

Nelson DeMille was born in New York City in 1943. He grew up on Long Island and graduated from Hofstra University with a degree in Political Science and History. After serving as an infantry officer in Vietnam, where he was decorated three times, DeMille worked as a journalist and short-story writer. He wrote his first major novel, *By the Rivers of Babylon*, in 1978 and has gone on to write twelve international bestsellers. He lives on Long Island.

For more information on Nelson DeMille, visit his website:
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Praise for *Wild Fire*

‘Wisecracking alpha-male thriller heroes don’t come much tougher,
or much funnier, than John Corey’

The Guardian

‘A sinister conspiracy’

Mail on Sunday

‘A real page turner’

The Independent on Sunday

For *Night Fall*

'Nelson DeMille at full tilt with another engaging, exciting
and impeccably researched thriller'

Guardian

'Gripping'

Esquire

'A timely and intense thriller starring a thoroughly likable hero'

Booklist

'Readers will think about this one for a long time'

Publishers Weekly

Wild Fire

Sample chapters

Also by Nelson DeMille

BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON
CATHEDRAL
THE TALBOT ODYSSEY
WORD OF HONOR
THE CHARM SCHOOL
GOLD COAST
THE GENERAL'S DAUGHTER
SPENCERVILLE
PLUM ISLAND
THE LION'S GAME
UP COUNTRY
NIGHT FALL
MAYDAY (With Thomas Block)

Nelson DeMille Wild Fire

sphere

SPHERE

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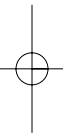
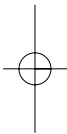
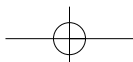
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*To Bob and Joan Dillingham –
who have such lovely daughters*



Author's Note

When fact and fiction are combined in novels, it's not always clear to the reader which is which. Early readers of the manuscript for *Wild Fire* have asked me what is real and what is a figment of my imagination, so I thought I'd address that here.

First, the Anti-Terrorist Task Force (ATTF) represented in this and other John Corey stories is based primarily on the actual Joint Terrorist Task Force (JTTF), with some literary license taken.

In this book, specifically, there is a lot of information on ELF, which is an acronym for something you'll discover in the story. All the information about ELF is accurate, to the best of my knowledge.

As for the secret government plan called Wild Fire, this is based on some information I've come across, mostly online, and can be taken as rumor, fact, pure fiction, or some blend thereof. I personally believe that some variation of Wild Fire (by another code name) actually exists, and if it doesn't, it should.

Other subjects in the book that people have asked me about, such as NEST, Kneecap, and other acronyms, are factual. If what you're reading sounds real, it probably is. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction, and often scarier.

The most frequently asked question I've gotten so far is, "Are BearBangers real?" Yes, they are.

The time period of this story is October 2002, a year and a month after 9/11/01, and the *New York Times* headlines and stories I use are real. Similarly, any mention of government security procedures, or lack of same, was true as of the time the story is set.

A few of my readers who work in law enforcement think that Detective John Corey has some problems with the limits of his power and his jurisdictional authority. I admit to taking some dramatic liberties for the sake of entertainment. A John Corey who plays by the rules and goes by the book is not what any of us wants in a hero.

Early readers of this book have told me that *Wild Fire* kept them awake long after they put the book down. Indeed, this is a scary book for scary times; but it's also a cautionary tale for a post-9/11 world.

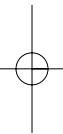
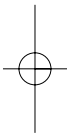
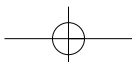
PART I

Friday

NEW YORK CITY

The FBI investigates terrorism-related matters without regard to race, religion, national origin, or gender.

—*Terrorism in the United States*
FBI Publications, 1997



CHAPTER ONE

I'm John Corey, former NYPD homicide detective, wounded in the line of duty, retired on three-quarter disability (which is just a number for pay purposes; about 98 percent of me still functions), and now working as a special contract agent for the Federal Anti-Terrorist Task Force.

The guy in the cubicle facing me, Harry Muller, asked, "You ever hear of the Custer Hill Club?"

"No. Why?"

"That's where I'm going this weekend."

"Have a good time," I said.

"They're a bunch of rich, right-wing loonies who have this hunting lodge upstate."

"Don't bring me any venison, Harry. No dead birds, either."

I got up from my desk and walked to the coffee bar. On the wall above the coffee urns were Justice Department Wanted Posters, featuring mostly Muslim gentlemen, including the number one scumbag, Osama bin Laden.

Also included in the nearly two dozen posters was a Libyan named Asad Khalil, a.k.a. The Lion. I didn't need to memorize

this man's photo; I knew his face as well as my own, though I'd never formally met him.

My brief association with Mr. Khalil occurred about two years ago when I was stalking him, and as it turned out, he was stalking me. He escaped, and I got away with a grazing wound; and, as the Arabs would probably say, "It is destined that we meet again to settle our fates." I look forward to that.

I drained the dregs of the coffee into a Styrofoam cup and scanned a copy of the *New York Times* lying on the counter. The headline for today, Friday, October 11, 2002, read: CONGRESS AUTHORIZES BUSH TO USE FORCE AGAINST IRAQ, CREATING A BROAD MANDATE.

A subheading read: *US Has a Plan to Occupy Iraq, Officials Report.*

It appeared that war was a foregone conclusion, and so was the victory. Therefore, it was a good idea to have an occupation plan. I wondered if anyone in Iraq knew about this.

I took my coffee back to my desk, turned on my computer, and read through some internal memos. We are now a mostly paperless organization, and I actually miss initialing memos. I had an urge to initial my computer screen with a grease pencil, but I settled for the electronic equivalent. If I ran this organization, all memos would be on an Etch A Sketch.

