, Dave saw several of the items from the list. Danny must have worked out here until late last night, or early this morning before work. Colin began examining the fifteen feet of garden hose with six-penny nails shoved through it in all directions.

Dave said, "That we'll drop across the road to hopefully insure no one can follow us." Moving to the baby food jars, he continued. "Fill these about one-third of the way up with gunpowder. Six should be more than enough if Danny gets the fuse. Burying these will make them think we have dynamite or hand grenades." After filling the jars, Dave punched holes in the lids for the fuses.

The windows in the garage door allowed them to see Danny pulling into the driveway. Colin went out to greet him, also to see if he required any help. Back inside the two brothers were both fascinated and intrigued with the way Dave came up with the various weapons, using almost ordinary items from the house. "Did you get the fuse?" Dave asked.

Reaching into a paper bag, Danny said, "I stopped by a gun shop that handles muzzle-loading supplies and bought fifty foot of fuse."

"That's perfect. Do you have a yardstick or a measuring device of some type so we can cut the fuse in precise lengths?" he asked. "When you find something cut two pieces into three-foot sections."

After pulling a yardstick out of one corner, Danny cut off the two sections as Dave had asked. "Who's got a second hand on their watch?" Colin stuck out his arm to reveal a Timex. Its second hand was in full view. Dave moved to the doorway and spoke again. "You say 'go' whenever you're ready. I'll light the fuse. When I say 'now,' you see how much time has passed for the fuse to burn. That way we'll know how long it takes and how long to cut the pieces to suit our needs. I'll do it twice just to be sure the time is about the same."

Dave stood ready, fuse in one hand, his trusty Bic lighter in the other. "Ready, get Set,...Go!" He lit the fuse, still holding it to ensure it didn't cross and light in another spot. "Now!" Dave said as the puff of smoke reached the end.

After a short pause, Colin gave his time. "One minute twenty-eight seconds, and that sure smells like rotten eggs." Danny handed Dave the second piece of fuse.

Again, the words came "Ready...Set...Go!" When it was lit, Colin told him, "Move a little further away from the door. Maybe the wind will blow the damn smoke away." After pretending to bring it inside, Dave did move farther from the doorway. This time when he hollered "Now!" the time was one minute and thirty-one seconds. So, the time of a minute and a half had been established for three feet of fuse.

Dave picked up a roll of masking tape and passed it to Colin. "Mark off every three feet with a piece of tape, but don't cut it. Then we'll know where to cut when the time does come. Turning now to Danny, he said, "You don't happen to have a backpack or a butt pack around do you?"

"No sweat," Danny said, then disappeared out the door. Shortly he returned with a backpack just the right size for everything to fit in, and it was camouflage too. Handing it to Dave he said, "I bought it for overnights where I didn't have to haul a full load."

"It'll be perfect," answered Dave. "Here's the keys to my car. Turn it around and back it up to the door. Then we can load everything up and double-check it before it's time to leave." Dave still felt apprehensive as he went over each item in the trunk. He really wasn't sure just what he would do tonight if the drop did occur. It certainly wasn't Vietnam, even though the enemy was playing for keeps. Dave didn't want to hurt anyone except in total self-defense, and as a last resort.

His biggest worry was how the two brothers helping him would react. It seemed almost like a game to them. Dave felt the reality of the situation hadn't set in. Their hunting game was one thing, but now the game would hunt back. He had enough worries about his own abilities after all these years, let alone whether one or both of them would freak out or just freeze at the wrong time.

The last two items to be placed into the trunk were a fifty-foot coil of rope and four boards, twelve by six inches with nails shoved through one side. Danny estimated there was still two hours till dark. The newspaper had said sunset would be at eight-twenty that evening. The drive out there would only take twenty minutes at the most, setting up another thirty. They had even packed a face mask used for deer hunting to prevent Colin from being identified.

Danny reached under the workbench and slid several items out of the way, revealing a bottle of bourbon still sealed. After unscrewing the cap, he handed the bottle to Colin who took a large swallow. Dave even accepted, taking two long drinks before passing it back to Danny. As he brought the bottle to his lips, Danny said, "When the good guys call, the bad guys fall!"

Dave couldn't let it pass so easily. "Just remember. Sometimes the dragon wins--so watch your ass. If something goes wrong, get the hell out of there. I can take care of myself." The bourbon was beginning to burn in his stomach, so he went out to the car and removed a piece of chicken to eat. After finishing, he put on his army shirt and slid the knife into his belt.

Danny shook hands with Dave as he spoke, "I'll leave the garage door unlocked. Be careful and take care of my crazy brother." Colin and Danny just looked at each other across the car in a silent good-bye.

Chapter III

During the drive out, Colin went over his part of the plan. Then the two men remained silent for the rest of the trip. Upon arrival, Dave drove down the dirt trail and stopped near the trees where the evidence of the previous vehicles had been found. The two men quickly unloaded the trunk and hid most of the items under a large bush. Dave pulled out the map and showed Colin where to take the car and lock it up. He had chosen a spot behind a fuel storage tank only a quarter of a mile away.

Dave was busy at work when Colin returned from his first assignment. Dave's movements were already as though he did this every day, using all the techniques of a trained military machine. Even his senses had increased greatly. He'd heard Colin's footsteps and determined his direction of movement long before seeing him. Now he had Colin digging under the root system of several trees, just deep enough to hold the jars of explosives. Dave was out on the landing strip, busy setting up the boards containing the nails. After digging the holes, he carefully worked at concealing the triggering devices. With the way he had staggered the boards around, the odds were good that the plane should at least hit one, pushing the nails into the tires right up through the leaves.

While Dave was busy cutting the fuse into lengths, Colin moved down the path and hid the hose full of nails behind a tree. When the time came all, they would have to do is toss it across the road. Dave had cut the fuse into various lengths so with the two of them lighting, several would go off simultaneously. Then after a brief pause, two more, and then finally the last one. The idea was to create the effect of several heavily armed men surrounding the area. Surprise and shock should make them believers. Then Dave would shout orders to the bad guys.

They still had daylight left when everything was all set up. Sitting down to wait. Dave went over the procedures one more time with Colin. He also kept reassuring Colin that if he paid attention, nothing should go wrong. Especially if they remained hidden in the shadows should the bad guys use any lights. Pulling out the chicken and two sodas, they indulged on what could be their last meal. After burying the garbage, the men moved to their respective positions for the night's vigil. They would maintain a radio check every thirty minutes unless one of them detected any activity. It would be like deer hunting or a Vietnam ambush. The hardest part would be the waiting.

Leaning against a large tree, Dave recalled memories of Vietnam. Mostly the many ambushes he'd help set up, and how when the firing began, they seemed to rage on for hours, with good men falling on both sides. When in actuality, five minutes was about the longest amount of time an ambush lasted. He also remembered the long nights of boredom and fighting off insects. Even now he still wasn't sure which was the worst.

The sound of a bad exhaust system got his attention long before the headlights started bouncing as the vehicle approached. Colin's voice came over the radio. "Here comes somebody, said the spider to the fly!"

Dave slid down until he was flat on the ground. Slowly he moved the radio into position. "Just stay out of sight and don't do anything until I tell you to. One last time, remember if something does go wrong, head for the car. Okay? And make sure you wear the face mask, or you'll be identified."

"Okay, I think another one's turning in too". Even though there was a reluctance in Colin's voice, Dave knew he would head for the car if the time came.

Dave quickly answered with, "Just stay off the air until I call for you; somebody might hear us." This time silence came from the radio. Dave slowly pulled the string back on the crossbow and locked it into place, then slid an arrow into the groove. He laid it within easy grasp, then waited, hidden among the trees.

Dave made mental notes of everything that went on, even the simple items like which men stayed with which vehicles and who settled in to take a nap. The time passed ever so slowly until five pickups and one van had arrived. The sounds from the engine of a small plane broke the silence. Several headlights were turned on to mark the landing strip. As the plane made its final approach, Dave picked up his radio..."Colin, when I say now, shoot an arrow into the tire of the trucks nearest you. Try and pick a spot they can't see right away. Then get ready to light the fuses and toss the hose across the path."

"Okay," was the only reply, which suited Dave just fine.

When the plane's wheels touched the ground, Dave gave the signal to Colin, and the arrows from both men began hitting their marks. The pickup farthest from Colin pulled out of the trees and moved towards the plane, which was now coming to a halt. The men from the other vehicles were walking across the field behind the moving vehicle. Dave quickly radioed Colin to let that one go. Colin only clicked the transmit switch several times to acknowledge. The plane must have hit one of Dave's booby traps because it made an abrupt turn and stopped. Far short of where the men waited, they began moving towards the plane as the engine shut off.

Both Dave and Colin had shifted their positions to prepare to light the fuses. First, Dave gave the signal to Colin, then he lit his own and took careful aim and hit the last vehicle's rear tire. Dave moved closer to the plane and hid behind a bush and took aim at the side of the plane.

After the first series of explosions went off, Dave yelled out, "Nobody move, this is the Federal Narcotics Division. Drop all of your weapons. You're surrounded."

When one of the men began moving along the side of the plane, the second series of explosions went off. Dave fired an arrow just in

front of the man, who froze in position and screamed, "Don't shoot! I give up. Everybody, throw down your weapons and don't move!"

Just for sheer effect, Dave yelled out, "Ceasefire." Almost to the second, one last explosion went off. Using it to his advantage, he said, "Ceasefire, damn it!" as he moved to a better vantage point. He yelled, "I want to see all your hands up and move into the open away from the truck, where I can see you better."

Using the radio, with his voice muffled so no one could hear what he said, "Colin, move around and make a little noise. Then move to a new spot and do it again. Just be alert in case they try something."

The smugglers moved about twenty feet away from the plane and the truck. Most were busy trying to see who was in the woods. After making sure no one had stayed behind in the trucks, Colin moved in the middle of the parked vehicles. Dave walked several yards closer to him and said, "I'm going to walk straight out there, about halfway, and turn on all their headlights. Move out behind me. No matter what, do exactly what I say, or we can be in a lot of trouble."

After slinging the crossbow over his shoulder, Dave pulled out the forty-five, took a deep breath, and started on his way, pulling the hammer back to save time should any proof of authority be needed. The headlights came on one at a time, casting an ominous glow around him. To the smugglers, Dave appeared to be nine feet tall and four hundred pounds carrying a cannon.

The headlights made it possible for Dave to see their faces. Even here, he couldn't help but look for someone he knew in the past. Throwing the coil of rope at their feet, Dave said, "One of you pick it up." Whether or not it was fear or contempt, nobody moved. "All right. You with the Levi jacket...pick it up."

Reluctantly the man moved over, slowly reaching down to pick up the rope. With more firmness, Dave said, "Now the rest of you get in a straight line and keep your hands up. You with the rope, start tying it tight around their left ankles until everyone, including yourself, is on that rope. Make sure you leave about ten feet on each end." When it seemed, they were reluctant to co-operate, Dave fired his forty-five into the air and yelled, "Move, and I mean now!" Then he pulled out his radio and said, "One of you better come up here. The rest of you stay in position."

While the smuggler was busy tying the rope to the others, Colin came up and said, "Yes sir, what would you like me to do?"

"Take the normal precautions, search each man and watch yourself." As Colin moved toward the group of men, Dave spoke again, "The first man to move is dead meat. I don't even want to see a finger move or hear a word from anybody."

Colin checked every man's pockets, ankles, and anyplace else a weapon could be hidden. Whenever he found a wallet or a weapon, it was tossed into a pile between Dave and the men. By the time he was finished so was the man who had been tying the group together.

Dave watched as Colin approached. When he was close enough, he said, "Take one end of the rope and tie it up high on the plane." After Colin secured it, Dave spoke again. "Now take their pickup truck and tie the other end to the roll bar. Then move the truck out until the rope tightens up and I say 'stop'. We're going to make sure nobody can pull anything until we're finished.

Colin already had the rope secured and was trying to move the truck, but the flat tire made it extremely difficult. The smuggler who had been doing all the talking spoke. "Something ain't right. You bastards don't act like narcs. Who the hell are you? I want to see your badges or some identification before you go any further, I know my rights."

"I got your rights hanging, asshole!" Dave yelled. "I keep my badge inside my pistol. You want to examine my credentials?" He pointed the forty-five at the man's groin. "Would you like a closer look? I'll be more than happy to oblige. We aim to please!"

Colin tightened the rope up until the men were hanging upside down, complaining about the pain caused by the rope. Dave kept a cautious eye on the men as he picked up their wallets. He also threw any weapons into the distance, far from their reach. After Colin shut the engine off, he went around the vehicle and punctured every tire. He also reached inside and jerked a handful of wires loose from under the dash.

Dave told Colin to stand guard and not to let anybody move while he checked the interior of the plane. Inside he found several bales of marijuana. Moving forward into the cabin, he found a briefcase shoved under the seat. Opening it up revealed several bags of white powder. Dave could only guess at the contents as he'd never had any experience in narcotics. Back outside, he searched the pickup and found another briefcase behind the seat. This one contained several neatly arranged bundles of money. He didn't bother to even estimate the amount. The most important thing was to get out of there before anything did go wrong.

Colin had been kicking the smuggler with the big mouth when Dave grabbed Colin by the arm to get his attention. He was still yelling for him to shut up as Dave shoved the briefcase with the money inside. "Take this and head for the car. Bring it down the path partway and wait for me. Blow the horn to let me know you're ready, then we can get out of here." Colin nodded his head and took off across the field, disappearing into the darkness.

He wasn't even out of sight when the big mouth started again. "Who the hell are you?" Dave ran over and shoved his pistol in the man's face and said, "The son-of-a-bitch that'll put a bullet in your head if you don't find a new line of work. Now just to give you something to think about, when my associate blows the horn, I'm lighting the fuse to a bomb inside the plane. So, either you get loose or start looking for marshmallows to enjoy the barbecue."

"You can't do that! It'll be murder!" he screamed at Dave.

"No more than what you do to the kids in the area. At least you have the chance to break the habit. Oh yes, one last thing, I'm sticking your wallets inside the candy box. It will be delivered to the real cops, along with a note telling them exactly where you are or were, as the case might be."

The horn blew several times in a row. Dave could see the glow from the taillights of the car. After lighting the fuse, Dave stopped long enough to say, "Have a nice day." While he ran through the field, big-mouth was screaming. "Who the hell are you? You can't do this! You don't know who you're messin' with!"

Dave couldn't resist the temptation any longer. The next time big mouth yelled, 'Who the hell are you?' he turned and yelled, "Batman" then jumped into the car. When it seemed Colin was taking his time about leaving, Dave hollered, "Go, Go, Go...! They can get loose any minute."

Once they were back on the paved road, Colin pushed the accelerator to the floor. About a mile down the road, he eased up and dropped down to the speed limit. Dave opened the briefcase containing the drugs. He scribbled out a quick note and a small map telling what to look for and where. He couldn't help but sign it Batman. Then he closed the briefcase back up.

Colin was laughing so hard it was affecting his driving. "We did it! We did it! Next time they'll think twice before making another drug run. What do we do now?"

"What we do is, go to the nearest fire station and drop off this briefcase without being seen," Dave said.

After a pause, Colin replied. "I know just the place. Up here in Beldon, the station only keeps one man on duty, the rest are volunteers. So, all we have to do is put it in front of the door, go around the corner and call him on the phone."

"Very good," Dave replied. "You catch on pretty good for a beginner. Just turn off the lights before turning into the driveway." Colin parked just outside the lot and Dave ran up to the door, then quickly jumped back into the car.

Everything seemed to be going perfect. They waited at the phone booth until they heard the fire whistle blow. Then they started back towards the way they had just come from. Within a few minutes the fire trucks passed them by, sirens blaring and lights flashing. When they reached the site, Colin slowed down so they could get a good view of what was happening. Several sheriff's cars already had arrived at the scene. It appeared that they had several people in custody.

The drive back to Danny's seemed to pass quickly. Colin pulled the car behind the house. He had the lights off and coasted to a complete stop. The noise of hitting a trash can made them both jump. Danny came running out the back door to see what was going on. Seeing who it was, he asked, "Well, what happened? Did they show up? Say something damn it!"

