

CHAPTER 1 - MONDAY, MAY 10TH

Dr. Norbert Willis sat at his desk seething in frustration. He slammed the three-ring binder closed, picked up his hardbound notebook, and began furiously writing notes before the thoughts left his head. Time was running out. He knew it. Pushing eighty-eight, he could feel his body failing. He reached up and touched the Band-Aid on his forehead as a physical reminder of his most recent misadventure— sliding his Jeep off an easy trail and bending the fender on a boulder.

Thinking back over his career, he enjoyed plenty of success, starting as a young physicist just as World War II was ending. He was the youngest graduate in his class and went on to a brilliant career, ending up at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. Often bristling at the restrictions the government bureaucrats imposed on his work until he retired almost twenty years ago, he was now combing through documents he had snuck out of the labs since then. They had nothing to do with physics. His work in the late 1940s and 1950s in physics gave him access to many of the Nazi documents in an attempt to learn their secrets and track down their scientists. One of his assignments was trying to reconstruct the movements of scientific personnel and equipment in the last hectic days of the war. He stopped writing and looked around at the private study he built with his own hands. It started out in the 1950s as a bomb shelter, but served him well as a safe place to hide the documents that were not supposed to be in his possession, and provided him a private place to work.

During his work on the shipments, he learned that Nazi submarines were used to transport uranium to Japan. The records showed that the Japanese paid in gold bullion that was brought back using the same subs. A few of them were lost near Argentina. It soon became his retirement hobby to try to find the lost subs and the bullion that would be worth billions now. Even if he turned it over, his share for locating it would make him a wealthy man. He made a few trips to South America to search for any clues or eyewitnesses.

He felt for years that he was close to uncovering this great secret. He would not let it beat him. Willis glanced up at the map above his desk. The colored pushpins encoded specific locations known only to him. He swore to himself and began scribbling frantically in his lab book. This continued until exhausted, the old man hobbled over to the recliner that had been rescued before his wife could throw it out. He sat and reviewed his notes, then entered one last thought before shutting the book. Little did he know it would be his final entry. He needed a minute to rest his eyes, to think, but instead fell asleep. The lab book slid from his hand, down beside the seat of the recliner and wedged between the cushion and the arm.

He awoke with a start. Looking around, he was calmed by the familiar surroundings of his books and his research. A memory popped into his head causing him to hurriedly move to the desk to capture it before it was gone. Where the hell was his notebook? He always left it right here. He glanced back at the recliner, but it was deep between the cushions now and not visible from his desk. Damn old age, anyway.

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"I'm telling you, this is the smartest dog in the world." Dan Williams looked at his uncle with a twinkle in his eye.

His Uncle Wally had driven from Modesto to meet Dan at his house and help him haul some things to Dan's machine shop. Wally was his father's brother, and Dan grew up helping them work on cars and other projects in Modesto. Dan now lived on a ranch in the hills east of San Jose owned by his mom's brother. The shop was on the primary portion of the spread, located about an hour southeast of Oakland.

"I call bullshit." Uncle Wally shook his head in disbelief. "What can she do that is so brilliant?"

Dan unclipped his cell phone from the plastic holster on his belt and handed it to his skeptical uncle. "You take this and put it in the other room. You can even put it under something and she'll find it."

"Yeah, right," Uncle Wally said, sarcasm dripping from his words as he reluctantly took the phone. He disappeared into the bedroom around the corner.

Syd was a female cattle dog, a mix of Australian Shepherd and mutt, with one ear that stood up and one that flopped lazily on her forehead. She had pale blue eyes that watched closely as Wally exited the room. She played this game with Dan often, so she was anxiously awaiting the command to retrieve.

"Make it fair. Don't go burying it under the mattress or something," Dan called after him.

A few minutes later, Wally came out of the bedroom smirking. "Okay, hotshot, let's see Syd the Wonderdog find that phone now."

Dan looked over at the dog, who was staring intently at her owner waiting for the signal. "Syd, go get my phone, girl." Syd was around the corner before he finished speaking the command. Within a few

seconds, she proudly pranced back into the room and dropped the cell phone on Dan's lap. "Good girl." Dan scratched her ears as he praised the dog.

"I'll be a son of a..." Wally looked at the phone in disbelief. "Did you rub dog food on that thing or something?"

"No, but maybe she does smell me on it, or the scent of the plastic. Who knows?"

"I kinda doubt that." Wally smiled at Dan. "I stuck it down in one of your boots in the front of the closet. The boot would smell more like you than the phone." He rubbed his chin. "Tell you what, let's try something." He walked into the other room, leaving Dan holding his phone. When he returned, he looked at Syd.

"Syd, go get my cell phone."

Syd was off in a shot and back just as quick, dropping the phone at Uncle Wally's feet.

"That dog's pretty smart. I'll give you that." He looked at Dan. "I laid it on the bed, but I still think she's going by smell."

"Could be." Dan scratched Syd's ears. "I'd never tried it with someone else's phone. I trained her because I'm always leaving mine in the next room, or in my truck. She can find my keys too. Watch." Dan stood up and felt his pockets like he was searching for something. Syd immediately perked up again.