I glanced at my watch. It was 4:30 P.M., and my colleagues on the 26th floor of 26 Federal Plaza were dwindling fast. My colleagues, I should explain, are, like me, members of the Anti-Terrorist Task Force, a four-letter agency (ATTF) in a world of three-letter agencies.

This is the post-9/11 world, so weekends are, in theory,

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just another two workdays for everyone. In reality, the honored tradition of Federal Friday—meaning cutting out early—has not changed much, so the NYPD, who are part of the Task Force, and who are used to lousy hours anyway, man the fort on weekends and holidays.

Harry Muller asked me, “What are you doing this weekend?”

This was the start of the Columbus Day three-day weekend, but as luck would have it, I was scheduled to work on Monday. I replied, “I was going to march in the Columbus Day Parade, but I’m working Monday.”

“Yeah? You were going to march?”

“No, but that’s what I told Captain Paresi.” I added, “I told him my mother was Italian, and I was going to push her wheelchair in the parade.”

Harry laughed and asked, “Did he buy that?”

“No. But he offered to push her wheelchair.”

“I thought your parents were in Florida.”

“They are.”

“And your mother’s Irish.”

“She is. Now I have to find an Italian mother for Paresi to push up Columbus Avenue.”

Harry laughed again and went back to his computer.

Harry Muller, like most of the NYPD in the Mideast Section of the Task Force, does stakeouts and surveillance of Persons of Interest, which, in politically correct speak, means the Muslim community, but I do mostly interviewing and recruiting of informants.

A large percentage of my informants are total liars and bullshit artists who want either money or citizenship, or who want to screw someone in their close-knit community. Now

and then, I get the real deal, but then I have to share the guy with the FBI.

The Task Force is comprised mostly of FBI agents and NYPD detectives, plus retired NYPD, like me. In addition, we have people assigned from other Federal agencies, such as Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), plus state and suburban police, Port Authority Police, and so forth, too numerous to name or for me to remember.

Also included in our collegial group are people who, like ghosts, don't actually exist, but if they did, they'd be called CIA.

I checked my e-mail, and there were three messages. The first was from my boss, Tom Walsh, special agent in charge, who had taken over the ATTF when my old boss, Jack Koenig, died in the World Trade Center. The e-mail read: CONFIDENTIAL—REMINDER—IN THE RUN-UP TO POSSIBLE HOSTILITIES WITH IRAQ, WE NEED TO GIVE SPECIAL ATTENTION TO IRAQI NATIONALS LIVING IN CONUS.

"CONUS" meant "Continental United States." "Hostilities" meant "war." The rest of it meant "find an Iraqi we can link to a terrorist threat against the US so we can make life easier for the folks in Washington before they bomb the shit out of Baghdad."

The message went on: PRIMARY THREAT AND EMPHASIS REMAINS UBL WITH NEW EMPHASIS ON UBL/SADDAM LINK. BRIEFING ON THIS NEXT WEEK—TBA. WALSH, SAC.

For the uninitiated, "UBL" is "Osama bin Laden," which should be "OBL," but long ago somebody transliterated the

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Arabic script into Latin letters as “Usama,” which is also correct. The media mostly uses the “Osama” spelling of the scumbag’s name, while intelligence agencies still refer to him as “UBL.” Same scumbag.

The next e-mail was from my second boss, the aforementioned Vince Paresi, an NYPD captain assigned to the ATTF to keep an eye on the difficult cops who sometimes don’t play well with their FBI friends. That may include me. Captain Paresi replaced Captain David Stein, who, like Jack Koenig, was killed—murdered, actually—one year and one month ago today in the World Trade Center.

David Stein was a great guy, and I miss him every day. Jack Koenig, for all his faults and for all our problems with each other, was a professional, a tough but fair boss, and a patriot. His body was never recovered. Neither was David Stein’s.

Another body that was never recovered, along with two thousand others, was that of Ted Nash, CIA officer, monumental prick, and arch-enemy of yours truly.

I wish I could think of something nice to say about this asshole, but all I can think of is, “Good riddance.”

Also, this guy has a bad habit of coming back from the dead—he’s done it at least once before—and without a positive body identification, I’m not breaking out the champagne.

Anyway, Captain Paresi’s e-mail to all NYPD/ATTF personnel read: YOU ARE TO STEP UP SURVEILLANCE OF IRAQI NATIONALS, REACH OUT TO IRAQIS WHO HAVE BEEN HELPFUL IN THE PAST, AND BRING IN FOR QUESTIONING IRAQIS ON WATCH LISTS. YOU ARE TO PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO IRAQIS WHO ASSOCIATE WITH OTHER ISLAMIC

NATIONALS, I.E., SAUDIS, AFGHANIS, LIBYANS, ETC. STAKEOUT AND SURVEILLANCE OF MOSQUES WILL BE STEPPED UP. BRIEFING NEXT WEEK, TBA. PARESI, CAPT. NYPD.

I think I see a pattern here.

Hard to believe, but it wasn't so long ago that we were trying to figure out what we were supposed to be doing every day, and memos were more carefully worded so as not to appear that we disapproved of Islamic terrorists or that we were upsetting them in any way. That changed real quick.

The third e-mail was from my wife, Kate Mayfield, whom I could see at her desk across the NYPD/FBI great divide of the 26th floor. My wife is a beautiful woman, but even if she weren't, I'd still love her. Actually, if she weren't beautiful, I wouldn't have even noticed her, so it's a moot point.

The message read: LET'S KNOCK OFF EARLY, GO HOME, HAVE SEX, I'LL COOK YOU CHILI AND HOT DOGS, AND MAKE YOU DRINKS WHILE YOU WATCH TV IN YOUR UNDERWEAR.