Colin brought his finger up to his mouth, "Shut up" very softly. "Open the side door to the garage and hurry up."

Danny opened the door and reached in to turn on the lights. The other two followed him inside. This time Dave was the first to reach for the bottle on the workbench. He took several big swigs, while Colin was busy telling the story to Danny. With his insides feeling like they were on fire, Dave went back out to the car for the briefcase. Danny sat on the workbench, totally engrossed in Colin's story. He hadn't even noticed Dave leave or re-enter the garage. Dave sat on the floor with his back resting against the wall. Colin was jumping around and talking so fast as he was trying to put Danny into the mood of what had occurred.

Dave waited for Colin to pause and take a breath, then used the lull to say, "Hey...Hey, can I say something?" As he raised the bottle to his mouth again, Colin had started talking again even faster. "Hey, god damn it! I got something I wanna say." This time Colin did stop long enough for he and Danny to see Dave dump the contents of the briefcase onto the floor. Dave looked up from the bundles of money, now heaped between his legs, to see Colin and Danny motionless with their jaws in the open position.

Danny slid off the bench and slowly moved over to Dave and sat down beside him. All the time he kept muttering, "Holy shit" over and over again. Colin joined in also, making it sound like a duet to Dave. Each of them began fondling the money. They passed the bottle from one to the other. Danny had broken open several bundles and was throwing the loose bills into the air, covering the entire floor. All three were laughing and waving the money around when suddenly the thought of someone finding out came over them at the same time.

Colin and Danny scrambled to gather all the loose bills, while Dave began stacking the bundles back into the briefcase. Danny went outside and checked for anything unusual in the neighborhood. By the time he came back, Dave had all the money back into the briefcase.

"It's okay. There are not even any lights on in any of the houses nearby," Danny reassured them. "Listen, you two better stay here tonight. I'll pull some sleeping bags out before I turn in for the night."

"Maybe you're right," Dave said. "I'm in no condition to drive back to the motel." Danny rummaged through the shelves for the bags, then shut off the lights as he went out the door.

Chapter IV

Both men jumped up with pistols in hand when Danny burst through the door hollering, "Wake up, god damn it! And put those guns away. Look at this newspaper! What you did last night made the news." He moved over to the bench and turned on the small television, even before Dave noticed Danny was still in his shorts. Even with the hangovers, the picture came in clear enough.

The announcer said, "We bring you these pictures taken early this morning by your WKYC remote unit." The newsman suddenly appeared next to a fire truck. The camera began panning back and forth over the area showing the burning debris and vehicles. "Sometime during the early morning hours, police and fire officials received an anonymous tip that a smuggling operation had gone awoul. A briefcase had been left at the fire station in Beldon. Unofficial reports say it contained up to half a million dollars in cocaine. The plane seen here was fully loaded with marijuana. Several people were injured and are in the Elyria Memorial Hospital, while others are in custody. Their names are being withheld at this time. We'll bring you further updates as we receive them. This is Gunther Phillips with WKYC."

Colin reached over and shut the television off. "Okay, now the whole world knows what happened. Do you think anyone will identify us to the police? Dave, it was your face they saw, not mine. What do we do now?"

"Don't worry," Dave began. "The bad guys won't tell the cops anything that might implicate them even further. None of them knew me or they would have said something last night to try and make us back off. All I've got to do is stay out of their circle while I'm here. Colin, do you think you can continue with the charade so we can nail them again? Remember if they find out you're involved; they'll make an example out of you for anybody else thinking about it."

"No sweat," was his reply, but even Danny knew the smile that accompanied it was more show than go. "All I've got to do is pay attention to what's said on the news and pretend that's all I know about what happened. What I want to know is, what are we going to do with the money? It might be a little obvious if we start spending that kind of money."

In a short time, Dave said, "What we need is a place that's relatively safe for the money. Danny, you go down to your bank and open a safety deposit box in your name. Colin, you do the same only make sure it's a different bank. We'll divide the money equally and slowly enter it into your savings or checking accounts. At least the money will be safe until I can think of something else. No matter what don't try paying off all your bills right now or buying a new car."

The two men nodded their heads, showing that they understood. Even the IRS might be somewhat suspicious if they suddenly started living beyond their normal lifestyle and income. Danny still had one

question. "Dave, what about your share of the money? Are you going to open a safety deposit box too?"

"No, I'd like to hide it here someplace, if you don't mind. Then just before I go home, I'll mail it in a package to myself at home."

"Sure," Danny said. "Nobody digs around in here but me, so it'll be safe. How about up in the attic above us? The only thing up there is Christmas decorations. I'll let you two take care of that. Right now, I've got to get to work." As he headed out the door, he hollered back over his shoulder, "make sure you stay out of trouble, and set my share aside and safe till I get home tonight."

After getting dressed, Dave and Colin rolled up the sleeping bags. They cleared off a large area of the workbench and set the briefcase to one side. Under Colin's watchful eye, Dave started piling the money into three equal stacks. Feeling slightly nervous about Colin watching his every move, Dave said, "If you want to count each bundle to ensure none of them are short, you can."

Laughingly Colin replied, "Why, I think we can trust the amounts on the outside. After all, the nice gentlemen who donated it wouldn't have wanted to cheat his associates. What I will do is help divide up the loose bills evenly. I wouldn't want you to strain yourself." They both laughed as Colin carefully put the loose bills into three separate piles. "We got an extra fifty, what will we do with it?" Colin asked.

"Easy," Dave began. "We go back to my place, get cleaned up and go to breakfast. But first, we hide the rest of the money. Grab some empty paper sacks so we can keep the shares separate. We'll put Danny's and mine in the briefcase and take yours along. We might as well stop at the bank while we're out."

Once they had hidden the briefcase, Dave drove them back to his motel. Colin was close to Dave's size, so he borrowed a clean set of clothes for the day. The day went fine. After all, what could go wrong after steak and eggs for breakfast?

Colin had no trouble at the bank. He'd stopped by a department store and purchased a briefcase. Carrying a paper sack into a bank to open a safety deposit box might look a little suspicious. Just to be safe, Dave waited in the car to avoid the two of them being seen Together in public, especially in a bank.

Dave later dropped Colin off at his car, then went to visit a few people during the afternoon. If they were home that would be fine, if not that would be fine too. It was something to pass the time away, with the intentions of being good at the same time.

Nobody was home at the first place Dave stopped, but two people were in the garage of the second. Dave knew the address was right. The only question was if the people were the same. Walking up the driveway, he recognized the face of the girl. The last time he'd seen her was at her graduation party. Now she was a young woman. He

guessed the man standing next to her was her husband. The man said, "Can I help you?"

Without showing any facial expression, Dave answered, "I'm looking for a young lady named Missy. This is the last address I have on her."

The girl sitting on the floor looked up into Dave's face, not sure who it was at first. "Dave, is that you? Oh my god, I thought you were dead! Nobody's heard from you in years. Where the hell have you been? What are you doing here now? Carl, this is my cousin Dave; I don't think the two of you have ever met before. Dave, this is my husband, Carl."

Dave stuck his hand out, "Nice to meet you. Well first, as you can see, I'm not dead. Second, I never was one to write letters and, when I stopped receiving them, I had no reason to write back. I'm just back to look around. After all, everybody gets curious to see what the old hometown looks like. Especially if they've been gone as long as I have."

Carl helped her stand up, then moved aside as the two cousins hugged each other. Stepping back, she said, "I didn't even recognize you. Aside from looking older, you still look pretty good. Can we get you something to drink or eat? Will you stay for supper, and how long will you be in town?"

"Slow down on the questions!" Dave knew he had better slow her down, and he didn't want to spend too much time doing nothing but answer questions. "I'm not sure how long I'll be in town, but I felt I should at least stop by for a quick visit. There's just too many people to see for me to stay for supper. Thanks anyway. I'll settle for a glass of water if it's cold."

Carl disappeared into the house. Missy went on to say, "We were working on the car getting ready for a trip. It'll be a nice vacation for us, our first since we got married five years ago. Every year we've said next year, and now this is it no matter what."

Carl returned and handed the glass of water to Dave. "You sure, you don't want anything stronger? It's no trouble at all."

"No, thanks," Dave replied. "I've already got a headache. I picked up some aspirins at the store and needed something to wash them down." After removing several aspirins out of the small container, Dave tossed them into his mouth. He took several swallows of water to be sure none of the taste remained in his mouth.

Missy took the glass and asked, "How about you at least come inside and sit for a while. After all, it has been a long time. You could at least stay and talk for a short time. What have you been doing all these years?"

He thought for a moment on how to delicately handle this without hurting her feelings. "I've been working as a forest ranger in and near the everglades. Fighting fires is the main part of the job. I like it because of the challenge of trying to stop a fire. Besides, all the relatives live up here, so I don't have to listen to their

stupid squabbles. It's lonely sometimes, but overall the peace and quiet win out. I don't want you to think that applies to you, even though I have to be going right now. There's just a limited amount of time I'll be in town, so I'm trying to ration the time among the few people I want to see. Remember, I did stop by, even if it was so short a visit. Please try to understand, and I won't be spending that much time with anyone."

Her face showed her sadness as she spoke, "I guess I'll have to understand. If you say this is all the time you can spare. I can only wish you'd stay longer. Do you think you'll be able to stop by again before you leave?"

" I honestly don't know. If I can, I'll give you a call first to make sure it will be all right. But for now, let's assume I won't. That way neither one of us will feel guilty if I don't make it back." He walked back over and gave her a good firm hug, then shook Carl's hand one last time. Moving back towards his car, he could see the water building up in her eyes. Prior to closing the car door, Dave said, "Remember, it's your turn to visit me next. I gave you my address. So, write and I'll answer. Bye. It really was nice seeing you again."

The young couple waved as Dave backed out of the driveway. He tooted the horn as he started down the road. A tremendous feeling of relief came over him as he drove down the street. The visit had gone well, but he still felt too removed from his family. Maybe time had dampened his feelings, and it was only the stereotype of keeping close to family and friends that made him want to visit. After all, he had responded to any mail, but they just stopped writing. Maybe 'out of sight, out of mind' did apply in his case. At least he'd stopped and it was over. Maybe his visit would rekindle their relationship. If not the hell, with them. The effort had been made. He did live fifteen hundred miles away, so that he wouldn't be bumping into them on the street.

Dave stopped by a fast-food restaurant and picked up some food to take back to his motel. Lack of sleep from the night before had begun to take its toll and what little sun did creep through the smog-filled skies made his headache even worse. He hoped that a good night's sleep would take care of it.

Upon reaching his motel, Dave parked the car then carried his meal up to his room. After setting everything down inside, he went down to the soda machine next to the office for two Pepsis. While there, he entered the office to ask if they had any paper he could use to write home. All the clerk had available was her child's notebook paper from school. Dave said that would be fine. He even offered to purchase it, but the clerk wouldn't allow it. To settle things, Dave gave her a dollar bill for the child's piggy bank.

Once back in his room, Dave took a nap after finishing his meal. He had been asleep for several hours when the phone rang. Lifting the receiver off the hook and say "yes" a voice came back. "Hello. How are you doing?" His mind still wasn't totally clear, but he recognized the voice of his wife, Karen. "I'm fine...I was asleep, so give me a chance to finish waking up before the questions start.

What's new with you? How's the weather? It stinks up here. The sun looks like our rainy day or just before sunup."

"It's nice here, except for your not being here. I miss you. Have you decided how long you're going to stay yet?"

His eyes were adjusting to a clearer vision, and his mind was pushing away the inner fog. "I miss you too. I'm still not sure how long I'm staying. I saw the kids from a distance but still haven't made up my mind as to whether or not to let them know I'm here. The same goes for Edna. Maybe I'll call her in a few days and see how it goes over the phone."

Well," she began, "I still think you should see them, but it's up to you. You're there, and I'm here, so you know what things are like there and how the people will react. While I've never met them, I'm sure whatever you decide will be fine and for good reason. Just remember why you wanted to go and all the questions you wanted answers to."

"You're right," he replied. "Maybe after I see a few more places and people, I'll at least call Edna and see how she feels about my seeing the children. Right now, we better get off the phone before he bill gets too high. Take care...I love you."

"I love you, too. Call when you get a chance in a couple of days...Bye." Dave said "Good-bye" and hung up the phone. Laying back on the bed, he put his hands on his face and tried to rub the soreness out. After taking a shower, Dave turned the television on to break the silence. As he sat down at the desk, pen in hand, his first intentions were to write Karen, then he thought about writing Edna since Karen had just called.

Dave just couldn't think of how to begin. After several attempts and two sheets of paper, he decided to pass on that idea for now. What Dave did feel was the necessity for a will. Just in case something did go wrong. Anything could go wrong just driving around let alone what he was involved in. He didn't have anything of real monetary value, only a few personal items at home. If something did cause his death, he wanted the news media to understand he wasn't a smuggler. The will would be from memory. It had been in a book he had once read. Dave thought the will was so beautiful he memorized it.

The plan would be to make three copies, placing them in separate envelopes. One to the local sheriff, the other two marked to Edna and Karen stamped and sealed. He'd leave them at Danny's house, only to be mailed in the event something went wrong. Dave personalized the first paragraph to each person, with a quick explanation of what he had done during this trip, then went on with the will originally written by Charles Lounsbury in the eighteen-nineties, only modifying it to suit his name and situation. In the one addressed to the Sheriff, Dave substituted 'Batman' for his name.

"I, as a veteran, Dave Johnson, being of sound mind and memory, do now make this my last will and testament, in

order, as justly as I may, to distribute my interests in the world among succeeding men.

First, that part of my interests, which is known among men and recognized in the sheep-bound volumes of law as my property, being inconsiderable of none account, I make no account of this in my will.

My right to live, it is but a life estate is not at my disposal, but these things expected, all else in the world I now proceed to devise and bequeath.

Item-I give to the good fathers and mothers, but in trust for their children, nevertheless, all good little words of praise and all quaint pet names, and I charge said parents to use them justly but generously as the needs of their children shall require.

Item II, I leave to the children exclusively, but only for the life of their childhood, all and every one of the dandelions of the fields and the daisies thereof, with the right to play among them freely, according to the custom of children, warning at the same time against the thistles. And I devise to children the yellow shores of creeks and the golden sands beneath the waters thereof, with the rag on flies that skim the surface of said waters, and the white clouds that float high over the giant trees.

And I leave to children the long, long days to be merry in, in a thousand ways, and the night and the moon and the train of the milky way to wonder at, but subject, never the less, to the rights herein after given to lovers; and I give to each child the right to choose a star that shall be his, and I direct that the child's father shall tell him the name of it, so that the child shall always remember the name of that star after he has learned and forgotten astronomy.

Item III, I devise to the boys jointly all the useful idle fields and commons where he may coast, all streams and ponds where one may skate or fish, to have and to hold the same for the period of heir boyhood. And all meadows, with the clover blooms and butterflies hereof; and all woods, with their appurtenances of squirrels and whirring birds and echoes and strange noises; and all distant places which maybe visited, together with the adventures there found, I do give to said boys each in his own place at the campfires at night, with all pictures that may be seen in the burning wood or coals, to enjoy without let or hindrance and without any encumbrance of cares.

Item IV, To lovers I devise their imaginary world, with whatever they may need, as the stars of the sky, the red, red roses by the wall, the now of the hawthorn, the sweet strains of music, or what else they may desire to figure to each other the lastingness and beauty of their love.

Item V, To the young men jointly, being joined in a Brave, mad crowd, I devise and bequeath all boisterous, inspiring sports of rivalry. I give to them the disdain of weakness and undaunted confidence in their own strength. Though they are rude and rough, I leave to them alone the power of making lasting friendships and of possessing companions and to them exclusively I shall give all merry songs and brave choruses to sing, with smooth voices to troll them forth.

Item VI, And to those who are no long children or youth or lovers I leave memory, and I leave to them the volumes of poems, songs and ideals, to the end that they may live the old days over and over again freely and fully, without title or diminution; and to those who are no longer children or youths or lovers I leave too, the knowledge of what a rare, rare world it is.