"What am I missing, Syd?" He continued to pat his pockets. "My keys and my wallet. Get 'em, girl." Syd stood up and scoured the room, then went into Dan's bedroom. She returned with both, the keyring draped around one of her lower canine teeth, and the wallet grasped in her jaw. Dan smiled at Wally and said nothing.

"Well she's smarter than her owner, I'll give her that." Uncle Wally smiled. "Now, you ready to get some work done?"

"C'mon, Syd. Mount up." Dan opened the door and Syd shot out and leaped up into the bed of Dan's pickup parked in the driveway.

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No one seemed to pay him much attention on the plane, but Albert Stevens was a quirky little man. Barely breaking five foot two, his stature belied his goals in life and his sense of purpose. Meticulous in his dress, his shirts were always white and his pants creased to a laser-sharp line. Wire-rimmed glasses only seemed to intensify the blueness of his eyes, which were continually moving to take in his surroundings. He wore his shirts loose masking his muscular physique. When he occasionally rolled up his shirtsleeves, his forearms revealed he was a man who could drive a nail with one blow of a hammer. He walked a bit like a rooster, his chest leading the way. He was determined and efficient in his movements and his words. Taking his seat on the plane, he quickly reviewed his files, put them away and listened to the classical music channel the airline provided.

His mission was clear. He needed to find out what information the old man has and to prevent by any means the continuation of any leaks. He dedicated himself to stopping anyone from learning the organization's secrets. These misguided people were more dangerous than they knew. If he found anything, he would call in a team to address the situation. Albert liked being the point man and took his job very seriously.

They landed at Oakland International Airport, and since he only brought a carry-on proceeded directly to the National bus. His frequent travels made him an Emerald Club member. However, the real value of this membership was he could pick discrete vehicles that would not stand out. He walked up to a white four-door, mid-sized sedan and threw his carry-on bag in the back seat. No need to stand out. He was your average businessman on a Monday morning flight

to the West Coast. In contrast, the guy behind him at the exit booth of the National parking lot was driving a new yellow Camaro convertible. People would notice and remember such a car, but that's probably why the young hot dog in the car wanted it. Albert showed his papers to the employee at the booth and pulled away chuckling.

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Paulo was not thrilled with the rental car choice, but rarely having traveled to the US, he had no status with the local companies. He asked for a gray sedan but was told the yellow Camaro was all they had. Any other time Paulo would love to have the new Camaro convertible but not today. Now, he would need to use more aggressive techniques to accomplish his task.

He kept an eye on the white sedan as it left the booth and watched it make a right turn at the second light. He was lucky the counter was not busy when he arrived or he would have already lost his prey. He could not let the clueless little man get away from him. Paulo needed to get the information before he did.

He breezed through the booth since he received his paperwork at the counter. He made the second right, and as luck would have it, the white sedan pulled into a gas station about a quarter mile ahead. Time to activate plan B.

Paulo entered the gas station lot and watched Albert walk straight into the convenience store it included. The rental car would obviously not need fuel yet. Paulo got out of the car and acted as if he was getting something from the trunk, then bent down to tie his shoe between the sedans. The glass front of the convenience store looked out onto the parking lot and the pumps. Americans. They never missed a chance to

try to sell you something. He could see his subject inside heading to the tall, glass coolers along the far wall. The cars blocked the view from the store, so he discreetly bent down and put a tracking device on the rear wheel well of the sedan. Perhaps his luck was going to hold out this trip. He walked inside, moving just past his target, almost touching him, and went to the bottled water.

Flying always dehydrated him.

The clerk behind the counter was a young Hispanic girl, most likely of Mexican descent. She seemed a little shocked when he, a tall man with blondish, thinning hair, spoke to her in English with a Hispanic accent. He returned to the Camaro and activated the software on his laptop that would track the device he planted. He was getting a clear signal, which would help neutralize the flashy ride as he could follow from a distance now. Driving along he noticed there were quite a few Camaros in the area, though not many convertibles.

Maybe he would be able to blend in.

Paulo would not let his country, his family and, most importantly, his grandfather down. His immediate goal was to follow this quirky little man whose name he knew was Stevens. Paulo hoped he could tail Stevens to that nosy scientist. Finding the scientist could hold the key to the ultimate success of the mission. He would find this arrogant American scientist who was part of the organization that had already taken so much from his family, who had dared come to his country to hunt for treasure that was his birthright, and he would snatch the prize right from under him.

CHAPTER 2 - MONDAY MIDMORNING

Dan pulled off the road and across the cattle guard onto the main ranch. The house was off to the left as he descended the hill and the rumble of his pickup caused his aunt to look up as she pattered in the yard. Both waved, but Dan turned right at the bottom of the drive and headed to the shop. Syd barked a greeting to the ranch dogs as they scrambled to chase the truck. Typically, Dan would head over to chat, but he had a busy schedule today. He was only weeks away from a project deadline and was running behind because of problems getting some materials in time.