Actually, it didn't say that. It said: LET'S GO AWAY FOR A ROMANTIC WEEKEND OF WINE TASTING ON THE NORTH FORK. I'LL BOOK A B&B. LOVE, KATE.

Why the hell do I have to taste wine? It all tastes the same. Also, bed-and-breakfast places suck—cutesy run-down hovels with nineteenth-century bathrooms and creaky beds. And then you have to eat breakfast with the other guests, who are usually yuppie swine from the Upper West Side who want to talk about something they read in the Arts and Leisure section of the *Times*. Whenever I hear the word “art,” I reach for my gun.

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I typed my response: SOUNDS GREAT. THANKS FOR THINKING OF IT. LOVE, JOHN.

Like most men, I'd rather face the muzzle of an assault rifle than a pissed-off wife.

Kate Mayfield is an FBI agent, a lawyer, and part of my team, which consists of another NYPD guy and another FBI agent. Plus, now and then, we add a person or two from another agency, as needed, such as ICE or CIA. Our last CIA teammate was the aforementioned Ted Nash, who I strongly suspect was once romantically involved with my then future wife. This was not why I disliked him—it was why I *hated* him. I disliked him for professional reasons.

I noticed that Harry Muller was cleaning up his desk, locking away sensitive material so that the cleaning people, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, couldn't photocopy or fax it to Sandland. I said to him, "You got twenty-one minutes before the bell."

He looked up at me and replied, "I have to go pick up some Tech stuff."

"Why?"

"I told you. I'm doing a surveillance upstate. The Custer Hill Club."

"I thought you were an invited guest."

"No, I'm trespassing."

"How did you catch this one?"

"I don't know. Do I ask? I own a camper, a pair of boots, and a hat with earmuffs. So, I'm qualified."

"Right." Harry Muller, as I said, is former NYPD, like me, retired with twenty years in, the last ten in the Intelligence Unit, and now hired by the Feds to do stakeouts and

surveillance so that the Suits, as we call the FBI, can do the cerebral work.

I asked him, "Hey, what's with this right-wing stuff? I thought you were with us?" "Us" meaning the Mideast Section, which makes up about 90 percent of the ATTF these days.

Harry replied, "I don't know. Do I ask? I just have to take pictures, not go to church with them."

"Did you read the e-mails from Walsh and Paresi?"

"Yeah."

"You think we're going to war?"

"Duh . . . let me think."

"Does this right-wing group have any Iraqi or UBL connections?"

"I don't know." Harry glanced at his watch and said, "I need to get to Tech before they lock up."

"You got time." I asked him, "You going alone?"

"Yeah. No problem. It's just a non-invasive surveillance and stakeout." He looked at me and said, "Between us, Walsh says this is just killing trees—file building. You know, like, we're not just up the Arabs' asses. We're on the case of domestic groups, too, like the neo-Nazis, militia, survivalists, and stuff. Looks good for the media and Congress, if it ever comes up. Right? We did this a few times before 9/11. Remember?"

"Right."

"Gotta go. I guess I'll see you Monday. I need to see Walsh first thing Monday."

"He's working Monday?"

"Well, he didn't invite me to his house for a beer, so I guess he'll be here."

"Right. See you Monday."

Harry left.

What Harry said about file building didn't make too much sense, plus we have a Domestic Terrorist Section for that kind of stuff. Also, snooping on rich right-wingers with a club upstate was a little odd. Also odd was Tom Walsh coming in on a holiday to debrief Harry on a routine assignment.

I'm very nosy, which is why I'm a great detective, so I went over to a separate, stand-alone computer where I could access the Internet, and did a Google search for "Custer Hill Club."

I didn't get any hits, so I tried "Custer Hill." The counter at the top showed more than 400,000 hits, and the mix on the first page—golf courses, restaurants, and several historical references in Montana having to do with General George Armstrong Custer's problem at the Little Bighorn—indicated that none of these references would be relevant. Nevertheless, I spent ten minutes scanning the hits, but there were no references to New York State.

I went back to my desk, where I could use my ATTF password to access internal files on the ACS—the Automated Case System, the FBI's version of Google.

The Custer Hill Club came up, but apparently I had no need to know about this file, and below the title was row after row of Xs. Usually you get something, even on restricted files, such as the date the file was opened, or who to see about getting access to the file, or at least the classification level of the file. But this file was completely Xed out.

So all I managed to do was alert the security goons that I'd been inquiring about a restricted file that had nothing to do with what I was working on, which was Iraqis at the moment.

But just to mess with their heads, I typed in, "Iraqi Camel Club Weapons of Mass Destruction."

No hits.

I shut down my computer, secured my desk, grabbed my coat, and walked over to Kate's desk.

Kate Mayfield and I met on the job when we both worked the case of the aforementioned Asad Khalil, a nasty little shit who came to America to kill a lot of people. He did that, then tried to kill me and Kate, then escaped. Not one of my better cases, but it brought Kate and me together, so the next time I see him, I'll thank him for that before I gut-shoot him and watch him die slowly.

I asked Kate, "Can I buy you a drink?"

She looked up at me and smiled—"That would be nice"—then went back to her computer.

Ms. Mayfield is a Midwestern girl, posted to New York from Washington, and originally unhappy about the assignment, but now deliriously happy to live in the greatest city on Earth with the greatest man in the universe. I asked her, "Why are we going away for the weekend?"

"Because this place drives me crazy."

Great cities can do that. I asked her, "What are you working on?"

"I'm trying to find a B and B on the North Fork."

"They're probably all booked up for the holiday weekend, and don't forget I have to work Monday."

"How could I forget? You've been complaining about it all week."