Item VII, And to the veterans of past and current wars or conflicts, the peace, so desired by both opponents, and may the horrors of war remain locked in Pandora's Box, and not the time spent for sleep, temporary or permanent. **To the wounds, both mental and physical, incurred from such senseless disputes, allow them to be treated as heroes and with the full dignity they deserve, forever."**

Signed this day

*Dave Johnson
Vietnam Veteran*

It was close to eleven PM when he finished sealing the last envelope up. Karen had placed several in his suitcase along with stamps. That was her way of hinting he should write home. The note paper she had included was far too small for his use. Dave sat on the bed now, opening the last soda. As the news began showing film of the fire and arrests, he watched carefully to examine each face. Should he meet any of them again, knowing their faces would be helping to avoid a confrontation. Dave even had a sheet of paper ready in case any names were given. None were, but the newsman did say several were all ready out on bail. That statement infuriated Dave even more because he knew the evidence was solid. Yet, the authorities had released them back into the public. They'd probably just sell more drugs, then use the money to pay their attorney's fees.

Dave switched the channel after hearing that to look for anything but the news. He finally came across the reruns of "Hogan's Heroes". The anger only grew inside him, even though there was a comedy show on the television.

Chapter V

When Monday came around, Dave had only called one of the other people he had wanted to see. It was his Uncle Robert, who was only a few years older than he. The two of them had been fairly close during his growing up. Uncle Robert had even allowed him to tag along on some of his dates. Dave never was sure, if the girls agreed or not, but at the time, none of them complained around him. Maybe the girls felt safer with him along. After all, what could happen with a young boy in the car.

Uncle Robert was please Dave had called, and of course Aunt Stefanie wanted him to join them for supper. Dave declined the meal, but did agree to stop by and visit for an hour or so later on in the week. They also told him not to waste good money on a motel room when he could stay there free of charge. Dave politely explained that if he did stay in their home, he'd feel obligated to be there in the evenings. And with all the places he wanted to see; he would rather stay at the motel. If he came in late, no one would be bothered, nor would he feel he was neglecting his hosts.

They said he would be under no obligation to "stick around" and if he chose to, would have full access to the kitchen facilities and anything else he might need. After reassuring them both that he would be fine, they finally accepted his decision with the understanding the offer remained.

Colin already had his money in the bank. Danny was to take care of his that morning. So far, they had hidden away all most twenty-five thousand each. The hardest part was keeping Colin from spending any of it. He did have bills due, but if he flashed money around and suddenly paid off all his bills, word might spread back to the wrong people and ruin any other plans of obtaining more. More importantly, it could be dangerous to him and his family.

That afternoon Dave met with Colin in Danny's garage. They discussed Colin's meeting while waiting for Danny to return home. "Well," Dave began, "What's the word? Did they say anything about what happened?"

"Just, and I quote, 'There was a minor business set back, so things are going to be little riskier than normal'... They even offered to give me a bonus, if I did start tonight. The only thing they said after that was that they would pick me up at allocation I would be given later. And if I didn't have a gun of my own, they would supply me with one to use. I told them that wasn't necessary as I had a pistol of my own. I even offered to drive my own car. After hashing it back and forth, they agreed. The only stipulation is that I have to wait at a phone booth for the directions at nine PM. The booth is located outside the grocery store in Grafton, the Sparkle Market. All we have to do is figure out a way to let you and Danny know where, once I know."

"Well, at least it appears they don't feel you're involved in their so call 'minor setback'." Dave said. This was the main concern. Even the two men Colin knew were not there, and Colin was disguised. "Are you sure you can go through with this tonight? All you have to do is make one slip up and it's all over, for all of us."

Colin answered without any hesitation. "I'll be fine, don't worry. There's no way I'm going to screw this up. You and Danny just make sure where I'm at if you start shooting."

Reassuringly Dave replied. "Don't worry. Just don't be too willing to give in if and when we show up. Once whoever is in charge gives the orders you obey. As long as you do that everything will be okay. You better make sure you act as nervous as the rest of them, and be prepared to be treated like one of them."

Danny's car pulled into the driveway at that moment, interrupting their conversation temporarily. After stopping in the garage to say 'hi', Danny went into the house. He returned with a stack of sandwiches and a six-pack of cold soda. Dave asked him what his wife thought was going on, especially since they never included her in any of their conversations.

"She never met you before. Besides, Colin and I usually come out here to mess around any way. So to her it's normal. Tonight, she thinks we're going coon hunting. I've done that before and come in about five in the morning. Sometimes I go to work, other times I call in sick and sleep all morning. Now eat up and tell me what the plan is for tonight. By the way, my share of the money is in the bank now."

Dave spoke, "Listen, over the weekend I came up with a plan on how you can explain where the money came from. But we'll have to wait till just before I go home to set it up. You're going to have a rich uncle die and leave you a large cash settlement from his estate. In the meantime, you better get together and think of some distant relative or pick a good name for your families and anybody else."

Meanwhile at the narcotics division of the Lorain County Sheriff's Department, Detective Doug Carson was busy going over the official reports on the mysterious circumstances surrounding last week's drug bust. Someone had even sketched a bat on the outside of the file folder. Rumors had it that "Batman" was one of the men in the department. After all, would Batman be labeled a hero or be branded as a bad cop who took things into his own hands?

No matter who it was, deep down inside, Doug Carson was glad someone was doing something to catch smugglers red-handed. The only part that still bothered him was a fear of it being a war over territory among the smugglers themselves. But the possibility of that being true was pretty remote. No respectful dealer would leave that amount of cocaine behind at the fire station. A few packets maybe, but not a full briefcase.

Everyone involved had already posted bail, except for the three in the hospital for minor burns and smoke inhalation. Even they were to be released sometime today, and of course none of them would talk.

The statement from their attorney explained that all of them were attending a party nearby when the plane crashed. When the group drove over to the crash site to assist any survivors, some crazy men attacked with bows and arrows, then subdued and tied each man to a large rope. After stealing their wallets, they proceeded to set fire to all vehicles and personnel so, they would perish in the ensuing blaze.

Before leaving, the smugglers lawyer had said, "You better find out who those crazy idiots are, running around trying to kill innocent men, while the authorities sit around doing nothing!" He slammed the door shut on his way out.

Doug knew better. Innocent his ass. Half the men in the department would give a week's pay just be credited with half the arrests on the past records of his clients. Somehow their attorney always managed to be at the station, even before the first one was finished being booked. Doug had already requested a computer printout listing all current and past officers who could use a bow and arrow. He also requested a printout of all the families who had lost a relative to a drug related crime. All he could do now was to begin going over each name until something fell into place, and with any luck, more information came in.

The entire situation caused Doug to wish he could have a printout made of all the known drug dealers, hand it over to Batman, and, after taking a week off, come back and pick up all the pieces. But he couldn't do that. He had a job to perform, a sworn duty. Maybe it would only turn out to be a one-time affair, and the whole thing would just disappear into the files.

At least he was secure in the knowledge that a large amount of cocaine would not make it to the streets, even if the bastards did beat the court system. Doug set the file on top of the rest of the open cases till he had more time to pursue the matter further. Right now, his plans were to go home and take his wife out for a nice dinner. Then he'd start over again tomorrow. His caseload already had him a week behind on paperwork.

Three men had already loaded the trunk of Dave's car up for the night operation. This time Danny would wear the hood over his face and carry an M1 carbine. Colin would pass the information on by leaving a note inside the phone book, between the yellow pages and the white pages. Danny would pick it up after Colin was out of sight. This wouldn't be as well set up as the previous operation, but it was the best they could do under the circumstances.

When the time grew near, Colin left first, then Dave and Danny used a different route to reach the phone booth. The two men would part out of sight until Colin left the booth and it looked clear.

Colin parked next to the booth so he could hear the phone ring and ten minutes passed before the phone rang. Colin quickly jotted down the information and slid the note inside the book. Afterwards he climbed into his car and started on his journey, his nerves already on edge. A cold sweat was beginning to form over his body.

Dave barely had the car stopped when Danny jumped out and ran into the phone booth. With both hands he ripped the entire book off the cable that secured it. Back in the car he flipped through the pages for the note. Finally, he began reading it aloud to Dave, trying to give the appropriate directions and a brief description of the terrain surrounding the spot. This time it would be an old farm that had been closed long ago by the banks.

Colin said in his note he was to take the path nearest the river on Route 303 just past Chamberlain Road. Danny knew another way in, but they would have to cross the river by wading in the water. It would only be a few feet deep, but no one would suspect them from that direction.

Using the description of the land Danny kept supplying, Dave concluded that the smugglers would have to use a helicopter or large truck to make the transfer. Since it was going to occur during the night, the odds were more that they would use the truck. It would be far too dangerous to fly among the trees during the darkness. There certainly wasn't a large enough area to make a safe landing for a plane. The only other possibility would be an airdrop.

The moon had already begun to rise above the horizon, making the scenery visible without having to use flashlights, yet dark enough to conceal the movements of the two men through the woods. Danny had walked the path ahead of the car, so Dave did not have to use the headlights. He also ensured the path was suitable enough for the car to travel on. The trail was nearly a mile long, winding back and forth toward the river. By estimating the halfway point, Danny chose a suitable place to leave the car hidden among some heavy brush on solid ground. They certainly didn't want the car stuck when it came time to leave or have to turn it around while someone was chasing them.

The two men cut several pieces of brush to cover the vehicle from both the ground and the air. After a final good luck handshake, the two men began the final trek to the river. The water seemed cold to Dave, but the sound of voices coming from the other side took his mind off the chilling waters. He motioned for Danny to move farther down stream, while he continued to the shoreline. This time their radios had earphones, so all they needed to muffle was their own voices. At least there wouldn't be any sudden outbursts at an inopportune time.

The day Dave had gone to the radio store, he had noticed the store was having a sale on inexpensive flashlights. He took the opportunity to purchase a dozen for less than fifteen dollars. Tonight, he hoped to use them to his advantage, in conjunction with a roll of fishing line.

From the sound of the voices and other noises, Dave figured he was less than one hundred yards from the clearing. Occasionally he could see the glow from a light or two through the trees. Danny called on the radio to say he was nearing the north side of the clearing and still had another fifty to seventy-five yards to go. Dave informed him to stay in place and out of sight until he was in position and the time was right. Reluctantly Danny agreed. All Dave

could do was to hope that Danny didn't move in too soon and ruin the whole operation.

Dave took his pack off and quietly removed the items inside and set them against a nearby tree. He left the crossbow there while he worked his way around the clearing, stringing the fishline as he went. Periodically he attached a flashlight. Dave carefully buried the lens end in the dirt, then turned on the light itself. He set two such lines up, one for himself and one for Danny. He also rigged another line that would allow him to drag the garden hose full of nails across the road when it was needed. All that remained was the long wait. Colin wouldn't be too hard to identify. He had worn his bright blaze orange vest, hoping the others wouldn't say anything except that he had bad taste.

The time seemed to pass ever so slowly. Danny kept calling Dave, wanting to know when something was going to happen. Even Dave hated sitting in the woods with damp shoes on, especially with a view of others standing around a warm fire. A couple of the smugglers had even climbed into their vehicles to take a nap.

Suddenly another set of headlights started down the path. Several men in the group moved behind their vehicles. After a series of long and short flashes of the headlights from both sides, the truck continued in. The closer it came, the larger it seemed to be. When it finally came to a halt amidst the other vehicles, Dave could see it was a five-ton boxed rental truck. Big, bold letters and yellow, it could be driven anywhere without being stopped.

As two pickup trucks moved into a loading position at the rear of the large vehicle, Dave began pulling the line attached to the hose full of nails. When no more could be pulled in, Dave could only hope it wasn't stuck halfway across. From his vantage point, Dave could see the first two trucks were now full of marijuana bales. The crew had begun tying a canvas cover over the bales.

Danny and Dave both froze as someone yelled from the group, "You guys...move those trucks over to the side so we can get two more in here. We can't stay here all night while you play around." Both men breathed a sigh of relief now that they knew it wasn't them being yelled at. Dave could barely hear the men still talking but couldn't make out what was being said. The two trucks were moved away, and two others replaced them. This time Colin was helping to transfer bales from the large truck to a smaller one. His vest made him quite visible even in the dim light.

Dave picked up the crossbow in one hand and the radio in the other. "Get ready to pull the string and tie it off, but not before I tell you. Don't shoot either, unless I tell you to or something goes wrong." A PHST...PHST... was all the reply Dave received. The quick clicks of the transmit button had said it all.

Dave aimed his first arrow at the front tire of the large truck. At the same time, he raised the radio up and said, "When I pull my lights where you can see them, you do the same, then yell just like we planned." Dave set the radio inside his pocket and grabbed the nylon

line. His last thoughts before pulling the trigger on the crossbow were of how good the batteries in the flashlights were.

Before the arrow finished its flight to the tire, Dave began pulling the fishing line. He also began yelling, "Federal officers, nobody move! You're surrounded. Throw down your weapons and no one will get hurt." Several of the group complied immediately, while others moved toward the tree line. It was at that moment Danny pulled his string and yelled. "You heard the man! Freeze or else!"

Somebody from amid the trucks called out, "It's a trick like before." Then several of them opened fire in the direction of the flashlights. Danny immediately began returning fire, hitting the parked vehicles and not the people. Dave had reloaded and shot someone in the leg with his arrow. The person was knocked off balance, dropping his Uzi before crawling under the large truck. Those who were still firing sporadically at the glow from the flashlights, never noticed Dave meticulously shooting the tires of the other vehicles.

One of the men did determine Dave's position and was starting to put as many rounds as possible towards his location. Dave quickly slid backwards and moved to a new vantage point and resumed firing. Someone from the group yelled, "Hold your fire, until you're sure of your targets!"

Dave waited till the firing had subsided, then yelled again. "This is your last chance to surrender, I'm going to give you five seconds to make up your mind...then we open fire again." Suddenly someone jumped up from the bed of a pickup truck and cut loose with a burst of automatic fire in Dave's direction.

Before he could totally move out of the way, Dave was spun around from the impact of a round hitting his arm. Dave immediately cut off a piece of the nylon line and tied it around his arm just above the wound. From what he could tell, only the muscle had been damaged and not the bone. The survivor instinct immediately overcame him. Dave rolled back into a steady position and fired a well-aimed shot at his opponent. The arrow struck the man in the stomach, flipping him backwards out of the truck.

Slowly all the shooting ceased. Danny began screaming at the top of his lungs, "You either throw down all weapons or none of you will see daylight again. Now move in front of the headlights...with your hands up and they better be empty!"

The pain was beginning to increase in Dave's arm as was the bleeding. Using a large handkerchief, Dave made a makeshift bandage and tied it as best as he could using one hand and his teeth. Pulling himself up using a tree for assistance, he slowly worked his way to the edge of the clearing, continually watching for anybody still holding out, waiting to ambush either him or Danny. Colin had already moved in front of the large truck with the main group. Those who couldn't make it on their own were helped by others.

Danny finally came into view from the rear of the group. He had waited to make sure nothing would go wrong. He still didn't know Dave

had been injured because his radio had been damaged during the last exchange of gunfire. Danny called out loud enough for all to hear, "Nobody move and if you have someone waiting or hiding for us still, you'll all be dead before the noise stops. Now empty out all your pockets then reach for the moon." With his rifle still in the ready position, Danny began moving from vehicle to vehicle looking for anybody else.

Dave kept the group covered and Danny moved to the front to take up a watchful position. "Make sure you keep them covered while I search the trucks." Dave said, "Pick two men to take care of the wounded."

Danny pointed to Colin and the man next to him, "You two, take care of the wounded and don't try anything funny." Colin moved slowly at first in order to allow the other man to take the initiative. Colin had also seen the blood on Dave's shirt, but knew better than to say anything or show any reaction to it.

Once the wounded men had been moved and any weapons tossed out of sight, Dave finished his search of the vehicles, including Colin's. Skipping his would certainly create suspicion among the others. This time Dave found a small soft bag like the airlines sell. Inside was the money he was looking for. After making a complete search of the rental truck, all Dave could find were the marijuana bales. This time there were not other drugs, but he did find a map with several areas marked off which he quickly shoved it inside his shirt.