He thought about how much he enjoyed the freedom ranch work gave him to determine his schedule. The ranch was his Uncle Ed's. Dan was brought into his uncle's ranching business ten years ago, when he and his wife, Janet, just married. Never one to shy away from work, Dan soon became indispensable. He was a whiz when it came to fixing things and easily kept up his end of the chores. In return, the hard work gradually built up his shoulders and arms converting him from a tall skinny youngster to a man with broad shoulders, able to throw 120-pound hay bales around all afternoon. They became so close his uncle requested Dan refer to him as Ed instead of Uncle. After Janet had been killed in a car accident five years ago, Ed's support kept him going through the hard times.

Ed bought the ranch in the mid-1950s, starting with 40 acres and parlaying that over the years into over 13,000 acres. It consisted of a significant portion of the southern San Antonio Valley, and an eastern section named the Hawk's Nest for its views that wrapped down on the Patterson side of the hills. Called the Rockin' A Ranch, the previous owner, whose family settled it in the late 1890s, had a wife named Audrey and a sister named Annie. Annie lived on the Rockin' A in a separate house, but

they always ate meals together. The previous owner told Ed his favorite time of the day was when he came home to find both of them sitting on the front porch in their rocking chairs. They were usually stringing green beans or some other chore to keep their hands busy. He named the Rockin' A after the two most important women in his life. Ed thought it was a great story, so he kept the name. To this day the locals referred to him as the new owner of the Rockin' A.

Two years ago Dan started collecting machining tools to help make some parts they needed for equipment. As the collection grew, he worked with Ed to create a space in a large storage building to set up a small shop. He first bought a lathe, then a milling machine. Eventually, it grew so big they built a large Quonset hut divided into a metal shop, a woodworking area and a vehicle repair area complete with a car lift.

As Dan's skills improved, and with the equipment they installed, soon everyone in the area was stopping by with problems and projects for him. What began as tinkering on weekends and evenings developed into a small business, though Dan often didn't charge the local folks. He and Ed jokingly called it HillTek Incorporated because of being up in the hills. As word spread it eventually became almost a full-time job doing machine work, so Dan pulled in Wally to help out when needed.

He took a detour on route to the main ranch so he could look in on some calves Ed asked him to check. He smiled to see his Uncle Wally already beat him to the shop. He knew he would take some grief for taking longer to get there. Wally was quite the character, always with a story or joke to tell, and they developed a close rapport that allowed them to get a lot of work done and have a good time doing it. Dan was around Wally much more as he entered his thirties and they had gotten much closer. He referred to him as Uncle, or sometimes as Papi, which he copied from Wally's granddaughter.

"You doing okay, Uncle?" Dan asked as entered the door of the shop.

"I feel more like I do right now than I did a while ago," Wally quipped.

Dan gave an eye roll as he continued into the shop. Papi had a million sayings primarily designed to see if you were listening, or get a reaction. Best not to encourage him this early in the morning, Dan thought as he put on his work apron. "What have you screwed up so far?"

"Oh, I just got here a few minutes ago, but I was gonna start measuring and marking those pieces for that roll cage. Are you late because you stopped at the powder coater?"

"First of all, I'm not late, because I'm the boss. And second, I asked you to stop and pick up the powder coating," Dan said in mock anger. Dan would have to rethink what he planned to do today because he needed the powder-coated parts to start assembly of the project coming due. Syd ignored them, going to a shaded corner of the shop and lying down.

"You mean to tell me that a young man like yourself can't beat an old man like me to work because you were too busy blow-drying your hair?" Wally said, smiling. He changed his tone because he saw the look on Dan's face. "I picked the powder coating up yesterday. It's in the bed of my truck."

Having established the tone for the day, both men set about their work with smiles on their faces.

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Albert was grateful for the navigation system in the rental car. After taking several interstates from the airport, he headed out into the suburbs. Albert would not have found the road leading south out of the town of Livermore into the hills without it. Though labeled Mines Road, he could see no evidence of mines. Perhaps they were farther along. As the road climbed, it became apparent a change of vehicles would be needed. This far out in the country the new car would stand out. Albert grew up in a similar area on the East Coast, a rural part of West Virginia. People in

these areas knew each other and would notice outsiders roaming around. He would have to come up with something to fit in easier. Most people up here drove pickup trucks out of necessity, as they were primarily ranchers.

He continued, venturing close to thirty miles on Mines Road before coming to another road going off to the left. Just before the intersection was a small building with neon beer signs in the window. The sign out front proclaimed it as Sam's Place. It was the first sign of civilization Albert had seen other than a few houses, and he began to wonder if he was getting lost. His navigation system said he had about ten miles to go, but it recalculated several times in the hills when he must have lost line of sight with the satellites.

He was tempted to stop but drove on to get the lay of the land. He noticed the area flattened out into a beautiful little valley after passing Sam's Place. As the valley spread before him, there were a few more houses. Eventually, the address numbers on the mailboxes were getting close to the address he was seeking. His confidence climbed when a few miles up the road a mailbox appeared on the left-hand side with the correct number and the name Willis written on it.

I guess Willis is old-school enough he's not as concerned with security as most town people are nowadays. Personally, Albert loved country living. He drove past to see if he could gain a better view of his target. The road did not oblige him, so Albert turned around and pulled to the shoulder to get a feel for the place. Since it was midafternoon, he was afraid to leave his car and walk in because someone could spot him. There was no phone coverage to use Google to find how far the house would be down the dirt access road. He could check it at the hotel and come back early tomorrow before daylight.