"I never complain."

She thought that was funny for some reason.

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I studied Kate's face in the glow of the computer screen. She was as beautiful as the day I met her nearly three years ago. Usually, women I'm with age fast. My first wife, Robin, said our one-year starter marriage seemed like ten years. I said to Kate, "I'll meet you at Ecco's."

"Don't get picked up."

I walked through the cube farm, which was nearly empty now, and entered the elevator lobby, where colleagues were piling up.

I made small talk with a few people, then noticed Harry and went over to him. He was carrying a big metal suitcase, which I assumed contained cameras and lenses. I said to him, "Let me buy you a drink."

"Sorry, I need to get on the road ASAP."

"You driving up tonight?"

"I am. I need to be at this place at first light. Some kind of meeting going down, and I need to photograph car plates and people as they arrive."

"Sounds like the mob surveillance we used to do at weddings and funerals."

"Yeah. Same shit."

We crowded into an elevator and rode down to the lobby.

Harry asked, "Where's Kate?"

"On her way." Harry was divorced, but he was seeing a woman, so I asked, "How's Lori?"

"She's great."

"She looked good in her photo on Match.com."

He laughed. "You're an asshole."

"What's your point? Hey, where is this place?"

"What place? Oh . . . it's up near Saranac Lake."

We walked out onto Broadway. It was a cool autumn day, and the streets and sidewalks had that Thank-God-It's-Friday feeling.

Harry and I bid each other farewell, and I walked south on Broadway.

Lower Manhattan is a tight cluster of skyscrapers and narrow streets, which insures minimum sunlight and maximum stress.

The area includes the Lower East Side, where I was born and raised, plus Chinatown, Little Italy, Tribeca, and Soho. The major industries down here are diametrically opposed: business and finance, represented by Wall Street, and government, represented by Federal, state, and municipal courthouses; City Hall; prisons; Federal Plaza; Police Plaza; and so forth. A necessary adjunct to all of the above are law firms, one of which employs my ex-wife, a defense attorney who represents only the best class of criminal scum. This was one of the reasons we got divorced. The other was that she thought cooking and fucking were two cities in China.

Up ahead was a big patch of empty sky where the Twin Towers once stood. To most Americans, and even to most New Yorkers, the absence of the towers is noted only as a gap in the distant skyline. But if you live or work downtown, and were used to seeing those behemoths every day, then their absence still comes as a surprise when you walk down the street and they're not there.

As I walked, I thought about my conversation with Harry Muller.

On the one hand, there was absolutely nothing unusual or remarkable about his weekend assignment. On the other hand,

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it didn't compute. I mean, here we are on the brink of war with Iraq, waging war in Afghanistan, paranoid about another Islamic terrorist attack, and Harry gets sent upstate to snoop on some gathering of rich right-wingers whose threat level to national security is probably somewhere between low and non-existent at the moment.

And then there was Tom Walsh's nonsense to Harry about file building in case anyone in Congress or the media wanted to know if the ATTF was on top of the homegrown terrorists. This may have made sense a few years ago, but since 9/11, the neo-Nazis, militias, and that bunch have been quiet and actually thrilled that we got attacked and that the country was shaping up pretty good, killing bad guys and arresting people and so forth. Then there was the holiday Monday debriefing.

Anyway, I shouldn't make too much of this, though it was a little odd. Basically, it is none of my business, and every time I ask too many questions about things that seem odd at 26 Federal Plaza, I get into trouble. Or, as my mother used to say, "John, Trouble is your middle name." And I believed her until I saw my birth certificate, which said Aloysius. I'll take Trouble over Aloysius any day.



CHAPTER TWO

I turned onto Chambers Street and entered Ecco's, an Italian restaurant with a saloon atmosphere—the best of both worlds.

The bar was crowded with suited gentlemen and ladies in business attire. I recognized a lot of faces and said a few hellos.

Even if I didn't know anybody there, being a good detective and an observer of New York life, I could pick out the high-paid attorneys, the civil servants, the law enforcement people, and the financial guys. I bump into my ex here sometimes, so one of us has to stop coming here.

I ordered a Dewar's and soda and made small talk with a few people around me.

Kate arrived, and I ordered her a white wine, which reminded me of my weekend problem. I asked, "Did you hear about the grape blight?"

"What grape blight?"

"The one on the North Fork. All the grapes are infected with this weird fungus that can be transmitted to human beings."

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She apparently didn't hear me and said, "I found us a nice B and B in Mattituck." She described the place based on some tourist website and informed me, "It sounds really charming."

So does Dracula's Castle on the Transylvanian website. I asked her, "Did you ever hear of the Custer Hill Club?"

"No . . . I didn't see it on the North Fork website. What town is it in?"

"It's actually upstate New York."

"Oh . . . is it nice?"

"I don't know."

"Do you want to go there next weekend?"

"I'll check it out first."

Apparently, this name didn't ring any bells with Ms. Mayfield, who sometimes knows things she doesn't share with me. I mean, we're married, but she's FBI, and I have a limited need-to-know, lower security clearance than she does. On that note, I wondered why Ms. Mayfield thought that the words "Custer Hill Club" referred to a place to stay, and not, for instance, a historical society, or a country club, or whatever. Maybe it was the context. Or maybe she knew exactly what I was talking about.

I changed the subject to the memos about Iraq, and we discussed the geopolitical situation for a while. It was Special Agent Mayfield's opinion that war with Iraq was not only inevitable, but also necessary.