Dave moved to the front of the smugglers again, pointing to Colin and the other man who had helped with the wounded. "You two. Move around to the back of the truck and start unloading everything and remember, I'm watching you." This time Colin led the way, climbing into the rear of the huge truck, then lending a hand to the other man so he could get inside easier.

Dave watched as the bales were tossed onto the ground. He chose Colin as one of the two men so in reality he would only have to watch one person. Numbness was starting in his arm, but it appeared the bleeding had ceased. The pain wasn't minimal, except when he had to move his arm. Later he would be able to treat it better.

After the truck was empty, all the smugglers were loaded into the rear, except for Colin and the other man, whom Dave had left for other things. Danny latched the door shut, while Dave had the two men load four bales into the only truck with tires still inflated. "Now, drag the rest away from the trucks, so when the fire starts the trucks won't burn up." Pointing to Danny, he said, "You make sure all the other vehicles are disabled except the one they just loaded."

All Danny did was remove the coil wire on the Ford and Chryslers, while cutting the battery cable on the General Motors. He knew Colin kept a spare in his trunk, so he would be one of the first to get away. Dave yelled to Danny, "Tie these two to the front of the truck." Danny knew it was so Colin and the other man could get loose and free the others. It would insure Colin's reputation with them and keep him from getting a criminal record.

After securing Colin and the other man to the bumper, Danny moved back to where Dave was waiting near the bales. "What do we do now?" saying it softly so the others wouldn't overhear.

"You take off for the car, I'll wait till I hear you blow the horn when you get to where this path meets the highway. Then I'll drive the truck with the bales in it to the road and follow you into town where we can leave it to be found. My staying here till the last minute will also give us more time.... Now take off."

"Gotcha." Then Danny disappeared into the darkness. Dave pulled out a can of diesel fuel from one of the trucks and began splashing fuel all over the bales, finally tossing the can into the center. He next started up the engine of the truck he planned on taking. Walking back to the front of the large truck, he said, "I told your friends the other night, now I'm telling you. Find another line of work or else. This time I'm only burning the bales and not the vehicles. So, once I'm gone you better get the hell out of here, because as soon as I get out of here, I'm calling the cops."

Colin only stared, while the other man asked, "Who the hell are you? What keeps you mess 'in where you don't belong?"

Dave grabbed him by the hair, shoving his pistol into the man's throat. "I'm the one who'll blow you into eternity if I see you again! The name for you to remember if anybody asks is "Batman". Any more questions?" When the man didn't answer, Dave kicked Colin. "You got any questions?"

"Nope...not me...nothing at all, sir," was all Colin replied.

The sound of Danny blowing he horn broke the silence. Dave walked over to the bales, set them on fire, then climbed into the truck and started down the path. He suddenly slammed on the brakes after realizing that he had forgotten about the hose full of nails. Quickly, Dave got out of the truck and tossed it into the back before continuing on.

Once out on the road, Danny led the way towards town. Just before entering the city limits Danny pulled off to the side of the road. Dave followed suit and parked behind him. Danny ran back to Dave's location and asked, "Okay, what do you want to do with the truck?"

"Well, it's pretty early in the morning, so let's be so obvious nobody will pay any attention. Here, take the crossbow and the satchel with the money and put them in the trunk. Then you follow me into town. Then you follow me into town. Once I park the truck, pick me up and head for a phone booth."

Concerned, Danny replied, "Whatever you say, but how are you doing? That arm looks pretty bad!"

"Don't worry, I'll be all right. Just get moving and make sure you drive carefully."

Danny put everything including his jacket into the trunk, then pulled out behind Dave. Dave drove right into town. Danny couldn't believe it when Dave pulled into the courthouse parking lot. He watched as Dave climbed out and began wiping off the steering wheel and anyplace else he might have touched.

Locking the keys inside was the last item before getting in the car with Danny. The relief of it being almost over made him very tired all at once. The closing of his eyes alone felt so good he wanted to take a quick nap. But he knew there was still more to be completed.

Danny became worried when he saw Dave slump into the seat and close his eyes. Only when Dave said, "Let's go find that phone," did he feel somewhat better about his friend. The phone booth near the gas station at the far end of town was the next stop.

Dave adjusted himself to a more comfortable position, then spoke, "Call the sheriff's department and ask for someone in the narcotics division. If they say no one is available, ask for a desk sergeant or an officer in charge. When someone responds tell them where the truck is parked and the spot where the drop was made. Make sure if they ask who you are, all you tell them is a concerned citizen called Batman. Then get me back to your place. All we can do is hope Colin gets away in time."

"Okay I got it, but that damn brother of mine better not get caught by either side, or I'll kick his ass," Danny answered with a tone of anger.

After he made the call, Danny headed for home. Dave seemed more alert now and that eased his mind somewhat. "I'm telling you, I left the ropes loose enough for them to get away. If that jerk doesn't get out of there, it's his own damn fault. You sure you're all right? You sure haven't been the life of the party."

Showing the signs of weakness in his voice, Dave answered, "I told you not to worry. I'm just a little tired that's all. Now let's get to your place, so I can at least get cleaned up. I hate wet shoes. Besides I want to see what this arm looks like in the lights."

Nothing else was said during the rest of the drive back. Dave just wanted to rest and Danny wanted to make sure he was there when Colin arrived. Along the way, several police cars went by heading in the direction of Grafton. Both men were concerned Colin might not have gotten away, but only time would tell.

Once back in the garage, Dave slowly pulled off his shirt. While Danny was in the house gathering up any first aid supplies he could find. The excuse he gave his wife about Dave was that he had fell on an arrow while climbing a tree. Aside from calling them stupid from running around during the night, she let it slide and offered to help. Danny quickly convinced her they would handle it by themselves.

By the time the wound was cleaned off with soap and water, it was apparent there shouldn't be any problem with the two of them

caring for it. The bullet had gone only through the meat. Even the bleeding had ceased until Danny began scrubbing it. Using a steady pressure directly over the wound, the bleeding ceased again. After applying a first aid cream, Danny began bandaging Dave's arm. He was busy putting the tape on when Colin pulled into the driveway. Colin ran into the garage, anxious to see how badly Dave had been injured.

Dave reassured Colin he was fine. Then they listened to Colin explain what had happened after he was loose and let the others free. Colin had even helped find enough parts to help get several other vehicles running before he left. "I took the long way back, just to make sure I didn't run into any police cars or have someone follow me. The best part was when one of them said you guys must have been the same ones who struck before....Sure took a load off my mind."

Dave laid down in the corner to rest a short while. "Break out the money and divide it up into our three shares. Only this time be careful getting it into your safety deposit boxes. I'm going to take a short nap."

Chapter VI

The constant ringing of the phone caused him to pick up the receiver. "Detective Carson" was what the voice said. Coming out of a sound sleep the voice spoke again. "Detective Carson, are you there?"

Barely aware of his surroundings, "Yea...I'm here, go ahead." He still wasn't sure if it was a dream or not.

"Sir, we have another smuggling operation broken up by Batman. The watch commander asked that I call you immediately. This time there was blood on the scene."

"What the hell time is it, and where's the crime scene located?" Doug slowly sat up on the side of his bed, awaiting the reply.

After the sound of papers being shuffled, the officer came back to say, "The time is two fifty-six and the report shows two crime scenes. One of which is in Grafton, the other is about six miles out of town. Sir, the watch commander wants to know if you're coming out or should he go ahead and move the vehicles and do the preliminary reports?"

Doug quickly answered, "Tell him it'll take me about twenty minutes to get there and not to move anything. Call somebody from the lab and have them meet me there. I don't care if they're in pajamas. I want them out there tonight."

"Yes sir, I'll make the necessary calls myself. Sorry to have disturbed you." The young officer was afraid the detective was upset with him.

"Don't feel bad...It goes with the territory. Just make sure nothing is disturbed until I get there...Good-bye." After hanging up the phone Doug tried to decide whether or not to take a shower before getting dressed. His decision was to just put on some comfortable clothes and pass on the shower. If nothing else it would give him an excuse to come back home, rather than spend the entire day at the department. It might even give him a chance to take a nap and relax.

On the way towards Grafton the dispatcher informed him the first crime scene would be at the courthouse building. Doug thought to himself that's all the county needed, a drug scandal involving town officials. Hopefully none of them would be implicated. The paperwork, along with politicians, would be far too much, let alone the press having a field day with a story like that. Maybe the press could be suppressed somehow. Hell, who was he kidding? Even the slightest relationship would reach the front page.

Arriving at the Grafton courthouse, Doug parked his car behind the van from the department's lab. He could only see two other

cruisers there. Tom, the department's lab expert, was already directing his photographers to get as many different angles as possible of the interior. "Well Tom...anything so far?"

"Hi Doug! No, I won't be able to give you any results until late afternoon. So far all I can tell you, is it's definitely marijuana bales and there appears to be human blood on the seat."

Tom went on when Doug didn't stop him. "One of the deputies ran the tag. It came back registered to a Carl Eastman...Of course he reported it stolen about one a.m. He just happened to look outside and notice it was gone. Once I've done the preliminaries we'll have it towed in. Tomorrow we can go over it in more detail."

Doug was walking around the truck looking for anything obvious. "What about the other site? Anybody out there yet?"

"Just the watch commander and three men. I told them not to touch anything and to wait for one of us. All I heard was there are two pickups and a large moving van. No people, just blood stains. Ray Martins on watch duty tonight. He said it looked like a damn war zone out there. Whoever Batman is the stakes keep getting higher. I just hope it's not his blood we found," showing even he was leaning towards Batman also.

"I don't think so. At least if he was caught no one would have called us. I just wish the son-of-a-bitch would pass the information on and let us handle it. You won't believe the pressure I'm getting from the sheriff. He's more worried about how bad Batman is making us look. Well, I'm going to head out to the other site. I'll meet you there."

"Okay, I'm just about finished here. Another five minutes or so and I'll be right behind you. Just don't let anyone screw up the crime scene. I hate it when a deputy fingers everything he finds." Tom kept on muttering something else Doug couldn't hear.

Doug grinned and climbed back into his car. Heading back out of town he radioed Ray for directions. Doug knew the general area and Ray said he would have a man meet him where the path met the highway.

Doug turned down the path. He stopped long enough to inform the deputy he should remain there until the lab van showed up. He then drove up to where the other police vehicles were parked. Stepping out of his car his foot became entangled in a string or something.

After untying his foot, Doug started pulling the nylon line. He found that it led into the woods. He removed his flashlight from the car and began following the string through the trees. It was easy to see the line was new and hadn't been there long. It lay on top of the leaves and other vegetation. One of the other men came over to see what Doug was doing. Doug said, "Hold it right there. I don't want anyone but the lab boys moving around. You go back down to the vehicles and wait for me. Make sure no one touches anything." The deputy shrugged his shoulders, turned, and left.

By the time the lab van pulled up, Doug had found the flashlights and both ends of the line. He also found several trees with bullet holes. Their angles of impact indicated the clearing as point of origin. At the large truck, he met with Tom and explained what he had found. When Tom had gathered up as much as possible, he left to return to the lab until daylight. Doug stayed, along with one of the deputies, to insure nothing was disturbed before the lab crew returned. Tom had left a thermos full of coffee for them to drink. He even promised to hit McDonalds when he returned to bring them breakfast.

The men did return right after the sun came out. They also brought the breakfast and fresh coffee as promised. Still carrying the hot coffee in one hand and an egg McMuffin in the other, Doug joined Tom in a thorough search of the area, after which the two men went over their notes together.

So far all but the rental truck had been reported as stolen. The truck had been rented using stolen identification. The blood sample results weren't back yet, but one of the hospitals reported a man with a bad stomach wound being left at the door. He was still unconscious and carried no identification. The doctor only reported it because the man was left outside the door of the hospital. The wound was a deep puncture and any suspicious wounds had to be reported to the authorities by law.

Tom had brought the reports out with him since they had found a few arrows at the scene. If the blood matched the man at the hospital, it might link the two together. They also found several types of shell casings near the vehicles, plus the thirty caliber carbine shells near the end of one string, and blood samples near another string location.

They concluded that whomever Batman was, he had helped and was also pretty intelligent. Between this and the last time he struck, it was apparent his methods were quite successful. Whomever it was, they were glad he seemed to be on the right side. If Batman or his friend were wounded, the blood types would be fed into the department's computer, then matched against all the deputies, then other local police units. Finally, those with the same type would have their whereabouts checked and verified. It was one hell of a long shot, but it was all they had. Just maybe the man in the hospital could give them further information.

Another starting point was to notify all the area physicians to be on the watch for any odd-looking wounds. Doug also wanted someone to call all the sporting goods dealers to see if anyone bought a crossbow during the last six months. The only other thing to do was to keep checking and hope for some kind of lead....

Chapter VII

Dave was finally waking up in Danny's garage. He had been far too weak to attempt the drive back to his motel. The sunlight was coming through the window, the warm rays hitting him directly in the face. So much so he had to move in order to avoid the harsh glare in his eyes. The movement caused him to quickly remember the wound in his arm. Immediately after the sharp pain hit, Dave pulled his arm against his chest. The pain was lessened to a dull ache. He tried opening and closing his hand. When everything still worked and the pain only increased slightly with the movements, he knew the arm would be fine.

Danny came in at that point and said, "Well, glad to see you're awake now. I was starting to get a little worried and wasn't sure what I was going to do. You sure look a hell of a lot better than you did last night. Colin went home after you fell asleep. He figured it would be the best thing to do. How are you feeling?"

"Tired and sore. What time is it?" Danny handed him a can of Pepsi, then answered, "Almost noon, I called in sick today so I could keep an eye on you. Just to let you know my wife thinks you fell on an arrow last night. She and I both agree you should stay with us and save on the motel bill, especially since this happened. Oh yeah, nothing on the news yet."

Dave looked up at him and replied, "Well, I'll keep the motel room, just in case the cops start looking at who has checked in and out. I do appreciate the offer though. Make sure you tell your wife I said so too. Let's change the bandage again before I go back to change my clothes. By the way, what did you do with the money bag?"

Reassuring his friend, Danny answered, "Don't worry, Colin and I agreed to wait till you were ready before we divided up the money. I've already prepared fresh bandages for you and some extras." With Dave still sitting on the sleeping bag, Danny proceeded to carefully remove the old bandage. Dave tried to help whenever possible. As the wound became fully exposed, both men were delighted to see it still looked clean with no signs of infection. After applying more first aid cream, Danny bandaged the arm back up insuring the wrapping wasn't too tight. Aside from some bruise discoloration and the tenderness, the wound hadn't even started bleeding during the entire procedure.

While Dave sat there trying to fully wake up and work the soreness out of his entire body, Danny went in to call Colin and let him know that Dave was all right, and to come on over. While inside, Danny's wife fixed a few bacon and egg sandwiches for lunch.

By the time Colin arrived, Dave was moving around fairly well. He was already trying to figure out the map as he ate the sandwich. Dave stopped long enough to help divide up the money, with Colin and Danny eagerly helping. This time there was only forty thousand.

Danny quickly wrote down the amount and began dividing it on paper. He went through several scraps of paper before coming up with the solution.

"What I came up with is we each get twelve thousand five hundred, and if Colin agrees, the extra twenty-five hundred will go to you Dave. After all, if it weren't for you, we wouldn't have anything. Besides, consider it as a damage settlement for your arm. What do you say Colin?"

"Sounds more than reasonable to me, so it's settled, Dave gets a bonus." Colin knew Dave deserved it more than anybody else.

Dave hadn't expected this. Their original plan had been to always split the money evenly. "I won't argue with you, but what I will do is use that money for any expenses we have. That way I'll feel better about the whole thing. Now that's taken care of. Take a look at this map I found." Moving his finger from one spot to another, he said "Both places we hit are clearly marked. These other dots must be other drop points. After last night, I think we'd be pushing our luck to go on. We've certainly been well paid and each of us has a nice nest egg to fall back on."

"What I suggest is we let Colin wait here a few days, then meet with his two friends again. Only this time Colin you'll back out at the last minute. All we need to do is locate the area of their next shipment and we'll know the exact spot using this map. Only this time the police will have the information, catching them red handed. Colin will be in the clear, and we've put one hell of a dent in their operation. This time you've really got to watch your step all the way. We'd better have one hell of an excuse for you, or they'll certainly try to tie you in with their being caught."