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Paulo cautiously followed the white sedan, leaving almost half a mile between them, cursing his flashy rental car. Fortunately, the signal was still strong and Stevens used only interstates once he left the airport. That changed, however, once off the interstate at Livermore when the target started heading south. Paulo followed him until he turned onto a small country road into the hills. As soon as the signal made a right onto Mines Road, Paulo pulled off to the side. There was no way he could stay incognito in this car. If the white car turned around or backtracked, he would likely be made.

Paulo was nothing if not decisive. He turned around and headed toward downtown, having noticed a few wineries nearby. Pulling the Camaro into one of the tasting room parking lots, Paulo walked toward some nearby grape vines, acting interested in them. With a soft briefcase containing a laptop in hand, he tried to look like a salesman visiting the winery to close a deal.

Ducking around the corner of the tasting room, he walked toward the production facilities of the winery. Since it was May there were very few people working in the production area. There, ahead, sat the gray trucks he spied from the road. The pickups were lined up near a loading dock for the staff to run errands. Paulo slid into the first one and checked the ignition. No keys. He pulled the visor down and the keys dropped into his lap. God bless trusting Americans.

He left the facility and headed in the direction Stevens went. Paulo figured that his car would be safe in the parking lot with all the other wine tasters at least until they closed. The laptop did not pick up the signal again for a few miles, and even then it was weak and intermittent.

It wasn't until he came to a group of houses and what looked like a small bar that the signal became stronger. He liked this little valley out in the middle of nowhere. Continuing a few miles the signal strength increased even more. He passed the white sedan sitting beside the road, heading in the opposite direction. Congratulating himself for switching vehicles, he put on a baseball cap with the winery's logo on it he found on the dashboard of the truck. He was sure the changes would keep him from being noticed. He spotted the name on a large gray mailbox that was ten yards past the sedan. Willis. He recognized it as the name of the scientist his grandfather had mentioned. Willis was the man he was really trying to find and following Stevens had paid off. Paulo continued on until he was out of sight, watching the monitor to ensure the small blip on the screen didn't move. It didn't, so he was confident he was viewed as another local.

When the sedan finally did move, it went south at a casual pace and stopped at the little bar/restaurant called Sam's Place. Following, Paulo drove past the bar and pulled off on a dirt track until he was hidden from the road. He waited there to see what Stevens did next since it was still early afternoon and to ensure that Stevens did not try to contact Willis before Paulo could get to him. He planned to make his approach early the next morning when there was no one around.

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Albert pulled into the parking lot of Sam's Place and parked near a large oak tree at the right edge of the property. The only other cars in the lot were an older model, brown pickup and an all-wheel-drive Subaru station wagon. It was midafternoon, likely not the busiest time for the place. The building, once a house, had been converted into a restaurant of sorts. There were picnic tables off to the left as he walked up to the steps. He couldn't imagine a place so far out in the country would have overflow crowds that

would require outside seating. Perhaps it was used during warm weather. There were even horseshoe pits, though he could see no horseshoes in them.

The bar looked just as rustic inside. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the room after being out in the bright sunlight. It was not shabby, but definitely rural with wild boars' heads mounted on the wall and a framed display of arrowheads. A couple of ceiling fans spun lazily overhead. A woman in her thirties with brown hair casually greeted him. She informed him that she was Sam, or Samantha, the owner and that she'd bought the place from a local family who ran it since the 1960s. Sam wore minimal makeup, with a girl-next-door cuteness about her. She gave him a menu and instructed him to sit anywhere he wished.

After ordering a burger and a Coke, he sat at the far end of the bar and pretended to be absorbed in a sports channel playing on the television. At the other end of the bar were what appeared to be a couple of locals. Both wore jeans and boots, though one guy wore a ball cap with CAT on the front and looked like he was wrestling something in the mud earlier. The other was taller and wore a cowboy hat with the ease and set of someone who did most of his work from a horse. His voice was slightly high-pitched, with enough of a twang that he sounded like the real deal. Any other time, Albert would have loved to talk with him to get more of a local flavor, but he did not want to attract too much attention so he made no effort to engage.

"What's this I hear about the USGS poking around out here again?" the tall cowboy said to the other. "Burt said he was at a meeting in town and they were comin' up here to measure somethin'."

"No idea," the other replied. "It's probably some excuse for the damned government to look for pot growers."

"Aw, hell. The cops use helicopters to do that."

"Well, I don't know. Could be anything."

Albert didn't react, but the overheard exchange gave him an idea. Finishing his lunch, he paid his bill. As he was getting up to walk out, a man came through the door. The man was almost as tall as the cowboy but looked more muscular through the shoulders. His jeans were relatively clean and he wore a Western-style shirt with buttons instead of the usual snaps. His quick smile acknowledged the two guys at the bar. The woman behind the counter brightened considerably.

"Hey, Dan. What can I get ya?" she offered.

"Nothing for me, Sam, thanks." He seemed not to notice her interest. "I was just checking to see if those parts I ordered were delivered by UPS today."

"UPS hasn't come yet. Should be showin' up anytime."

"Okay, maybe I will have a Dr. Pepper while I wait for a bit." He nodded as Albert passed him.