Twenty-six Federal Plaza is an Orwellian ministry, and the government workers there are very attuned to any slight change in the party line. When political correctness was the order of the day, you would have thought the Anti-Terrorist Task Force was a social service agency for psychopaths with low self-

esteem. Now, everyone talks about killing Islamic fundamentalists and winning the war on terror—grammatical correctness would be “the war on terrorism,” but this is a Newspeak word. Ms. Mayfield, a good government employee, has few politics of her own, so she has no problem hating the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and UBL one day, then hating Saddam Hussein even more when a directive comes out telling her who to hate that day.

But perhaps I’m not being fair. And I’m not totally rational on the subject of bin Laden and Al Qaeda. I lost a lot of friends on 9/11, and but for the grace of God and heavy traffic, Kate and I would have been in the North Tower when it went down.

I had been on my way to a breakfast meeting there in Windows on the World on the 107th floor. I was late, and Kate waited in the lobby for me. David Stein, Jack Koenig, and my former partner and maybe best friend in the world, Dom Fanelli, were on time, as were a lot of other good people and some bad people, like Ted Nash. No one in that restaurant survived.

I don’t get shaken up very easily—even getting shot three times and nearly bleeding to death on a city street didn’t have any lasting effect on my mental health, such as it is—but that day shook me up more than I realized at the time. I mean, I was standing right under the plane when it hit, and now, when I see a low-flying plane overhead—

“John?”

I turned to Kate. “What . . . ?”

“I asked you if you wanted another drink.”

I looked down into my empty glass.

She ordered me another.

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I was vaguely aware that the news was on the TV at the end of the bar, and the reporter was covering the congressional vote on Iraq.

Back in my head, it was 9/11 again. I had tried to make myself useful by helping the firemen and cops evacuate people from the lobby, and at the same time, I was searching for Kate.

Then, I was outside the building carrying a stretcher, and I happened to look up and see these people jumping from the windows and I thought Kate was up there and I thought I saw her falling. . . . I glanced at her standing beside me, and she looked at me and asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

And then the second plane hit, and later I could hear this odd rumbling sound of collapsing concrete and steel, unlike anything I'd ever heard before, and I can still feel the ground shaking under my feet as the building fell and shards of glass rained down from the sky. And like everyone else, I ran like hell. I still can't remember if I dropped the stretcher, or if the other guy dropped it first, or if I was actually carrying a stretcher at all.

I don't think I'll ever remember.

In the weeks following 9/11, Kate became withdrawn, couldn't sleep, cried a lot, and rarely smiled. I was reminded of rape victims I'd dealt with who lost not only their innocence but part of their soul.

The sensitive bureaucrats in Washington urged anyone who'd been involved with this tragedy to seek counseling. I'm not the type to talk about my problems to strangers, professional or otherwise, but at Kate's insistence, I did go see one of the shrinks hired by the Feds to handle the large demand. The

guy was a little nuts himself, so we didn't make much progress in the first session.

For my next session and subsequent sessions, I went to my neighborhood bar, Dresner's, where Aidan the bartender gave me sage counsel. "Life's a bitch," said Aidan. "Have another drink."

Kate, on the other hand, stuck to her counseling for about six months, and she's much better now.

But something had happened to her that was not going to completely heal. And whatever it was, it might have been for the better.

Since I've known her, she has always been a good company girl, following the rules and rarely criticizing the Bureau or its methods. In fact, she used to criticize me for criticizing the Bureau.

Outwardly, she's still a loyal soldier, as I said, and she goes along with the party line, but inwardly, she realizes that the party line has done a 180-degree turn, and this realization has made her a little more cynical, critical, and questioning. To me, this is a good thing, and we now have something in common.

Sometimes I miss the starry-eyed team cheerleader I fell in love with. But I also like this tougher and more experienced woman, who, like me, has seen the face of evil, and is ready to meet it again.

And now, a year and a month later, we are living in a state of perpetual color-coded anxiety. Today is Alert Level Orange. Tomorrow, who knows? For damn sure, it's not going to be Green again in my lifetime.



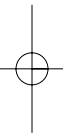
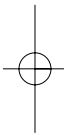
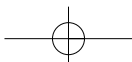
PART II

Saturday

UPSTATE NEW YORK

It does not do to leave a dragon out of your calculations,
if you live near him.

—J.R.R. Tolkien



CHAPTER THREE

Detective Harry Muller parked his camper on the side of an old logging road and gathered his gear from the front seat, then got out, checked his compass, and headed northwest through the woods, wearing an autumn camouflage outfit and a black knit cap.

The terrain was easy to navigate, with well-spaced pine trees and ground cover of moss and dewy ferns. As he walked, daylight began filtering through the pines, revealing a thick ground mist. Birds sang and small animals scurried through the undergrowth.

It was cold, and Harry could see his breath, but the pristine forest was spectacular, so he was slightly more happy than miserable.

Slung over his shoulders were binoculars, a Handycam, and an expensive Nikon 12-megapixel camera with a long 300mm lens. He also carried a *Sibley Guide to Birds* in case anyone asked him what he was doing there, and a 9mm Glock in case they didn't like his answer.

He'd been briefed by a guy known as Ed From Tech, who'd

told him that the Custer Hill Club property was about four miles long on each side, for a total of sixteen square miles of private land. Incredibly, the entire property was enclosed within a high chain-link fence, which was why the Tech guy had also handed him the wire cutters that Harry now carried in his side pocket.

Within ten minutes, he came to the fence. It was about twelve feet high and topped with razor wire. Metal signs, about every ten feet, read: PRIVATE PROPERTY—TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

Another sign read: DANGER—DO NOT ENTER—PROPERTY PATROLLED BY ARMED GUARDS AND DOGS.

From long experience, Harry knew that warning signs like these were usually more bullshit than reality. In this case, however, he'd take the signs seriously. Also, it troubled him that Walsh either didn't know about the dogs and armed guards or knew and didn't tell him. In either case, he would have a few words for Tom Walsh on Monday morning.