Neither of the brothers said anything at first. Everybody just looked at one another for a while, hoping someone would break the silence first.

"Listen," Dave finally said, "This isn't a damn game we can keep going on with. My getting hurt has nothing to do with us quitting. Don't you understand this is just like gambling. We have to quit while we're ahead and no keep playing until there's nothing left. The key factor is the stakes are your lives and not just the money. You've both got more than you normally make in two years, so take it and don't push your luck. Sure, it was fun and nothing is going to change what we did. But it's time to face reality and quit. The police will take it from here."

Danny was the first to speak up. "You're right, but the risk was worth it for that kind of money. Maybe we should quit while we're ahead."

"No," Colin finally said. "I say we do it one more time, then we quit, not before. Don't you see with all the trouble we've caused, they'll have to make the next load even bigger. That will also mean more money to pay for them. Come on, what do you say? One last time."

Now Danny understood the reason people stayed in the drug business and why gamblers stayed in until they were wiped out. "No, Colin, Dave's right. We have to quit now before we get caught by either side. You just get the information and let the cops handle it. We've got enough money to last awhile. Who knows? Maybe you'll get called back to work soon. At least you can catch up on all your bills and have plenty left over. Just maybe we can talk our wives into letting us go to the Adirondacks on a hunting trip this year."

"Yeah, maybe we can even rent a cabin this year, instead of freezing our butts off in a tent." At least Colin had a smile on his face now, and seemed content with quitting before it was too late.

Since everyone was finally in agreement, Dave had them take their share of the money and put it away. Dave took a thousand dollars to cover the expense of getting through legitimate channels. All three left at the same time, each in a separate direction, Dave to his motel for clean clothes, the two brothers to deposit their money.

After Dave had taken a shower and changed clothes, he sat down on the bed and began going through the phone book for an attorney. So many of the names seemed familiar, but not enough for him to be certain about whether or not he knew them. His decision was based on the smallest ad. That way he felt the man would be less likely to ask too many questions.

The appointment was set up for that afternoon. The lawyer settled for Dave using only private and personal as the reason. The lawyer was either just getting established or wasn't very good if Dave could get an appointment that quickly without any hassles. When Dave arrived at the address, it was quite apparent by the building's appearance that the man certainly wasn't in the upper income bracket.

Dave no more than entered the door when a young man in a suit and tie greeted him. "Yes sir, may I help you?"

"I hope so, I'm supposed to meet a Mister Prado. I have an appointment. My name is Wayne, Bruce Wayne." It seemed only fair to Dave, after all, it was Batman's true identity.

"Yes, Mister Wayne, I'm Larry Prado. Come in and sit down. What can I do for you as an attorney?" he said as he stepped behind his desk and sat down.

Dave sat down on a sofa against the wall. "I first would like your word that whatever is discussed here, doesn't get repeated."

"Mister Wayne, I would assume that your familiar with the law enough to know the lawyer-client relationship is always confidential. Now how may I help you?" Then he sat back in the large soft chair.

Dave opened his briefcase so only he could see inside, hoping the attorney would think it was full. In reality all he had inside was the thousand dollars, the phone book from the motel, and the last of the notebook paper he had leftover. Shuffling the papers around, Dave pulled out five one hundred-dollar bills.

"Larry, I represent a client that wishes to remain anonymous. I have a five-hundred-dollar retainer here if you'll agree to handle a few matters for him locally. I can guarantee it's nothing illegal. Before I say anything more, I need your answer with a typed contract stating you agree to keep everything confidential. Also include your fee for ten hours time, which I feel will more than cover your time." Dave laid the five bills on the desk and spread them out. From the look on the young man's face Dave knew it would be all right.

With his voice varying slightly, the attorney said, "Just give me a few moments to draw up the contract. I'll have my secretary type it up. My only request is the allowance of a statement saying nothing illegal shall even be suggested as part of said requirements of me." He looked like a child in a candy store, waiting anxiously for his parents to say he could have two dollars to spend.

"Suits me fine. Like I said, the main thing here is to keep my employer anonymous. That also applies to myself and the actions you're to take on his behalf."

Even before Dave had finished talking, the attorney had begun scribbling away on a note pad. Dave closed his briefcase backup and set it next to his feet. The lawyer rose from his desk and apologized for not having any refreshments to offer Dave. The secretary must have been in a separate area as Dave hadn't seen even a desk when he came in earlier. The sounds of the typewriter could be heard now as Larry, as he wanted to be called, re-entered the room.

"Once my secretary is finished, I have two people from the next office willing to come over as witnesses so it can be notarized. Each of us will have a copy for our records. I placed 'client', wherever a name should have been entered. So aside from your signature at the bottom, no name except mine shall appear on the document. If you don't mind my asking, just why did you pick my office over the more prominent firms? Not that I'm complaining, but it does make one curious."

"I imagine it does make you wonder!" Dave began. "As I said, my employer does things on, shall we say, a different approach. He feels that the less prominent businessmen, do a far more thorough job, trying to establish a good record."

It was at that moment that the secretary knocked on the door and entered with the contract in hand. After Larry read it over, he handed a copy to Dave for his inspection.

"This will be fine," Dave said after skimming over the contract. "Now, if you'll just point out where you'd like me to sign," then reached for a pen on the desk in preparation.

"Please wait till I get the witnesses before signing. Betty, please go next door and let them know we need two people to witness a contract signing. On the way back, pick up your notary seal and join us." With a quick turn she left both the room and the office, only to return in less than a minute with two ladies following behind. After a brief introduction, Dave signed the contracts, as 'Bruce Wayne' of

course. Then the attorney signed, followed by the witnesses, lastly being notarized by the secretary.

Larry made out a receipt for the money and handed it to Dave. The two ladies, along with the secretary, then left the room closing the door behind them. "Now, Mister Wayne, or Bruce if I may, just exactly what is it you would like me to do?"

Dave picked up both the contract and the receipt and placed them into the briefcase. Pulling out a sheet of paper, Dave said, "If you'll please write down the following names and addresses" then slid the paper across the desk. "I'd like you to establish two trust funds and two savings accounts in those names. The money will be delivered in cash by me, and you're to ensure that no one finds out who made the donations. It's as simple as that. Do you think there'll be any problems, legal or otherwise?"

"You mean that's it?" He seemed quite shocked by such a simple request. "If that is the case, you could have gone straight to the bank and taken care of it there."

"I know, but you have to understand this is the best way in insure anonymity for both my client and myself. The amounts are not that large, but the consequences surrounding the circumstances could lead to further ramifications. How long until you're ready to receive the funds and make the necessary deposits? The amounts will be broken down when you're ready to make the deposits. The two names ending in Jones will be the two savings accounts. The two names ending in Johnson will be the trust funds, payable on their eighteenth birthdays. Once everything is settled and the money is deposited will be the time you're informed as to when to notify those involved and not before."

Larry was busy writing down several notations, pausing to ask, "In reference to the trust funds, what should I do about an executor of the funds? If something were to happen or for that matter, just whom do I notify, since they're underage."

Dave didn't have to think very long about that. He replied, "At the address listed there, you'll find an Edna Bullock, their mother. Make sure she understands only the children at age eighteen may withdraw the money. If something happens to either of the children, the remaining child will be the sole heir. If both children should die before receiving the money, it's to be donated in their name to the local college fund. Does that cover everything at this time?"

"Yes sir. Just how do I get in touch with you when everything is ready?"

"Don't worry. You have your retainer. I'll be in touch in about two days. That should give you enough time. Don't you agree?" Dave stood up after putting the list back inside his briefcase.

"Two days should be fine. I'll have all the necessary papers ready." He also stood up and stumbled slightly as he came around his desk on some law books piled on the floor. Shaking hands with Dave he

said, "If you don't mind my asking, does your client do this sort of thing very often?"

"Sorry" was the only answer Dave gave the man before leaving the office. Outside Dave took a deep breath and felt relieved now that one of the final steps was put into motion. Dave spent the rest of the day watching the house where his children lived, still trying to make up his mind about whether or not to visit Edna and the children.

That evening he still hadn't made up his mind, so he went to Danny's house to inform him and his brother about how they would get their money without having to worry. All they would have to explain, to anyone who asked, was that an attorney contacted them and said they were sole beneficiaries in a will. Someone they didn't even know about, and the attorney wouldn't tell them who it was. Dave would let them know when he needed their money for the lawyer. All they had to do was stick to their story, no matter what.

Chapter VIII

Early the next day Dave stopped at the gas station to watch Edna's house. He still was torn between going over there or leaving them to continue as a whole family. Dave's interference could cause real problems. The children wouldn't be able to relate to him as their father. So far Edna's second husband had been their father image and he certainly didn't want to destroy that. And it would be anybody's guess as to how the children and Edna would react. Her current husband couldn't help but to have hard feelings towards him.

Dave went around to the back of the station to use the rest room facilities. Upon his return to the interior of the store section, he was caught off guard by the sight of the children buying a gallon of milk and some candy. While trying to maintain his composure, Dave went over to the cooler and removed a Pepsi and stood behind them in line. In his heart he wished they would turn around and recognize him, then rush over and put their arms around him. But in his mind, Dave still knew this wasn't the way they should meet, if at all.

So, Dave stood there just trying to be calm. The girl dropped her change to the floor. Dave bent down to assist her in locating all of it and the boy also joined in the search.

"You're always dropping stuff. Boy, what a dumb sister you are". As young Dave reached under a wire cookie rack for a nickel.

Donna shot back a quick reply. "I am not! It's all your fault... You bumped my arm on purpose!"

"Excuse me," Dave said trying to stop their argument." Here's several coins I picked up. You do realize it's not polite to call your sister dumb, especially in public. Didn't your mother ever teach you that?"

Young Dave dropped his eyes towards the floor, then spoke." Yes sir, I'm sorry sis. Thank you for your help, sir!"

Dave was glad the boy realized he was wrong and tried to make amends. "It's all right son, and you're quite welcome. Now you better get home before the milk starts to spoil. Just be careful crossing the road."

"Ah, you sound just like Dad, but don't worry, we'll look both ways." With that the two children left the store. Dave paid for his Pepsi and picked up a bag of pretzels to take along. He watched through the window as the two children held hands while they crossed the road, then entered the house.

Dave got into his car and left, consuming the pretzels while driving over to Danny's house. He only stayed there long enough to let them know he would need their money in a few days. Colin wanted

to know how the taxes would be paid on the money. Dave informed him to ask the lawyer when he contacted them. The keything for them to do was to act surprised when the attorney showed up. Dave also told them not to make any plans on how to spend the money, before that day otherwise someone might get suspicious if one of them talked about buying a new car or paying bills off.

That evening Dave stayed in his motel room alone. Several times he reached for the phone to call Edna, but backed out every time. Once the desk operator even answered before Dave had a chance to hang up.

"Desk, May I help you?" The sound of the voice caught Dave completely off guard.

"Uh....yes. Do you happen to know of a pizza place that delivers?" He had already eaten, but it was the best he could think of.

"Sorry sir. If you'd like I can look one up in the phone book for you though", the clerk replied trying to help in any way he could.

"That's alright. Maybe I'll use the opportunity to get some fresh air. Thanks anyway." He hung the phone up and laid back on the bed, feeling rather silly about how he'd carried on. Finally, the hour grew too late to place the call. Dave consoled himself by watching the television and letting the subject pass for the night.

Dave was up early the next day. He sat in his room waiting for nine a.m. when he could call the attorney for a progress report. The lawyer informed Dave that everything would be ready that very afternoon. All that was missing were the dates and the amounts for each person involved. Dave said he would provide the money early in the morning of the next day. The lawyer informed him everything would be ready at ten a.m. for his appointment including someone to accompany the money to the bank for deposit.

Immediately after speaking to the attorney, Dave called Danny at work and then Colin at home. They would each make provisions for removing their share of the money from the bank. Dave would pick all of it up that evening at Danny's and deliver it the next morning.

All three men agreed that Dave was to give the attorney a three time period, before they would supposedly notified for the first time. That should allow more than ample time for Dave to make it back home.

Colin also informed Dave that he planned on going out to the tavern today. If possible, he would at least make contact, with the outside chance of finding out where if not when the next drop would occur. Only after he had made contact would he proceed to the bank. After which he would meet Dave at Danny's with the money and any information he had obtained.

Colin did meet with the two men at the tavern. When he first arrived in picked a booth in a far corner. Walking across the large room, he could see that either he was too early or they had changed their minds. Within ten minutes of his arrival, both men entered and

slowly scanned the room until one of them spotted Colin. The taller of the two led the way with Stan stopping at the bar to purchase three beers before joining them.

As Tony slid into the booth opposite Colin, he said, "Everything okay with you?"

Colin felt nervous now. He was afraid they had linked him to what had happened. But he knew he'd have to try and convince them otherwise. "What can I say? You certainly can't tell me that night was supposed to overwhelm me into continuing on. Whoever that son-of-a-bitch was could have killed us. By the way, how is that guy who was hurt so bad?"

Stan sat down and pushed a beer toward Colin. Tony looked around to see if anyone was listening. Only after taking a sip of beer did he answer. "Our friend is critical. Don't worry, he'll be all right and he knows better than to say anything to the cops."

Stan spoke up next. He seemed more at ease with Colin. "You did okay, Colin. You just stick with us and we'll fix up everything. Here's a hundred bucks for your help the other night. I told you we would take care of those who help us. If you need anything just let us know. As long as you work for us your money problems will be over."

"Yeah," Tony broke in, "You stick on our side and you'll be okay. Now, make yourself available this Friday. Since you did so good last time with helping us get out of there, I think we can trust you. This time the drop will be near Eaton Estates. I'll give you the exact location Friday evening. I'll call you at home about Six p.m. Just make sure you've got a full tank of gas and don't mention this to anyone. Understand?"

"No problem," Colin said. Now he knew they trusted him almost totally. After finishing his beer, he slid out of the booth. "See you later!" then shook their hands and left. He still had to stop at the bank and get over to Danny's to meet the others.

Danny left work early in order to make it to the bank before it closed that day. He had one of the three briefcases in the trunk. Dave suggested it would be far less conspicuous than a paper sack. Besides, just carrying the briefcase made him feel important. With the money inside a sense of power surged through his body.

Danny couldn't wait till the money came back legally. He had visions of walking into the finance company and paying off his car loan in one-dollar bills, just to see the look on their faces. The best part would be being able to take his wife and children on a real vacation and not a simple weekend excursion. Maybe even a trip to Disneyworld and a room in the park itself, not several miles away.

Dave took the afternoon to find a print shop and have the map copied. Sitting outside the print shop, he carefully checked each mark to ensure the copy was clear. As the day went on, the use of his arm increased. The soreness was still there, but not anywhere as bad

as when he first woke up. Only after his hot shower could he even straighten the arm all the way out. Changing the bandage even surprised him. There wasn't any sign of bleeding on the bandage during the night.

Arriving at Danny's, Dave slipped a wind breaker on so he could wear the pistol underneath. Carrying such a large amount of cash, it was best to be prepared for anything. Dave's biggest concern was whether or not all the money would fit inside the briefcase. Inside the garage all three discussed the details for the attorney. Colin also gave what information he had gained to Dave. Only after several attempts did Dave and Danny convince him to give up on the whole idea.

That night in his motel room, Dave propped a chair against the door for extra security. He went over the map several times. Each time he came up with the same location near the area Colin gave him. The spot marked on the map turned out to be an area behind the elementary school. It angered Dave even further when he thought of them using a school, the very place children were supposedly safe. The mark indicated the drop zone was almost three hundred yards to the rear of the school just inside the tree line. Dave surmised that there must be a dirt road leading through the woods from the opposite side. Otherwise all the vehicles would bring too much attention if they came from just the school side. Anyone living nearby or just passing by would report that kind of activity at night.

After double checking the lock on the door, Dave slid the briefcase under the bed. He laid the forty-five on the table next to the bed. It would be more accessible there should someone try to enter. He left the lamp lit and lay back to try and sleep. If nothing else someone might think he was watching television all night. Dave was almost sure that no one had any idea that he was baby-sitting such a large amount of cash. But almost only counted in horseshoes and hand grenades, so he took precautions for peace of mind.