Sam brought him a Dr. Pepper and a balled-up napkin. When he looked at it funny, she said, "It's some chicken for Syd." He smiled, shook his head and put it in his shirt pocket.

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Paulo was glad he grabbed some trail mix and an energy bar at the gas station with his water. He ate them as he waited for the sedan to move again. When it passed his hiding place on a dirt road, Paulo stayed until there would be a safe cushion between the two vehicles. He maintained the distance for the thirty miles of winding road returning to Livermore. At the end of Mines Road, Paulo pulled into the winery, left the truck in the visitors' parking lot and casually walked over to the yellow Camaro, carrying his briefcase with his laptop inside. Pulling out of the winery, he

noticed on his screen that Stevens was stopped near the interstate a few miles ahead. When he got close to the area, he could see the sedan pulled into a cluster of hotels and chain restaurants. Paulo selected a hotel across the side street and requested a room overlooking the parking lot.

Intent on ditching the flashy car, he called the rental agency and told them he had a flat tire and asked them to send a replacement when they could. They were happy to inform him they had a satellite franchise in the town of Livermore, where he was located, and could be there in fifteen minutes with a different car. Paulo hurried down to the car and let the air out of the left front tire. A short time later, an eager young man from the agency pulled up in a small, tan Jeep Compass. They switched keys and Paulo signed the paperwork. He left the youngster to struggle with putting the mini-spare on the Camaro. The kid looked excited to get his hands on the bright yellow sports car. One problem solved.

Paulo took the SUV, got some fast food for dinner and went to his hotel room to keep an eye on Stevens. Tired from the flight, he was glad to see the target walk across the street to a chain restaurant. He set his alarm for 4:30 a.m. and lay down on the bed. The software on the laptop would alert him if the sedan started moving again.

Sure enough, the laptop screeched about an hour later. Paulo jumped up from the bed and looked out the window in time to see the sedan pull out of the parking lot. He was still half asleep so was initially confused when he saw Stevens standing in the parking lot. *What was he doing?* Paulo shook his head trying to clarify his thinking.

Stevens was standing next to a white SUV similar to the one Paulo had just received. This new vehicle was also a Jeep, but a different model and a little bigger. The insignia said Cherokee. Stevens measured an area on the driver's door with a tape measure. *So I was not the only one to decide to switch vehicles.* Looking through his binoculars, he watched as his target set a laptop on the hood of the new car and worked on what looked like graphic design. Once happy with his work, Stevens walked across the street to a FedEx Office store. A short while later he returned to the Cherokee and

placed a small sign in the area he previously measured. Standing back, Stevens inspected his work. He would now be driving an SUV with a USGS logo on the side.

Paulo waited until Stevens left and was inside for thirty minutes before taking the chance to go near the new vehicle. Glad he brought two additional tracking devices in case of problems, he placed the magnetic device on the undercarriage of the Cherokee and went to his room. The signal was as strong as the first one. He set it to alarm when moved and returned to bed.

CHAPTER 3 - TUESDAY, MAY 11TH

Dan and Wally both looked up from their work as Ed's truck came sliding to a stop in front of the shop, a cloud of dust billowing in from the dry heat. It was only 9:30 a.m., but the morning coolness had already burned off. It was going to be a warm one.

"What the hell?" Dan said as he shut off the lathe. Syd stood up, looking at the truck as it rocked to a stop.

"That ain't like him," Wally observed. "Somethin's up." Wally set down the tape measure he was using to mark the next batch of steel he planned to cut. They both moved toward the open overhead door. Ed jumped out of his truck as it still rocked from being put into park so abruptly. In his mid-seventies, ranch life kept Ed in shape, making most people think he was ten to fifteen years younger. A gregarious man, who loved to tell stories of his days as a hot-rodder or the many hunting trips he'd experienced, he was not easily excited, which drew attention to his behavior now.

"Dan, grab the high-lift jack off your truck and get in. Betty called and said a car fell on Willis." He grabbed a pry bar and a bottle jack out of the shop and headed toward the door.

"You want me to go too?" Wally asked, knowing it was something serious by Ed's demeanor.

"Sure. Jump in, but we have to hurry."

Dan was already throwing the hi-lift jack from his 4x4 onto the bed of Ed's truck and climbed into the passenger seat as Wally scrambled into the back seat of the one-ton Chevy crew cab. Syd hopped onto the flatbed with Ed's dog, Rounder. Dan knew better than to ask a bunch of questions when Ed was this intense. He would give them details when he was ready.

Ed backed the truck away from the shop entrance and slammed it into gear, fishtailing in the gravel driveway as they shot onto the pavement. Once on the solid road and progressing at a steady speed, Ed finally broke the silence.

"She just called. She was hysterical and not making much sense. I told her we were on the way."

"Did she call for an ambulance?" Wally asked from the back seat.

"Said she called me first. I told her to call 911 and we'd be there as fast as we could."

Willis and Betty lived about four miles away, but it could take the sheriff thirty minutes or more to get to the area. While only about fifteen miles from San Jose as the crow flies, the San Antonio Valley was a world away from the high-tech Silicon Valley. Nestled in the Diablo Range, there is only one twisty road in and out of the area, which kept it sparsely populated with cattle ranchers and independent-minded individuals who prefer solitude to people.