He took out his cell phone and switched it from ringer to vibrate. He noticed that his phone had good signal strength, which was a little strange up in the mountains. Impulsively, he dialed his girlfriend Lori's cell phone. After five rings, his call went into voice mail.

Harry said softly into the phone, "Hi, babe. It's your one and only. I'm up here in the mountains, so maybe I won't have good reception for very long. But I wanted to say hi, I got up here last night about midnight, slept in the camper, and now I'm on-duty, near the right-wing loony lodge. So don't call back, but I'll call you later from a landline if I can't reach you

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by cell phone. Okay? I still need to do something at the local airport later today or tomorrow morning, so I might need to stay overnight. I'll let you know when I know. Speak to you later. Love you."

He hung up, took the wire cutters, sliced a gap in the chain-link, and squeezed through onto the property. He stood motionless, looked, listened, then put the wire cutters back in his pocket. He continued on, through the woods.

After about five minutes, he noticed a telephone pole rising between the pine trees, and he approached it. Mounted on the pole was a telephone call box, which was locked.

He looked up and saw that the pole was about thirty feet high. Approximately twenty feet up the pole were four floodlights, and above that were five strands of wire running along a crossbeam. One wire obviously powered the telephone and another powered the floodlights. The other three were actually thick cables that could carry lots of juice.

Harry noticed something unusual and focused his binoculars toward the top of the pole. What he'd thought were evergreen boughs from surrounding trees were actually boughs protruding *from* the telephone pole. But these boughs, he knew, were the plastic kind that cell-phone companies used to camouflage or beautify cell-phone towers in populated areas. Why, he wondered, were they here in the middle of the woods?

He lowered his binoculars, raised his Nikon, and snapped a few shots of the pole, recalling that Tom Walsh had said to him, "In addition to cars, faces, and plate numbers, photograph anything else that looks interesting."

Harry thought this seemed interesting and good for the

files, so he took his Handycam and shot ten seconds of tape, then moved on.

The terrain began to rise gradually, and the pines gave way to big oaks, elms, and maples whose remaining foliage were brilliant hues of red, orange, and yellow. A carpet of fallen leaves covered the ground, and they rustled when Harry passed over them.

Harry did a quick map-and-compass check and determined that the lodge was straight ahead, less than half a mile away.

He broke out a breakfast bar and continued on, eating, enjoying the fresh Adirondack mountain air while staying alert for trouble. Even though he was a Federal agent, trespassing was trespassing, and without a warrant, he had no more right to be on private, posted land than a poacher.

And yet, when he'd asked Walsh about a warrant, Walsh had said to him, "We have no probable cause for surveillance. Why ask a judge if the answer is no?" Or, as the NYPD liked to say about bending the law, "It's better to ask for forgiveness later than to ask for permission now."

Harry, like everyone else in anti-terrorism, knew that the rules had changed about two minutes after the second tower had been hit, and the rules that hadn't changed could be broken. This usually made his job easier, but sometimes, like now, the job also got a little riskier.

The forest had thinned out, and Harry noticed a lot of stumps where the trees had been felled and carted away, maybe for firewood, maybe for security. Whatever the reason, there was a lot less cover and concealment than there had been a hundred yards back.

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Up ahead, he could see an open field, and he approached it slowly through the widely spaced trees.

He stopped under the last standing maple and surveyed the open land with his binoculars.

A paved road ran through the field and downhill to the entrance gate, where he could see a log-cabin gatehouse through his binoculars. The road was lined with security lights mounted on metal poles, and he also noticed wooden telephone poles with five strands of wires coming out of the woods, crossing the field and road, and disappearing again in the woods on the far side of the road. This, he assumed, was a continuation of what he'd seen near the fence, and it appeared that these poles and wires circled the property, meaning the whole sixteen-mile perimeter was floodlit. He said to himself, *This is not a hunting lodge.*

He scanned the road as it traveled uphill to a huge two-story Adirondack-style mountain lodge that sat on the rising slope in front of him, about two hundred yards away. On the front lawn of the lodge was a tall flagpole from which flew the American flag and, beneath that, some sort of yellow pennant. Beyond the lodge were some utility structures, and at the top of the hill was what looked like a radio or cell-phone tower, and he took a telescopic photo of it with his Nikon.

The lodge was made of river stone, logs, and wood shingles, with a big columned portico out front. The green-shingled roof sprouted six stone chimneys, all of which billowed gray smoke into the air. He could see lights in the front windows and a black Jeep in the big gravel parking lot in front of the house. Obviously, someone was home, and hopefully they were expecting guests. That's why he was here.

He used the Nikon to take a few telescopic photos of the parking lot and lodge, then he turned on his Handycam and took some establishing footage of the lodge and his surroundings.

He knew that he'd have to get a lot closer if he was going to photograph arriving cars, people, and license plates. Ed From Tech had shown him an aerial photo of the lodge and pointed out that the terrain was open, but that there were lots of large rock outcroppings for concealment.

Harry looked at the outcroppings rising up the hill, and he planned his route to sprint from one rock formation to another until he could reach a vantage point about a hundred feet from the lodge and the parking field. From there, he saw he could photograph and videotape parked cars, and people going into the lodge. He needed to stay there until late afternoon, according to Walsh, then get over to the local airport to check out arriving-passenger manifests and car rentals.

He recalled the time he was on the case of a bunch of Irish Republican Army guys who'd set up a training camp not far from here. The Adirondack Forest Preserve was as big as the state of New Hampshire, a mixture of public and private land with a very small population, making it a good place to hunt, hike, and try out illegal weapons.