Dave finally did fall asleep, but it turned out to be far from restful. He dreamed of when he was in Vietnam, stationed at some remote village. Everything began fine, even the smell that came after a fresh rain, the smell that was always present during the darkness of the storm. In his dream the darkness had engulfed the area outside the hamlet. Only its interior was still visible from the warm glow of the fire. The c-rations were warming next to the fire as Dave and the others ate their rice.

Suddenly the constant chatter from the jungle ceased. Instinctively the men threw water on the burning embers and hugged the ground, yelling "Incoming" as the steady blasts from enemy mortar rounds began. Each explosion made the earth tremble. The vibrations passed through Dave's body until it seemed his heart pounded in tune with the blasts. Out of sheer habit, the men crawled in between the dust and falling debris away from the grass huts into the safety of darkness.

He woke up on the floor next to the bed, trying to establish the reality of where he was. There was a constant pounding on the door and someone yelling from outside, "You okay in there? Hey! Are you all right?"

Wiping the cold sweat from his brow, Dave yelled back, "Fine, I'm fine...Sorry I made so much noise." Dave slumped back against the wall, still trying to regain his thoughts and wait for his heart to slow down.

Whoever it was outside the door, began pounding again. "Make sure you keep the noise down. I need my sleep. I got a long drive tomorrow."

"Sorry" was all Dave said in reply. Slowly he pulled himself up and went into the small bathroom to take a hot shower. While he waited for the water to heat up, Dave returned to the bed to see what time it was. The small travel alarm seemed blurred at first, then the numbers came into focus. Three Forty-two in the morning. After finishing his shower, Dave experienced a chill over his body. He quickly wrapped the bed covers around himself and shut off the air conditioner.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and turned the channel selector from station to station until he found a movie to watch. Dave opened up the last Pepsi, then settled back to enjoy the John Wayne movie. Even though the soda was warm, the effort of getting dressed and going down for ice helped him to stand the taste.

He fell asleep again and awoke at almost nine o'clock. This time he dressed and prepared to drive to the lawyers. After a final inspection of the money and his forty-five, Dave slipped on the windbreaker and picked up the briefcase. Walking down to the car his nerves were still on edge. He constantly kept looking for anyone or anything suspicious. This feeling stayed with him even as he drove downtown to the attorney's and parked the car.

Even after he entered the office, Dave couldn't help but to remain cautious. He was escorted right into the small room and offered a cup of coffee by the secretary but declined as he sat down facing the door. The young attorney even appeared to be nervous as he entered the room with several papers in hand. He sat down behind the desk and sorted them into several stacks before finally speaking.

"Good morning, Mister Wayne. I believe you'll find everything quite in order. After we've completed the preliminaries, I'll make the phone call to my associate to pick up the funds." He then rose and carried the papers, now all neatly arranged, to where Dave was sitting. "If you'll please read over each one and sign on the appropriate line, all I have to do is fill in the amounts. Of course, I'll have my secretary make out the receipts after you give me the money. If you wish I can call my associate now and have him witness the transference of the funds, if it would make you feel more at ease."

"As a matter of fact, I would feel a little better about handing this much cash over, if there were witnesses for both our sakes. This associate of yours, does he know anything about our transaction? You did agree to keep this a secret matter, especially the names of those involved!" Dave gave him a look of distrust, causing the lawyer to stumble while moving towards the door.

"You don't have to worry. All he knows is he will be escorting me to the bank. He's an off-duty policeman so he can carry a firearm legally. Even my secretary doesn't have the names. Only you and I know them. I intend to keep the papers in a safety deposit box until the date comes for notification. Then I'll deliver each one myself so no one will ever know the true source of the money.

"Please understand," Dave began, "I have to insure there are no foul-ups. My employer would find someone to replace me. And at these prices neither one of us can afford that, don't you agree?"

"Yes, I can see your point from that angle." He had a slight grin on his face now as he dialed the number. "Hello Andrew....Yes, it's me.....Everything's almost ready. By the time you get here I'll be readyGoodbye." Hanging the phone back up, he turned back towards Dave. "Does everything meet with your approval, Mister Wayne? I've even taken the liberty to deposit all the money into a special account from which I'll transfer the funds to the individual accounts to make it less traceable."

Feeling a little more relaxed at how things were going, Dave said, "Fine, I'm sure you'll handle everything in the appropriate manner. Let's get down to the finer details before your escort arrives. The Jones' will each be given thirty-seven thousand. The two children are to have fifteen thousand for each of their trust funds. You are to receive two hundred a year to maintain the funds as agreed. Two weeks from today, you're to notify the Jones', three weeks from today the children. Just make sure their mother understands how everything is set up."

The young attorney sat there making sure the correct figures were in the proper places. He marked his calendar with small notations so he wouldn't forget the correct dates. Dave set the briefcase on the desk and began stacking the money in piles of ten thousand each. He slid each pile over to Larry for him to ensure that the amounts were correct.

During the moment Larry set down the final stack of bills, his intercom buzzed. "Yes?" he said.

It was his secretary, "Mister Prado, Mister Benson is here. He says you're expecting him."

"Have him take a seat; I won't be much longer." Then he looked at Dave and said, "That's my escort. We'll finish up here and put everything in my case, then call him in. That way he won't have any idea what's going on between us. I'm sure you feel more at ease that way."

Larry had Dave sit back down while he personally made copies of the completed documents. Upon his return Dave put the copies into his briefcase, while Larry locked the originals in his desk. After setting the money case on the desk, he called the secretary over the intercom to have Mr. Benson come in.

Several soft taps at the door later, Larry said, "Come in". As the man came into the room, Larry introduced him. "Mister Wayne, this is Mister Benson. He's going to escort me to the bank."

"How do you do, Mister Benson?" Dave said as he put his hand out. It was at that time when he felt he'd seen Benson someplace before.

"Excuse me," Benson began. "Do I know you? I generally remember a face, but I can't quite place yours."

"You seem familiar to me also. Maybe we've run into each other before. Are you from here? Dave asked wondering where he had seen the man. He only hoped the man didn't know his true identity.

"Been here all my life. Maybe you just look like someone I know. In my line of work so many people look alike after a while." He still looked puzzled as he also tried to put Dave's face with where they'd met.

"Sorry, I've only just come to your town on business and I've never been here before. I don't think my pictures in the post office." Everyone laughed at that comment and let the subject drop.

Larry was the next to speak. "I'm ready to go now gentlemen, if we're all in agreement on everything. Mister Wayne, if you need me anymore, I'll be back in my office later on this afternoon. I've got an appointment in court right after I leave the bank. Thank you for letting me handle these matters for you and your client."

"Thank you, Mister Prado, I mean Larry. I'll call you in a few weeks to see if the details go okay. Mister Benson, nice meeting you," Dave said as everyone slowly made their way towards the door.

"Fine, I'll be expecting your call and if I can be of any further assistance, please let me know." With a last handshake on the street, the two men began the two-block walk to the bank.

Dave watched the men until they entered the bank, then immediately got in his car and drove to a position where he could see inside through the bank window. As the two men walked away from him, he realized where he'd met Benson. At the second bust he had been one of the men that Danny had put in the truck. All Dave could do was hope Mister Benson hadn't recognized him, and wouldn't.

When the two men left the bank, Dave watched as they shook hands and went in separate directions. Dave waited until Mister Benson was out of sight, then locked up his car and entered the courthouse. He looked on the first floor, then moved to the second where he found Larry talking to someone near the elevator. "Excuse me, Mister Prado."

"Why yes, Mr. Wayne. Is there something else?" He seemed quite surprised to see his client, now that everything was completed.

"Please don't misinterpret this, but may I see the deposit slip?" Dave asked, hoping the attorney wouldn't be offended.

"No, Mr. Wayne. It's all right, although I must say it does bother me a little. But I do understand your concern for your client. That explains why your employer trusts you with projects like this." He opened up the case the cash had been in. Dave could see it was now empty as he removed the receipt from a pouch in the side.

Dave quickly scanned it for the amount and passed it back. "Thank you, and I hope you do understand."

"That's all right. I even had a copy made for you just in case." As he placed the original inside, he removed the copy and gave it to Dave. "By the way, Mr. Benson said he remembered why your face was so familiar."

Dave folded the copy and slid it into his pocket. Nervous now, he looked for the staircase, just in case a hasty retreat was necessary. "And where was that?"

"While we were walking, he realized you look like his brother-in-law who lives in California. They've never met, only seen each other's photos." Larry seemed glad he was able to tell him.

"No kidding," Dave began after a sigh of relief. "Maybe I've got a long lost relative out west. Well, thank you again, Larry, and I hope we do business again sometime."

"You're welcome, and as I said, your concern for your employer reassures me even more." Larry replied before losing sight of Dave.

If it hadn't been for someone else inside the elevator, Dave would have sat on the floor to rest. The relief of his not being recognized and knowing the money had been put in the bank, made his legs feel so weak. He made it out to the car and sat there several minutes smoking a cigarette before getting up the energy to drive. His next destination was the school and its surrounding area.

Arriving at the school, Dave found the playground full of children so he couldn't just drive back to the woods. Some teacher might report a stranger being around to the authorities. Dave drove away from the school and began going up and down all the side roads looking for a possible road leading into the woods. After several dead ends, he finally found one that led to a set of railroad tracks. His only option was to try the workman's road beside the tracks. The going was slow, because it had been neglected and several large ruts had developed. Dave almost missed the trail leading away from the tracks, but someone had dumped a load of trash next to it. The trash pile had caught his eye because he couldn't believe someone would drive along the tracks just to dump their trash.

After pulling partway in, Dave stopped the car and got out. The weeds were too high for him to see any obstacles that might be hidden, and this certainly wasn't the time or the place to become stuck and need a tow.

Dave walked almost twenty minutes down the winding path through the woods. Eventually he saw an opening to the field behind the

school. He had passed several open areas where trucks could turn around or wait. But none of them showed any signs of having been used lately. With all these possible locations, Dave was glad this one would belong to the cops. There would be too many variables to consider, and after being so lucky on the first two, he wasn't going to push it here.

Dave almost did get stuck while backing the car up. He had to rock it back and forth several times to get out of a hole. Only when he made it back to the paved road did he feel safe again. Dave stopped at a car wash in order to clean all the mud off and then took a short drive to dry off the water. He was amazed at how little the area had grown over the years. He drove almost fifteen miles before any real change could be noticed. Someone had built a new housing project near the county line, probably to avoid the higher taxes of Cuyahoga County.

That evening Dave went back to Danny's house to inform them of how the meeting with the attorney went. Also, he needed to discuss the new plan of action they would send off to the sheriff's department for tomorrow night's raid. Dave waited until he knew Danny would have finished supper. Pulling into the driveway he could see Danny working on his car.

Wiping the dirt from his hands, Danny said, "I was wondering what happened to you! My wife even made extra so you could join us for eats."

Walking over to Danny, Dave answered him. "You shouldn't have gone to any trouble for me. I figured your wife would rather have the time with you alone," feeling somewhat guilty since she had taken the time and effort to include him in their plans.

"Hell, you should have known better than that! You're always welcome here. How did everything go today? Colin just called. He's on his way over." Danny didn't feel it was necessary to do any more than reassure Dave. He and his brother had always considered him as family.

"Everything went fine. Once Colin arrives, we'll go over the paperwork I'm going to give you. Do you know anybody at the sheriff's department we can pass the information to safely?" Dave didn't want to tell Danny about the man he'd seen earlier that day. No sense worrying him about it.

Dave gave Danny a hand changing the spark plugs in his car, during which they talked about the old days and what changes had occurred. Danny tried to fill in a few gaps concerning Dave's family, but he had only seen them on rare occasions. He knew Dave had never really fit in with them. It seemed no matter what Dave did, nothing ever pleased them. After a while their criticisms finally caused Dave to drift farther away from his family and eventually to Florida.

Danny was glad they had the chance to talk. Working on the car made it a more relaxed situation. He only wished Dave lived closer. Their friendship had always been enjoyable. Dave had been like having

another brother around. He only happened to have a different last name.

By the time Colin arrived, Danny's car was all tuned up. The three men went into the garage to work on a new strategy and so Dave could explain the money situation. Of course, the first issue they settled was the transfer of the money to the attorney. Dave gave the copies to Danny so he could put them into the safe deposit box. That way should something go wrong, the brother's could follow through without Dave. Colin was the hardest one to explain to as to how the money would come back, and why it would be to everyone's best interest to allow some time to pass in between.

Danny had to re-explain everything before Colin finally understood totally. Even after Colin told them he understood, neither of them believed him, but knew better than to push their luck. When they started working out the details on the map, Colin again started wanting to attempt another hit on the smugglers. He reluctantly accepted the fact that he was alone on the issue.

"Colin, I asked Danny already, but maybe you know someone in the sheriff's department we can trust with the information we have?" Dave asked.

"Sorry, the only time I meet any cops, is when they give me speeding tickets," Colin said.

"Okay, I guess we'll have to work something out. "After a short pause, Dave went on, "I got it! Let's drive the cops just as crazy as the bad guys. Let's fix it so the sheriff himself gets the information. Danny, have you got a typewriter in the house and some paper?"

Danny replied, "Sure, but it's not a very good one. I'll get it." The he disappeared out the door.

Colin seemed confused. "What are you going to do?"

Answering quickly Dave said, "Wait till Danny gets back, but basically, we'll type the details on a note then put it with the map. We'll deliver it to the sheriff's house tonight and hope he gets everything set up in time."

Entering the garage, Danny said, "here it is. Like I said, it's not very good. I don't even know if the ribbon is still usable." Then he set it down on the workbench where Dave had cleared a section off.

Dave inserted a sheet of paper and went through the keys one at a time. Several of them were stiff and slow to react. But overall it seemed to work. Dave replaced the sheet of paper with a clean one. "Well, how do you start something like this? And don't get cute. I use the old hunt and peck method."

"How about 'Dearest "Sheriffy"?' Colin said, half grinning, half serious.

Danny spoke next. "Not funny at all. Dave, why don't you just type, 'Attention Sheriff, this is Batman.' That ought to insure he at least reads it."

"Okay, suits me just fine." Dave began typing out the phrase.

*Attention Sheriff--This is Batman.
Enclosed you will find a map with all the known transfer points used by the drug smugglers. This Friday night they will try again. It will be your turn to bust up their operations. If you use the area I've circled and have your men hidden until the final delivery vehicle arrives, it should be a worth while arrest. I feel that if you catch everyone there and use the evidence already provided, you will not only have a good arrest, it should drive them out of the area. Or at least provide you with the necessary names to stop most of the drug traffic. By the way, at least one of your men is working with them. All I can tell you is the one I saw works as a deputy.*

You will also notice I have drawn in the dirt roads and marked out all open areas in the woods. It's the best I can provide. Sorry I can't be of more help.

Batman & Associates

P.S. Have a nice day!!!!

All three of them started laughing when Dave typed out the last line. Danny said, "I'm thirsty. Anybody want a Pepsi or a beer from the house?"

Colin answered first. "I'll have a beer."

"Make mine a Pepsi," Dave said.

When Danny returned with the refreshments, Dave asked, "Who is the sheriff and do either of you know where he lives?"

"His name is Mertz," Colin began, "I think he lives close to here."

Danny spoke up next, "He sure does, and I see him every once in awhile. His house is just a couple of blocks from here. I can show you if you want."

"Good," Dave said. "We'll take a drive by before it gets dark, then come back later and drop the papers off."

Danny said, "He's usually home by six, and it's past that now. Come on, we'll take my car. Then I can see how our tune up job turned out."

"I'm game. Should I move my car so you can get out?" Colin asked.

"No," Danny answered. "I think I can make it okay."

"Well, let's go then" Dave said and started for Danny's car. The two brothers followed behind. Colin sat in the back while Dave sat up front next to Danny. The car started all right and Danny carefully maneuvered it out onto the street. Dave was all set for a five-minute drive, but quickly found it to be only two streets away.

As Danny drove past the sheriff's house, he pointed and said, "That's it there. If you look around back, you'll see his cruiser parked by the garage. I told you he'd be home now. Usually I take a walk in the evenings and that's when I see him come home."