"I wonder if something happened with his Jeep again," Dan said. A look from Ed caused him to continue. "He stopped in the shop yesterday. Borrowed a couple of tools. He said he slid on a hill over by the Castle Rock last Friday and dinged his fender on a boulder."

"I told him to stop taking that thing over there, that's rough country for a man his age," Ed grumbled.

He turned off onto the dirt track leading to Willis's property, dust flying up behind them. As they approached the house a few minutes later, they could see Betty out by the separate garage/shop off to the left. Betty waved them over to the open garage door. As soon as they got in the door, Ed stopped in his tracks. Looking over Ed's shoulder, Dan's heart dropped. What they saw was far more gruesome than expected.

CHAPTER 4 - TUESDAY MIDMORNING

Norbert Willis lay on the floor of his garage. His head was crushed by the rail of a four-post car lift with an older Jeep CJ on it. A pool of blood spread from under the body.

Betty was hysterical, shouting, "You've got to help! Help him!"

Ed stepped forward. He bent down and felt for a pulse in Willis's wrist, stood and turned to Betty. "Betty, I'm sorry. We're too late. He's been gone awhile because he's cold. There's nothing we can do."

"Well at least get this damned thing off him." She burst into tears and Ed grabbed her by the arms as her knees began to buckle. He turned her and began to move her toward the door. Dan caught his eye as they walked past. A slight shake of Ed's head was enough to tell Dan not to bother.

"Everybody clear out of here 'til the sheriff arrives." Ed herded them out the door. They could do nothing now except wait for the authorities.

The California Department of Forestry, or CDF, fire crew arrived a few minutes later with their EMT and Dan informed them they were too late to do anything. The EMT went in to confirm the lack of pulse, then shook his head. Dan and Wally followed him in to act as witnesses, ensuring nothing else was disturbed. Silent, they walked out to join the others. Ed took Betty in the house and attempted to comfort her. He was at a loss for what to say to a woman wavering between hysterics and anger, so he called his wife Margaret to come over. Maybe she could keep Betty calm until some family arrived.

The CDF crew waited for the sheriff to give their report. "How'd you guys get here so fast?" one of them asked no one in particular. "Betty called Ed first," answered Dan.

"Why would anyone call him before calling 911?" he questioned, perplexed.

"Maybe because she knew she would get someone on the other end of the phone who gives a damn," Wally said, not liking the implication. "Do you see how long it takes the sheriff to get here?"

Dan grabbed Wally by the arm to calm him down. The CDF guy put his hands up in surrender and walked to his group. An uneasy silence descended until Dan went over to the CDF crew.

"Sorry, guys, my uncle's obviously upset. We appreciate you guys being here and the service you provide to the folks up here." They seemed to relax a bit, but the one who raised the question kept a wary eye on Wally.

Margaret pulled in and went directly into the house, allowing Ed to slip out a few minutes later. Finally, a sheriff's vehicle pulled in, dust billowing around the marked Ford SUV, lights flashing. A sheriff's Crown Victoria followed the SUV and came sliding to a dramatic stop behind the first vehicle. Out of the second car popped a short deputy rushing to put his hat on. He practically tripped over his nightstick when he missed its baton ring on his belt.

"Oh jeez," said Dan, shaking his head. "Here comes Barney Fife."

Deputy Spinelli was five foot six and stocky with close-cropped black hair and a short mustache. He was known locally as Speedy, both because he tended to speak rapidly and for his propensity to give out speeding tickets at marginal speeds above the limit. Spinelli looked nothing like the deputy from the 1960s TV show but had a similar reputation for overreacting. He fell in behind Lieutenant Thronson as they strode toward the group outside the garage. Thronson was a big man, his blond hair and blue eyes signifying his Swedish descent. His easy-going manner made him tolerable to the folks in the hills. He walked up and shook hands with Ed, then the CDF EMT. He turned and nodded to the others.

"What've we got?" he asked, waiting for one of the other two to start talking. Ed gave him the rundown of being called and what they found when they got there. Ed also made sure to tell him that other than feeling for a pulse they touched nothing and came outside to wait.

"Dead huh?" Thronson shook his head. He was not looking forward to going into the garage. Spinelli, on the other hand, started twitching like a terrier that saw a squirrel, putting his hand on his gun and staring at the garage door waiting for Thronson to move. Thronson listened as the EMT gave his report then dismissed the CDF crew to go about their business. As they walked to their truck, Thronson nodded at Ed, Dan, and Wally. "OK, you three come with me."

Walking through the door, Thronson pointed to his left. "You three stand over there out of the way." He and Spinelli went over to examine the body, not speaking at all. After looking around, squatting down to get a closer look and circling the whole shop, Spinelli moved toward the three of them.

"Looks to me like we can't rule out suicide," he announced, seemingly talking to Thronson but toward the group for effect. "But—"

Before he could get out anything else, Wally launched into a tirade. "How many kinds of stupid are you?" He paused. Behind Spinelli, Thronson smirked but said nothing. "So you think the man killed himself by sticking his head under the rail and crushing it here," he said, pointing for clarification. "While the switch to activate it is over there ten feet away." He pointed to the other side of the lift. He paused to let it sink in. "Personally, I don't think his arms are long enough, and at almost ninety years old I don't think he'd be fast enough to get under it before it stopped moving."