This surveillance was a little different from the IRA bust, in that no crimes had apparently been committed and the people who lived in that big lodge probably had some pull someplace.

Harry was about to make his first rush toward an outcrop when suddenly three black Jeeps appeared from behind the lodge and started traveling cross-country at high speed. In fact, they were traveling straight toward him. "Shit."

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He turned and moved back into the tree line, then heard dogs barking in the forest. "Holy shit."

The three Jeeps came right up to the trees, and two men exited from each vehicle. They carried hunting rifles.

Out of the trees around him came three men with German shepherds straining at their leashes and growling. The men, he noticed, had sidearms strapped to their hips. Harry now saw a fourth guy coming out of the trees who walked as if he were in charge.

Harry realized the only way his position could have been fixed so accurately was if there were motion or sound detectors planted in the area. These people *really* liked their privacy.

He felt an unaccustomed sense of anxiety, though not fear. This was going to be messy but not dangerous.

The security guards had formed a circle around him but kept a distance of about twenty feet. They were all dressed in military-type camouflage fatigues with an American flag patch on their right shoulders. Each man wore a peaked cap with an American eagle on it, and each had a wireworm sprouting from his left ear.

The man who was in charge—a tough-looking, middle-aged guy—stepped closer, and Harry saw he had a military-type name tag that said CARL.

Carl notified him, "Sir, you are on private property."

Harry put on a dumb face. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, geez. Well, if you'll point the way—"

"How did you get through the fence, sir?"

"Fence? What fence?"

"The fence that surrounds the property, sir, and is posted with 'no trespassing' signs."

"I didn't see any—. Oh, *that* fence. Sorry, Carl, I was following a woodpecker, and he flew over, so I found a hole in the fence and—"

"Why are you here?"

Harry noticed that Carl's tone had become a little less polite, and he'd forgotten the "sir" word. Harry replied, "I'm a bird-watcher." He displayed his guidebook. "I watch birds." He tapped his binoculars.

"Why do you have those cameras?"

"I take *pictures* of the birds." *Asshole*. "So, if you'll point me to where I can exit the property—or, better yet, drive me out—I'll be leaving."

Carl didn't reply, and Harry sensed the first sign of possible trouble.

Then Carl said, "There are millions of acres of public land around here. Why did you cut a hole in the fence?"

"I didn't *cut* any fucking hole, pal. I *found* a fucking hole. And by the way, Carl, fuck you."

Harry, and everyone around him, realized that he was not sounding like a bird-watcher any longer.

He was about to flash his Fed creds, stand these bastards at attention, and tell them to give him a ride back to his camper. His second thought, however, was not to make a Federal case of this. Why let them know he was a Federal agent sent here to snoop? Walsh would have a total shit fit. Harry said, "I'm outta here." He took a step toward the forest.

All of a sudden, rifles were raised and pistols came out of their holsters. The three dogs growled and pulled at their leashes.

"Stop, or I'll let the dogs loose."

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Harry took a deep breath and stopped.

Carl said, "There are two ways to do this. Easy or hard."

"Let's do hard."

Carl glanced around at the other nine security guards, then at the dogs, then at Harry. He spoke in a conciliatory tone. "Sir, we are under strict instructions to bring any trespassers to the lodge, call the sheriff, and have the individual transported by a law enforcement person off the property. We will not press charges, but you will be advised by the sheriff that if you trespass again, you are subject to arrest. You may not, under the law or under our insurance policy, exit the land by yourself on foot, and we will not drive you off the land. Only the sheriff may do that. It's for your own safety."

Harry thought about that. Though the assignment was belly-up, he could pull out a little win by seeing the inside of the lodge, and maybe getting a little info there, and a little 411 from the local sheriff. He said to Carl, "Okay, sport, let's go."

Carl motioned for Harry to turn and walk toward the Jeeps. Harry assumed they'd put him in one of the vehicles, but they didn't, so maybe their insurance policy was real strict.

The Jeeps did stay with him, however, as he was directed to the road and up the hill toward the lodge, accompanied by the whole contingent.

As he walked, he considered these ten armed security guards with the dogs, the gatehouse, the chain-link fence, the razor wire, the floodlights and call boxes, and what were most likely motion and sound detectors. This was not your everyday hunting and fishing club. He was suddenly pissed off at Walsh, who'd barely briefed him, and more pissed at himself for not smelling trouble.

He knew he shouldn't be frightened, but some instinct, sharpened by twenty years of police work and five years of anti-terrorist work, told him that there was an element of danger here.

To confirm this, he said to Carl, who was walking behind him, "Hey, why don't you use your cell phone to call the sheriff now? Save some time."

Carl didn't respond.

Harry reached into his pocket. "You can use my cell phone."

Carl snapped, "Keep your hands where I can see them, and shut your fucking mouth."

A cold chill ran down Harry Muller's spine.



CHAPTER FOUR

Harry Muller sat across a desk from a tall, thin, middle-aged man who had introduced himself as Bain Madox, president and owner of the Custer Hill Club. This, explained Mr. Madox, was not his day job, only a hobby. Bain Madox was also president and owner of Global Oil Corporation (GOCO for short), which Harry had heard of, and which also explained two of the photographs on the wall—one of an oil tanker and another of a burning oil field in some desert or another.

Madox noticed Harry's interest in the photographs and said, "Kuwait. The Gulf War." He added, "I hate to see good oil burning, especially if no one is paying me for it."

Harry didn't reply.

Mr. Madox was wearing a blue blazer and a loud plaid shirt. Harry Muller was wearing his thermal long johns. He'd been subjected to a humiliating strip search by Carl and two other security guards, who had cattle prods and promised to use them if he resisted. Carl and one of those two guys stood behind him now, cattle prods in hand. So far, there was no sign of the sheriff, and Harry didn't think the sheriff was on the way.