"Let's go get a beer and play a game of pool," Colin said, now bored with the driving around.

Danny answered first. "It's okay by me as long as we don't stay too long."

"I agree," Dave added. "Let's settle on playing only three games. That way it won't be too long a time for us to stay. We don't want to deliver the information in the middle of the night."

The three stopped at the nearest tavern in Laporte, a small community that would probably never make any map. Inside the place was fairly empty. This time Dave bought the beers. Danny and Colin set up the pool table and had began a game of cutthroat. By the time Dave came over with the beers it was his turn. They ended up playing about eight games before agreeing to quit for the night. The bartender wasn't upset. He said Wednesday and Thursday were his slowest nights and was glad to have their business.

They went back to Danny's and gathered up the papers and placed them in a paper sack. The time was nine o'clock. The darkness would be sufficient to mask their actions. Dave fastened a note to the outside, addressing it to the sheriff to insure that his family wouldn't mistake it for a prank. Danny volunteered to carry it up to the door. He attached a piece of string to hang the bundle on the doorknob. Dave and Colin would wait up the street until Danny was finished, then go to a nearby phone booth and call the sheriff's office, telling whomever answered to relay a message to the sheriff that a package was on his door.

Colin would make the call and be sure whoever answered understood it was Batman calling, not a prank call or a bomb threat. Nobody said anything during the drive over. Only after Danny got out of the car did Dave speak. "Good luck and be careful. If he thinks you're a burglar.... Well you know."

"I'll be okay. Just make sure you wait for me" Danny replied, then started walking down the street.

Dave and Colin sat in the car waiting nervously, watching any vehicle that drove by or lights that suddenly came on. After what seemed an hour, Danny came into view?

His sudden appearance caught both of them off guard, especially when he jumped into the back seat and said, "Let's go...Come on, Let's go, but don't squeal the tires."

While Colin shifted into first gear and started towards Danny's house, Dave asked, "What the hell happened? Did he catch you?"

"No," Danny answered as he was still trying to catch his breath. "But I could see them watching television, so after I hung the bag on the door, I rang the doorbell and ran to the house next door, where I hid in the bushes and watched what happened."

"You did what!!" Dave asked somewhat shocked at Danny's action, then he waited for Danny to catch his breath. "Well, what happened? Did anybody see you?"

"No. The people next door weren't home. I did see the sheriff himself answer the door and take the bag inside. I didn't want to try and sneak over to see what happened inside, so I ran back to the car."

"Well," Dave began, "at least we know he got it. All we have to do now is hope he handles it okay."

Chapter IX

Detective Carson was asleep in his favorite chair when the phone rang. Lois, his wife, quickly ran over to answer it before it woke him up, but she was too late. He listened to find out if it was one of her friends, or somebody from the department calling.

"Dear," Lois called out, "it's for you. Sheriff Mertz wants to speak to you right away."

"Awe shit, now what did I do?" he replied as he moved towards the phone. He took the receiver from his wife and noticed the dirty look she gave him. Even after being married to a cop for eight years, Lois really hated him getting calls from the department at home. She never did learn he couldn't work the standard eight hours a day. His job just didn't allow for that kind of schedule. "Yes sir, what can I do for you?" It was more of a standard statement than a question.

"Listen, Doug, I think you better meet me at my office right now. I just had a package delivered to my house from your buddy Batman. He wrote me a letter. In it he made a lot of allegations we better discuss in private. How long will it take you to get down there?"

"I'll be there in half an hour. Just give me a chance to change clothes," the detective said, as he wondered what this character Batman had done now.

"Fine. I'll be waiting," the sheriff said. "Don't tell anyone why you're meeting me." Then the click from the phone hanging up was all Doug heard.

The drive over to the sheriff's office seemed longer than usual. Maybe it was that the sheriff had made him feel more like an errand boy than a professional law enforcement man. If Lois hadn't started on him again, he probably wouldn't have felt that way. Hopefully, the answer to part of his problem might be what the sheriff had to show him. It was rare for the sheriff to call him at home. It had to be pretty important.

Whatever it was, and whoever Batman was, had felt the need to contact the topman in the department. Quite possibly he had proof someone in the department was on the take. All he could do was wait and find out. Hopefully Lois would be calmed down by the time he made it home again. Doug parked his car close to the building, pausing only to make sure he had the right key for the rear door. Doug didn't even have the chance to knock on the sheriff's door before the sheriff motioned to him through the window to come on in.

"Doug, this damn Batman's hit below the belt coming to my house! Go up to your office and bring the entire file to me," the sheriff ordered, then picked up his phone. "Sergeant Hall, come in here."

Detective Carson quickly went up to his office and gathered up all the notes he had on his desk and shoved them into the file folder. He even stopped to check his IN box, just in case anything new had come in since he'd left. It was a good thing too, because the computer results on all the deputies with the same blood type and not on duty were there.

Upon his return to the sheriff's office, the nervous detective found Sergeant Hall compiling a list of men. The sheriff was choosing the names from his personnel roster. Looking up for a moment, the sheriff said, "Sit down Doug, I'll only be a few more minutes."

Doug sat down in one of the heavy wooden chairs and began sifting through the vast pile of notes and information gathered by various sections of the department. The computer list he had just picked up was the first item to receive his undivided attention. Out of the four hundred and twenty-six personnel, only a hundred and twenty had the matching blood type, A-Positive. Then out of that group, forty-six were women, which he knew Batman wasn't even from the little information they had. Sixty others were either on duty or out of town, narrowing it down to fifty-four possibilities. It wasn't the easiest list to start from, but far better than the original amount.

It was never verified that one of the Batman group had been wounded. But the possibility of another of the smugglers being hurt was still there. The man in the police ward had died without coming out of his coma. If Batman was the one who had shot him, the possibility of criminal charges was there. But if the media got hold of the information, they would most likely demand his freedom. Plus, the elections were near, so no one would want to admit an individual citizen did more to disrupt the drug traffic than the authorities had in months.

Doug listened to the sheriff finishing up his conversation. "That'll be all sergeant. Make sure those people are here tomorrow at Five p.m. You understand the procedure. They're only to be ordered to be present, and no phone calls after they check in. I don't want any of them to know what's going on. If anyone asks, tell them to shut up and sit down."

"Yes sir," the sergeant replied. "I'll wait till three before I call and won't inform them of others being involved." Then he disappeared out of the office, closing the door behind him.

"Okay, Doug, this is what I received at my house," the sheriff said as he slid the note and paper to a position where they could both examine them. "The son-of-a-bitch says somebody in our department is playing both sides of the track. If that's true, I want to know who and make the bastard pay the price!"

"I agree. The only problem is getting the evidence to make it stick," Doug said. "At least we now have a map showing all the drop points used by the smugglers. Plus from the note, Batman has given all the details and the best approach for capture."

"You heard me tell Sergeant Hall about calling in a detail. We're going to use this information and bust up their smuggling ring."

I only hope this information is correct. All we need to do is charge in on a bunch of boy scouts camping. We'll both be working empty warehouses for some off-beat guard agency till we retire."

Trying to reassure his superior, Carson responded, "I don't think so, sir. Batman has done all right on his own. For whatever reason, he passed the information on to you, rather than handle it himself. I would say that if he went through the trouble of making sure you received the information, he must be positive about someone in here being bad. Maybe we can pull some names out during the first trial of those we know he hit. Otherwise we're still grasping at straws, all we can do is wait for a slip up."

The sheriff was more interested in immediate action. "What I've already set in motion is for a team to be assembled at the last possible moment. None of them will have any indication as to what's going on. Once they arrive none of them will be allowed to make any calls or pass any information out."

"No one but you, Sergeant Hall, and I will know the exact reason or location until the last possible moment. That way if one of them is involved, he won't be able to alert his associates."

The sheriff and his detective spent the next two hours working on what they hoped would be a solid plan of action. Both men agreed to call it a night, being back first thing in the morning. Doug would stop by the county engineer's office and try to pick up a more detailed map of the school's area.

When Doug arrived home, Lois was already in bed asleep. Lois never even made any indication that he had heard him come in. The next morning, she still didn't speak to him unless it was necessary. As he went out the door, her good-bye kiss told him she was still angry. Rather than start his day off with an argument, Doug decided to call later on and let her know he would be working late.

The rest of his day seemed totally hectic, from the engineer's office giving him the run around about the map, to a point where he had to keep going up to the sheriff's office because neither of them would take a chance on being overhead. At four o'clock he went down to the weapons locker to see how Sergeant Hall was progressing. The sergeant had already set everything upon one side of the room and taken an inventory of each item and enough ammo to go with it. The list even had a space for the name of each man to show who had what when the time came.

"Did you make all the necessary calls?" Doug asked.

With an air of pride in his work he said, "Yes sir. Everyone should be here anytime now. Once they get changed into their uniforms, I'm going to have them wait in the briefing room."

"I also took the liberty to have a copy made of the map you gave me earlier and mount it on the wall. I covered the map over with a piece of cloth to keep prying eyes off until you're ready."

"Very good, Sergeant," Doug began, "I think the hardest part will be keeping the building intact while they wait around. After you're finished here, you're going down and keep the animals in their cages, aren't you?"

"Yes sir. If you have any suggestions, I'd be willing to accept teaching them a new game, but they carry guns, too!" the sergeant replied hoping for some kind of idea to help in dealing with his men.

"Tell you what," Doug replied, "call down to one of the television rentals and pick up several action movies to play on the recorder we have. Just don't get any 'Dirty Harry' movies. Tell the men it's a new psychological study the college is doing."

"Good idea. Who knows? They may even believe it." The sergeant was willing to try anything.

"Fine, I'll see you later than." Doug returned to his office. Now he had to call Lois and let her complain about his job again.

When both the sheriff and his detective entered the briefing room, a silence fell over the men. Doug pulled the cover off the map while the sheriff moved to the podium in front of the group.

As he began to speak, everyone shifted around, so they were facing him. "Men, I'm, sure you know you're not here for any study program. We have reliable information on a large drug shipment going down tonight. I'm going to tell you out right the information also included the implication that people from this department are involved." He paused and watched their faces.

"If they are in this room, or if you know who it is and I find out, "Not only will I have his badge, but I'll make sure he gets the maximum sentence available."

"Now then, I've chosen ten names at random. Outside are five unmarked cars. You'll be paired off and given instructions on the area you're to put up a surveillance on. I want each team to stay inconspicuous, and keep track of every vehicle and license plate coming or going. Nobody makes a move without prior approval from Detective Carson or myself. The rest of you will be taken by truck to the area and enter through the woods from two directions. One group will be led by me, while the other by Detective Carson. The key here will be surprise, so remain as quiet as possible. If anyone of you makes an unnecessary noise, he'll answer to me personally. Now, Detective Carson will go over the details for tonight's operation, after which Sergeant Hall will call out the names of the special detail."

The detective moved a little closer to the group as the sheriff moved toward a nearby chair. Doug went on to explain all the details and gave them some idea of what to expect. He made certain of one rule. "No one, I repeat, No one, is to fire their weapon except as a last resort. The biggest thing to do is to insure no one gets away. And once in custody, none of them are to talk to anyone, especially other prisoners."

Doug spent the next half hour going over the rest of the information and answering any questions about the raid. Afterwards he had Sergeant Hall read off the names and told them to change back into their civilian clothes. They would have a jacket with "Police" written on the back for the raid only. The other men would remain in the room until nine, then be loaded into the truck.

After the sheriff left the room, Sergeant Hall instructed the surveillance teams and the others to meet him at the weapons room where they would be issued shotguns and automatic rifles. That would allow them plenty of time for checking out the weapons before leaving the building. Then they would return to the briefing room to await the time of departure. The surveillance team would receive a final briefing from Detective Carson.

Chapter X

Danny and Dave waited for the phone to ring. They sat at the kitchen table eating potato chips and drinking sodas. The clock had long passed six o'clock and still no word from Colin. Both of them were starting to become nervous, yet they knew a lot of things could delay the whole operation. Neither of them wanted to try calling him for fear that would be the exact moment someone would be trying to reach Colin.

It was almost seven when the phone rang. "Hello?" Danny said hoping it was his brother and not anyone else.

"It's me", Colin said. "Stan just called me. I'm supposed to meet them behind the school at eleven tonight. The only thing they said to be sure of was that I didn't tell anybody and to make sure I wasn't followed. What do I do now?"

"Just a minute," Danny replied then turned towards Dave. "Dave, Colin was told to meet them behind the school at eleven. He wants to know what he should do next."

Dave didn't have to think about it very long. "Tell him to do what they said, only instead of stopping at the school, drive right on by and take a long ride into the next county and don't come back till two or Three AM...then if he should get asked by anybody, he can tell them he was being followed so he led them on a wild goose chase." "Okay, Colin, did you hear all that?" Danny asked.

Colin had heard enough to understand. "Enough, I'll see you tomorrow if all goes well.... Bye." Then the click of the phone being hung up was heard.

Danny hung up the phone also and turned to Dave. "Do you really think he'll be all right with that story?"

"Sure, after what happened to them on the last operation. I'll bet a lot of them will be driving around in circles, long before rendezvousing at the school." At least that's what Dave hoped would happen. He could see that Danny was worried about his brother.

"I suppose you're right. What are we going to do tonight, now that everything is happening around us?" Danny inquired.

"You're going to go in the house and spend the evening with your wife," Dave replied almost making it sound like an order. "I'm going to drive out there and make sure the cops and the smugglers all show up. I picked out the perfect hiding place to watch the whole thing." Then Dave went outside and opened up the trunk where he slipped on his camouflage jacket and knife.

"You're nuts!" Danny yelled, but Dave didn't pay any attention to him. "First you tell us to stay away and yet you're going right in the middle of everything. What if you get caught or hurt again?"

"Don't worry, I'll be all right. You forget I know what to look for and what to do. It's just like being back in the jungles of Nam. It's what I do best. Besides, if I get caught, you can bail me out." Dave hoped he could reassure Danny enough to drop the subject without an argument.

Dave parked his car almost two miles past the school. He chose an old abandoned house close to the railroad tracks. After loading both the crossbow and forty-five, Dave began working his way through the woods. When he arrived at the large oak tree he'd chosen that morning, he quickly climbed up to a suitable vantage point. From there he could see in all directions, yet remain well hidden from the view of others. Just to be safe Dave had brought along a length of fishing line. He tied it to a nearby limb, with one end tied to the crossbow so he couldn't drop it. All he had to do now was wait. Dave shifted around until he could find a somewhat comfortable position and began his vigil.

The moon was only in a half view and that, along with the clouds, kept visibility down to a short distance. Dave was glad the watch he wore had a light inside. By ten-thirty his legs were going to sleep so he kept changing positions for comfort. The first headlights appeared along the railroad tracks. The noise from the ruts bouncing the truck around had brought it to Dave's attention. He watched the truck move down the path and onto the school playground, where it turned around and came back into the woods and stopped at the first clearing. Whoever it was, shut off their engine and lights, then lit up a cigarette.

Within a few moments another truck came in from the same side, and followed the path until it parked next to the first. One by one others entered until nine vehicles were parked in the clearing. Dave watched as several men moved in and out of the trees. He wondered if they were looking for him or the cops. One of them leaned against the very tree Dave was in. Very slowly and carefully Dave moved the crossbow and took aim. Only if the man looked up and saw him would Dave shoot and hope that no one saw him.

Whoever it was left after a short time, but Dave kept the crossbow ready just in case. Two more vehicles appeared in the distance, one at the tracks and one near the school building. To Dave, they seemed to be lookouts because they remained where they were waiting. From his vantage point, Dave noticed a new set of headlights flash on and off several times from the school driveway. The vehicle in the woods nearest the school did the same. The new vehicle then slowly made his way towards the woods. As it came closer, Dave could see it was another rental truck even larger than the last.

Dave was beginning to wonder if the sheriff was going to make it, or if he was in on the operation. Even as the unloading began, Dave still couldn't see anyone but the smugglers.