Spinelli looked incredulous, having no idea how the lift worked.

"Perhaps it malfunctioned. We'll have to test it." "You just do that." Wally was not backing down.

Thronson interrupted by saying, "We will need to check the system for any defects or malfunctions that could have caused this. But let's not rule

it out until we get more information. Before we proceed, I need the lab guys to work over the whole scene. What I need from you three is to tell me exactly how far into this room you came this morning. Did you touch anything? Move anything?"

The three of them explained that Dan and Wally were no farther in than they currently were and only Ed had touched the body.

"Have you been in this garage before, recently?"

All three shook their heads. Suddenly, Dan remembered. "I was here about three weeks ago and helped him rebuild a carburetor for this Jeep but not since then."

"Okay, you go outside and we'll wait for the techs."

The three of them turned to file out, as Spinelli came over holding a body hammer. It had a flat face on one end for pounding surfaces, and the opposite end was a curved wedge shape. They all stopped to see what was happening.

"Lieutenant." He extended the hand with the hammer and nodded toward it. "I found this in a trash barrel. It has blood on it."

Thronson was apoplectic. "You moron. What part of 'wait for the crime techs' did you not understand? You just contaminated the scene." "But I—"

"Shut the hell up. Get an evidence bag, put that hammer in it, give the damned thing to me then go sit in your vehicle until I come get you." He pointed to Spinelli's cruiser.

Wally shook his head. He saw Ed roll his eyes, but when Wally looked over at Dan, his nephew was as white as a ghost.

Dan watched as Spinelli went to the trunk of his cruiser and pulled out an evidence kit. He took out a plastic zip-lock bag and put the hammer in it, wrote something on the bag with a sharpie and sealed it. Having accomplished his assigned task, Spinelli walked around to the front of his

car, lay the bag containing the hammer on the front fender and leaned against the cruiser with his arms crossed. He looked like a scolded schoolboy who was rebelling by refusing Thronson's order to sit in his car.

There was a slight commotion behind Spinelli as a beat-up brown pickup carrying two passengers pulled into the yard. It didn't take long for word to spread in the hills and folks were showing up to see what was going on. It was Harvey and Albert, two locals, both retired with nothing better to do. Harvey was a beanpole of a man who always wore a tattered straw cowboy hat and tended to stutter. His friend Albert was short, overweight and talked at a high-pitched rapid pace. Dan always wondered how they ever managed to become friends.

"I heard the call on my scanner," Harvey announced. "Came to see if we could help."

Deputy Spinelli spun around and went into control mode, holding up his hands to stop them. "Sorry, fellas, this is a crime scene. You can't go in there."

"Is Willis alright?" Albert asked.

"Again, this is an active investigation. We can't tell you anything."

Harvey noticed the bag on Spinelli's fender, creased his brow and blurted, "Hey, Dan, why's your hammer got blood on it?" He kept looking back and forth from the bloody tool to Dan. The hammer had the initials DW on the butt of the handle.

Ed muttered, "Oh, for Christ's sake." He looked at Wally, trying to warn him with his eyes not to say anything. But it was out of the bag.

Spinelli looked at Dan and stiffened, hand automatically going to his gun. "Is that yours?"

Dan looked at the deputy, dropped his chin and shook his head in disbelief. Behind him, Ed said, "Let's wait for the lieutenant."

Thronson had gone into the garage and was taking a few pictures with his cell phone.

Undaunted, Spinelli began moving toward Dan, right hand still on his gun strap, his left taking out his cuffs. "I guess you'll have to answer me at the station."

Dan heard Syd growl from the truck behind him. "Syd, sit." The dog settled down but kept her head up, eyes glued on Spinelli.

Ed stepped in front of Dan. "I said, let's wait for the lieutenant."

At that, Spinelli stopped in his tracks but unsnapped the strap holding his weapon. Ed looked him in the eye and with a calm voice said, "Son, around here, if you pull a gun on a man, you'd better be ready to use it." He paused but stood his ground. "Now, here's what's gonna happen. Dan is not going anywhere, and you are going to step back while I stick my head in the door and get the lieutenant. Dan will explain all about the hammer and we'll let Thronson decide who's talking to who and where." Ed was an imposing figure, at least a head taller than Spinelli.

Spinelli inched forward.

Still as calmly as if he were talking to a child, Ed continued. "Deputy, if you pull that gun, I have about four witnesses who are gonna swear the reason they found it up your ass is that you threw it on the ground and sat on it. Are we clear?"

Spinelli blinked, swallowed hard and almost squeaked, "Crystal." He took three steps backward and tried to look casual as he leaned against the fender of his cruiser again. "Lieutenant." his voice cracked.

"Yeah," Thronson answered as he came out the door. He stopped short and frowned as he looked at the postures of Spinelli, Ed, and Dan. "What's up?"

"We have a sort of development here." Spinelli was almost in control of his voice again. "This man here identified the weapon as belonging to Dan."

Thronson asked Dan, "Is that yours?"

“Yes, sir, that’s my hammer. Willis stopped by yesterday, told me he’d slid his Jeep into a rock and borrowed a few tools including the hammer.”
“What time was this?”

“About two yesterday afternoon. That Jeep’s old, but you can see on the right rear fender where there are some new scratches. Willis wasn't the most capable four-wheeler.”

“I’ll check it out.” He thought for a moment. “What else did he borrow?”

“A couple of dollies and a short blue pry bar. Body dollies,” Dan clarified.

“Gotcha.” Thronson looked around. “So what’s everybody looking so twitchy about?”

Wally spoke up. “Speedy here whipped out his cuffs and was about to take Dan in, is what.”

Thronson smiled at the nickname that he’d heard before. “You’ll have to excuse Deputy Spinelli’s enthusiasm, gentlemen. He’s spent too much time in San Jose. It will take him a little while to adjust to the folks up here. So to clear this up, let’s cut right to the chase.” He looked directly at Dan. “Can you explain this?”

“Yes, sir.” He held Thronson’s gaze steadily.

“Okay, let’s do that.” He looked at Spinelli. “I suggest you get in your car and start on the mountain of paperwork you caused.” Spinelli reached for the hammer.

“No. Leave it there so it can’t get you in any more trouble.”

Spinelli said nothing but shot a look at both Wally and Dan. He made no eye contact with Ed, climbed into his car, grabbed a clipboard and acted as if he was reading the computer screen on the dash.

Syd, sensing the danger had passed, lay her head down and groaned a dog harrumph.

Thronson turned to Dan, Ed, and Wally. "You three come with me. I want to talk to you separately, so Ed, if you don't mind waiting in your truck," he said as he nodded at Ed's truck. "Wally, you wait here by yourself." He put his hand on Dan's shoulder. "Step into my office," he said, pointing at his SUV. Thronson walked around to the driver's side. They each climbed in. Dan sat in the front passenger seat staring straight ahead.

"You mind answering a few more questions here?"

"No. Not at all." Dan shot a glance at Ed in his truck, who nodded to reassure him. Thronson advised Dan of his rights, assuring him it was merely routine procedure. It still made Dan nervous.

"Okay, just give me a rundown of where you've been today, for the record."

"I got up around 5:30, took a shower and met Wally over at the shop where we were until Ed came to get us."

Thronson talked to both Ed and Wally, making sure the others were kept separate from each other. After he had finished with all three, he called them all together. "Wait here, I need to check something." Thronson walked into the house. After about ten minutes, he came out, approached the group and let out a heavy sigh. He looked at each man briefly before speaking. "Mrs. Willis said her husband went out to his shop around 4 a.m. I guess he had a habit of getting up at odd hours when he couldn't sleep." He turned his attention to Dan. "Do you live alone? Can anyone corroborate where you were before six this morning when Wally arrived?"

A hurt look came over Dan's face. "Yes, sir, I live alone." He would have thought Thronson would remember he lost his wife in a car crash five years ago. He couldn't remember if it happened before Thronson's time in the hills. "Since Janet's accident..." He still couldn't bring himself to say death.

"I know about it, son. But hell, that was a long time ago. None of these women around here have roped you in yet? You didn't have some young filly spending the night?"

Dan turned a shade pinker. "No. Not at the moment."

"Well, you're not completely in the clear yet. I'm not taking you in, but I can't rule you out. So if you guys know anything that might shed some light on this..."

"Not a thing," Ed answered.

Thronson could see Wally shaking his head. "Okay, well keep your ears open. You guys have more idea what goes on up here than I do. I'll stop back in a few days, or you can call me." This resulted in a lot of head nodding.

After heading into the house to check on Betty and Margaret, Ed, starting for his pickup, asked, "Anything else you need from us, Lieutenant?"

"Nah, not right now. Thanks for your help." He gave a wave to Dan and Wally as they turned to leave.

The mood on the ride home was sullen. Even the effusive Wally sat ruminating about what he had seen. Dan wondered who would hurt a man in his late eighties, and up here of all places. Willis had no enemies locally that he knew. Willis was retired from the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories and had worked on some important stuff, but it was twenty years ago or more. Dan spent time with the old guy, listening to him talk about things he did in his career. At least the ones he was allowed to discuss since some of it was top secret.

Dan found it ironic that many of the people who passed through the area thought of the locals as hicks. Sure, there are few rednecks up in the hills, but most of the folks were either people like Willis who valued their privacy, or ranchers. Running a ranch required a lot of intelligence and business skills. Ed, for example, could talk to anyone on most subjects and hold his end of the conversation fine.

Willis never had the patience for people he considered stupid, and he spent a lot of time with both Ed and Dan. The old man was never rude, he just wouldn't waste his time. Dan couldn't imagine him doing anything to deserve what happened.

As they pulled onto the Rockin' A Ranch, Ed looked at Dan. "I would try to avoid that deputy for a while if I was you."

"Hey, I wasn't the one who threatened to shove his gun up his ass," Dan shot back, grinning.

Wally chuckled loudly at the break in tension. "I been to two world fairs and a dogfight, and I ain't never seen anything as funny as that." Ed allowed himself a grin as he got out of the truck.