Suddenly another vehicle approached from the railroad tracks and joined the others. Out of the large Cadillac a big man in a three-piece suit appeared from the rear door. Whoever it was seemed to be well known. The driver of the rental truck went to greet him. He

even lit the man's cigar, then the two of them moved up to the rear of the truck as they watched the unloading that was going on.

The men on surveillance had taken up their assigned positions now. When the orders came in, all exits would be blocked with no chance of anyone escaping. The police trucks were being unloaded by the rest of the deputies at both ends of the area. So far everything had gone smoothly. The late hour meant almost no one would be on the roads. The only other vehicle Doug had seen was one of the surveillance teams.

Sheriff Mertz and Sergeant Hall had come across someone parked where they were to unload. The sheriff went up to the vehicle and checked it out. It turned out to be only a pair necking in the back seat. He found it difficult to keep from laughing as the boy tried to put his pants on and pretend he wasn't scared. The sheriff told them if they went straight home, he wouldn't tell their parents. The boy didn't have to be told twice and the car quickly disappeared down the road.

After a quick check with the other group, both teams spread out and slowly worked towards the target area. Several men had been assigned to sneak up on the lookout vehicles and quietly take the men into custody. The idea was to hopefully provide enough surprise in the first few moments so the rest of the smugglers would be less likely to retaliate.

Dave heard the rustling of leaves and turned in time to see the badge from someone glisten in the moonlight. Slowly he began to make out several other figures taking up positions on both sides of his tree.

Now that the deputies were here, he would have a ring side seat for the whole thing. It appeared the individual closest to his tree was signaling the others to stay down and in position. Whoever it was seemed to be a leader, Dave had never seen the sheriff so he didn't know if it was him or not. All Dave could do was assume he was the leader of this contingent.

The moonlight wasn't bright enough for Dave to see the group taking up positions on the opposite side. Nor did he know the man climbing back into the Cadillac was a prominent attorney. But he did know the sound of its engine starting up meant it was about to leave.

Suddenly a voice bellowed over all other sounds. "This is the Sheriff of Lorain county. I want you to throw down your weapons and surrender. We have you completely surrounded."

Several men dove under vehicles while others ran into the darkness, only to be immediately thrown to the ground and handcuffed, or confronted by armed officers and forced to surrender. Someone fired several rounds. No one knew which side had started it but both sides began firing. The driver of the Cadillac immediately took advantage of the situation and tried to get his supervisor away. With all the firing going on beneath him, Dave new he wouldn't be noticed up in his tree, so he fired the crossbow. The arrow hit the front tire, causing the driver to lose control and ram into the large truck.

The driver jumped out with a pistol in hand only to be struck in a hail of gunfire. The shooting began to diminish after that, when again the sheriff was heard. "Cease fire men, cease fire...You men might as well surrender while you still can."

The Cadillac had been smoldering since the crash. Now flames burst out from under the hood and began to consume both vehicles. Detective Carson ran up and opened the rear door in hopes of saving the passenger. As he pulled it open, the fancy dressed man pushed a revolver into his ribs. "You do what I say and we'll both get out of here alive."

Doug felt his heart pounding in his throat. Slowly he dropped his own pistol to the ground. "Don't worry, I'll do what you want, but you'll never get away with it Mr. Blake. Even if you do get out of here, there's no place you can go. Your picture will be across the country before you are."

"Maybe so but it's worth a try, I'm not giving up without at least trying." He shoved the gun harder into Doug's ribs until he could see Doug's face change from the pain. "Now you tell them to let the two of us leave here in a police vehicle, or you'll never see the sun rise again.... Understand?"

"I understand!" Raising his head above the roof of the car, Doug yelled the request to the sheriff.

"All right Doug, you tell him nobody else leaves. And you tell him, if anything happens to you, he'll never live to spend time in jail." The sheriff's reply as half serious, half bluffing, in hopes of getting his man released. "Sergeant Hall, have a vehicle brought up. Nobody interferes while Detective Carson is in danger."

The other men had been taken into custody and were being led away from the burning vehicles and searched. Doug and his captor moved away from the fire. Two deputies kept their weapons ready just in case the opportunity allowed them to take action. The police vehicle was brought up to the edge of the woods and left with the doors open to show it was empty. All the men knew a bullet to Mr. Blake, could strike their fellow officer either in error or causing the bad guy to kill him. All they could do was allow them to leave and hope Doug would be let go safely.

Dave watched the whole thing take place, waiting for someone to act rather than allow the crook to leave. When it seemed no one was going to help, Dave decided to take action even if it meant being caught. He took aim on the two men moving toward the car, and waited for the right moment. Any error in judgment and they'd throw the key away for shooting an officer. Several times Dave had to wipe the cold sweat from above his eyes. The constant strain was beginning to blur his vision as well. But the man in the suit stayed too close to the detective. Taking a final deep breath, Dave waited for the big man to face towards him.

Finally, he was, but the distance was beyond the normal sighting range. The flames of the fire gave Dave a clear view, so, he took a guess at how high to aim above his target. The clunk of the string

propelling the arrow forward was heard only by Dave. To him it sounded as loud as a pan being dropped. He quickly hugged the tree to stay hidden as he let the crossbow swing back and forth on its tether.

Doug didn't know what the gurgling sound behind him was. All he knew was the pressure of the revolver in his ribs was gone. When the body hit the back of his legs, Doug dove for the ground and waited for the sounds of gunfire. Instead Doug heard the sounds of footsteps coming closer and a voice saying, "Sir, are you all right?" Rolling over Doug could see the attorney laying on the ground, with bubbles emerging through the blood on his back. Directly in the middle of the blood was an arrow that he recognized instantly. Quickly checking for a pulse and finding one, Doug said, "Call an ambulance quick and try to stop the bleeding...I want him alive if at all possible!"

After that was started, Doug stood up and looked around. He knew whoever Batman was, he was here and in a position to fire that arrow and not be seen in the process. Now Doug was positive it couldn't be a deputy or even one of the smugglers. Doug thought about ordering the area sealed off and having every square inch searched for Batman or his crossbow. But he now owed his life to whoever it was, and he couldn't arrest a man who just saved his life.

"Doug, are you all right?" the sheriff asked. "Who the hell shot him? I didn't hear any gunshots from where I was at."

Doug moved, allowing the light to reveal the wounded criminal. The arrow became quite apparent, "I'll tell you over here in private," Doug said, then led the sheriff away from the others, speaking softly so the others wouldn't overhear their conversation. "It's Batman. the son-of-a-bitch was or is here someplace and saved my ass. I'd rather the others didn't know. My feelings are he should be left alone after what he did here tonight."

"Fine, Doug," the sheriff began. "I think under the circumstances, we can make an exception. We'll wait till we're back at the department before we realize it wasn't one of our men who did this."?

"Thank you, sir. Now let's get everyone out of here and only leave two men to watch the crime scene. I'll tell them to park in the middle, and it's alright for them to sit in the car. In the morning we'll send the forensic team out, and let them go over the place with a fine-tooth comb." Doug was grateful his leader granted his request. He also knew it was best to begin moving everyone out immediately, before either of them had second thoughts.

The ambulances arrived first, followed by the fire trucks. Within a few minutes the prison bus arrived and the prisoners were immediately loaded on board. Sergeant Hall volunteered to ride along with the lawyer to maintain a vigil. Other deputies were chosen to watch over the other wounded men. Sheriff Mertz supervised the loading of the bus, while Doug took care of making sure all weapons and drugs were loaded into the police van.

After everything had been taken care of for the night, the detective assigned the two men to remain behind. He then left with

the last of the group to return to the office and begin the tons of paperwork. As the car pulled out onto the highway, Doug wondered if he would ever meet the man who had saved his life. Or if he did find out who Batman was, could he help keep Batman from being prosecuted. The way he felt about it right now, he'd rather try and help get him out of the state or at least help pay his attorney's fees. Word came over the radio stating that the press was at the department. The sheriff ordered a blanket over the whole subject until further notice.

Dave was getting stiff and very sore up in the tree. The two remaining deputies had decided to walk around after everyone had left, so Dave couldn't come down just yet. All he could do was remain there a while longer. Finally, they got back into their police car. Dave waited a few more minutes just to be safe, then untied his crossbow and retied it to his back, and slowly began his descent to the ground. Several times he had to stop because of noise that he thought might give him away.

Eventually Dave made it all the way down. He chose to crawl the first thirty yards then quietly worked his way to his car. He was covered from head to toe with dirt and insect bites. Now safely away from the authorities, Dave could finally scratch the bites and wipe off the dirt. Opening the trunk, he tossed everything inside. Still scratching Dave climbed into the front seat and started up the engine. He backed out on to the highway before turning on the lights, just to be safe.

Chapter XI

Dave had fallen asleep on the bed fully clothed. Waking up he saw it was almost noon. The shoes were the first to come off, followed by the rest of his clothes. Dave went in and started the shower water. While it was heating up, he turned on the air conditioning. The heat had already begun to build in the room. After finishing his shower, he got dressed again. This time he would find a place to eat lunch before going any further. His stomach was making all kinds of noises. Dave settled on Burger King and driving to the park to enjoy it.

Sitting in the park, Dave watched the children playing on the swings and other playground equipment. He wished his children were there so they all could play and laugh together. But he knew it would never be. Maybe someday they would come looking for him and understand about the divorce and his leaving. Dave watched the children for almost an hour before going back to his motel, where he finally entered the pool for a swim, even though the chlorine burned in his wound. Swimming back and forth eventually took its toll. Dave had to climb out and lay in the sun to rest and dry off.

Several people came and went while he lay there. He didn't even pay any attention to who it was after the first few. He just lay there with his eyes shut, enjoying the warmth of the sun as it relieved the aches and pain. Dave had just about fallen asleep when someone dropped something on his chest. At first, he thought it was an accident, then opening his eyes he knew it had been deliberate. There stood Colin and Danny, "Hey, how you doing?" Dave asked.

"A lot better than you," Danny said. "Man, you look beat and your eyes look like road maps. What time did you get in last night?"

Sitting up Dave said, "I don't know. Around three or four this morning."

"No wonder you look so tired," Colin replied. "Take a look at today's paper. We tried calling before we came over but you were out. So we decided to stop by anyway."

Dave laid the paper down on the concrete and began reading the headlines.

**Major Drug Ring Broken in Late Night Raid
Sheriff Mertz calls it a major step in stopping the
ever increasing influx of drug trafficking.**

The article went on about how many had been injured during the arrest, also the amount of drugs confiscated. Looking up at the two brothers, Dave said, "So tell me something I don't know. I was there, remember?"

"Just how close were you? The radio says they have a reliable source that somebody known only as Batman, shot the leader with an arrow during the arrest." Danny asked.

"Yeah, it was me," Dave said reluctantly, "I had no choice, but nobody saw me and I got away clean." Trying to change the subject, he went onto say, "Did you bring your swimming trunks along?"

"No, we just wanted to make sure you were all right. Come on. Let's go up to your room and talk." Danny said.

Dave gathered up his towels and joined the two brothers. On the way up they stopped and bought Pepsis' to drink while they talked. The rest of the afternoon went quickly. Finally, after several hours the two brothers prepared to leave. Both men needed to get home for supper with their families. Of course, each one invited Dave to join them for the evening. Finally, the brothers agreed to have a barbecue Sunday at two p.m. where Dave would join in.

After they left Dave read the newspaper article in its entirety, along with the other sections of the paper. He began feeling homesick so he called Karen to see how she was doing and to hear her voice again. they talked almost half an hour before agreeing to stop because of what the phone bill might be. When Dave hung up, he couldn't help but want to go home, even though he still hadn't talked to Edna, or spent the time he'd wanted with his children. He quickly flipped open the phone book to the airline listings, then called Eastern's toll free number. Dave made the reservations for Monday morning. The flight would take off at nine-fifteen a.m. and he would have to check in one hour before.

Dave felt relieved that he had made a definite decision on when to leave. It would be nice to sleep in his own bed and have Karen around. He also knew going back to work and seeing his friends would be better than staying here. He laid back on the bed and thought about whether or not to call Edna, finally falling asleep without having made up his mind.

The room was totally dark when Dave woke up. He fumbled to find the light switch. The glare hurt his eyes at first. Looking at his watch he could see it was now after eleven p.m. he rose from the bed and took another shower, then prepared to go out again. This time he would go to a pancake house for a real meal instead of a fast food place. Tonight, he would have a good steak and baked potato served in a nice surrounding. On his way down to the car, Dave stopped by the office and paid his bill through Sunday night. He planned on taking care of everything rather than wait till the last moment.

Even while he ate, Dave tried to make up his mind about Edna and the children. During the drive back to the motel, he decided to leave here a message and allow her to make the final choice. Back in his room, Dave used the stationary to compose his note. He went over it time and time again before beginning to write.

Hi Edna, I did come and make the effort you wanted me to, enclosed you will find the clippings from the smuggling

operations I broke up or turned the information over to the cops.

I've been torn between seeing you and the children. I suppose I'm afraid they won't understand our breakup. The old jump wings I'll keep, but the knife is yours to send again if you need me.

I'll be staying at the motel listed on the outside of the envelope if you want to see me or at least call. If I don't hear from you, I'll understand and return to my new home. All I'll say is I did my best while I was here, now you do your part with the children.

I didn't call or let you know before this because the thought of breaking up the family relationship you have with your husband was important to me for the children's sake.

I'm nothing but a name to them and that's probably all I'll ever be. I can live with that, but it would be very hard if I thought I was going to cause problems among what you now call your family.

Well that's all for now -
Dave

Even as he sealed the envelope with the clippings inside, he could think of a dozen things he should have said. If she did or didn't want him to enter her life would now be left to her.

A light rain began to fall as he drove towards the gas station near Edna's house. Dave still felt exhausted as it came closer to being over. Still somewhat apprehensive about dropping off the note, Dave parked behind the building. He watched the houses for any indication of some one still being awake, but none of them had any lights on. After waiting several minutes Dave crossed the street, watching for any signs of activity.

Staying close to the house, he worked his way to the back door he'd seen the children use. Slowly he worked the knife through the envelope and into the wooden door. Finally it seemed lodged deep enough to remain. Dave hung the leather sheath from the handle, then worked his way back to his car. He could only hope that Edna would want to call him sometime the next day.

The next day Dave waited till the last possible moment before going to Danny's for the barbecue. He still hadn't heard from Edna, but he still hoped she would call. Even during the party, Dave called to see if he had any messages at the motel, but none were there. Dave didn't say anything to the others. This was a matter concerning only Edna and him. He spent the rest of the night in his motel room. Earlier he had said good-bye to Danny and Colin.

Early Monday morning, he was dressed and ready long before he needed to be. Yet he was nervous about not hearing from Edna, and wanting to see Karen again. The **Pandora's Box** she'd opened needed to be closed. Dave wanted to be a normal person again. This insane madness that he had just gone through was a crazy gesture on his part. But he and the others had succeeded. The money compensated everyone, as well as the idea of doing good for others.

Before leaving his motel room for the last time, Dave tried to call Edna. If nothing else to say good-bye and ask why she never called him. Dave let the phone ring at least fifteen times, but no one answered. Maybe he would call again from the airport after checking in at the ticket counter.

At the airport Dave had tried to call Edna twice before having to board the plane. Each time he let it ring over and over, but still no one answered.

Dave was on the plane, watching the baggage being loaded on board. He had decided to hide his remaining share of the money in the suitcase, rather than ship it separately. When the plane finally cleared the runway Dave felt relieved to be on his way home.

The same moment as Dave's plane began leveling out for its long journey south, Edna found the knife she knew to be Dave's. Somehow it had fallen off the porch and into the bushes. After hiding the note, she immediately went inside to call him at the hotel.

"Hello, Slumberland Motel. May I help you?" the voice said.

"Yes, I'd like to speak to Mr. Dave Johnson please." Edna hoped he was still there.

"Just a moment.... I'm sorry, Mr. Johnson checked out early this morning. He didn't leave any forwarding address." The clerk was waiting for any other questions the lady had.

"Thank you," Edna replied and hung up the phone. She knew calling the airport would be a lost cause. Far too many airplanes, from too many airlines would be leaving in all directions for her to check each one. All she could do was to put the knife and letter in a hope chest, directly under her high school yearbook next to her sweater.

THE END