Harry watched Bain Madox sitting quietly behind his big desk in the large pine-paneled office on the second floor of the lodge. Through the window to his right, he could see the rising slope behind the lodge, and at the top of the hill, he noticed the tall antenna he'd seen from the woods.

Mr. Madox asked his guest, "Would you like some coffee? Tea?"

"Fuck you."

"Is that a no?"

"Fuck you."

Bain Madox stared at Harry, and Harry stared back. Madox looked about sixty, Harry thought, very fit, unseasonably tanned, swept-back gray hair, a long, thin, hooked nose like an eagle's with gray eyes to match. Harry also thought this guy looked rich, but not stupid rich. There was something about Madox that signaled strength, power, and intelligence. Command and control. And Madox didn't seem one bit nervous about having abducted and detained a Federal agent. This was not good, Harry knew.

Madox took a cigarette from a wooden box on his desk and asked, "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"I don't give a fuck if you burn. Call the sheriff. Now."

Madox lit the cigarette with a silver desk lighter and puffed thoughtfully, then asked, "What brings you here, Detective Muller?"

"Bird-watching."

"I don't mean to be rude, but that seems like a sissy hobby for a man involved in anti-terrorism."

"You're about one minute away from me placing you under arrest."

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"Well, then, let me use that minute wisely." Madox examined the items strewn across the desk: Harry's cell phone and pager, which were now shut off, his key chain, the Handycam, the Nikon digital camera, the binoculars, the Sibley bird guide, a terrain map of the area, the compass, the wire cutters, Harry's credentials, and his 9mm Glock 26, the so-called Baby Glock that was easier to conceal. He noticed that Madox had removed the magazine, which was smart of him.

Madox asked Harry, "What am I to make of this?"

"Whatever the fuck you want to make of it, pal. Give me my shit, and let me the fuck out of here, or you'll be looking at twenty years to life for kidnapping a Federal agent."

Madox made a face, suggesting he was annoyed and impatient. "Come on, Mr. Muller. We're well beyond that by now. We need to move forward."

"Fuck you."

Madox suggested, "Let *me* play detective. I see here a pair of binoculars, a small video camera, a very expensive digital camera with a telescopic lens, and a bird guide. From that, I can conclude that you are an enthusiastic bird-watcher. So enthusiastic, in fact, that you also have these wire cutters in the event a fence comes between you and a bird. Plus, a 9mm handgun in case a bird won't stay still long enough for you to photograph it." He asked Harry, "How am I doing?"

"Not too good."

"Let me keep trying. I also see here a US geological survey map on which is drawn in red the perimeter of my property, plus the gatehouse, and this lodge and other structures. This suggests to me that an aerial photograph was taken of my

property, and these man-made features were transferred to your map. Correct?"

Harry didn't answer.

Mr. Madox continued, "I also see here on my desk this badge and a card that identifies you as a retired New York City police detective. Congratulations."

"Eat shit and die."

"But what interests me most is this other badge and ID card that say you are a Federal agent with the Anti-Terrorist Task Force. *Not* retired." He stared at the photo ID, then at Harry Muller and asked, "Working today?"

Harry decided to try the cover story one more time, just in case this guy wanted a reason to cut him loose. "Okay, let me tell you again what I told your paranoid rent-a-cops. I'm up here for the weekend camping. I watch and photograph birds. I'm also a Federal agent, and by law I have to carry my credentials and my piece. You shouldn't put two and two together and come up with five. Understand?"

Madox nodded. "I do. But put yourself in my position. And I'll put myself in yours. I'm Federal Agent Harry Muller, and I'm listening to a man who tells me that all the circumstantial evidence I see in front of me—evidence of surveillance—can be explained as bird-watching. So, do I let you go? Or do I demand a more logical and truthful explanation? What would *you* do in my position?"

"Sorry, I can't hear you over your loud shirt."

Mr. Madox smiled, then opened the Sibley guide, put on his eyeglasses, and selected a page. He asked Harry, "Where are you most likely to encounter a loon, Mr. Muller?"

"Near a lake."

"That was too easy." He flipped a few pages. "What is the color of a cerulean warbler?"

"Brown."

Mr. Madox shook his head. "No, no, Mr. Muller. Cerulean *means* blue. Sky blue. One more. Two out of three is passing." He flipped through the book again. "What color is the male—?"

"Hey, take that book, put a coat of K-Y jelly on it, and shove it up your ass."

Mr. Madox closed the guide and threw it aside. He turned to his computer screen. "Here are your digital photos. I don't see any birds in them. I see, however, that you seem interested in one of my utility poles . . . and let's see . . . here's a telescopic shot of the tower behind my lodge . . . close-ups of my lodge . . . ah, there's a bird perched on my roof. What is that?"

"A shit-seeking hawk."

Madox picked up the Handycam, switched it to Replay, and looked through the viewfinder. "Here's the pole again . . . you noticed the plastic boughs, I assume . . . here's the lodge again . . . nice views from where you were standing . . . that bird is flying away. What was that? Looks like a great blue heron, but he should have migrated south by now. It's been unusually warm this fall. Global warming, if you believe that crap." He put down the camcorder and asked, "Do you know what the solution is to global warming? No? I'll tell you. Nuclear winter." He laughed. "Old joke."

Madox sat back in his chair and lit another cigarette. He blew perfect smoke rings and watched them as they rose and dissolved. "That's a lost art."

Harry Muller glanced around the room as Bain Madox

practiced his lost art. He could hear the breathing of the two men behind him as he shifted his gaze to a wall that was covered with framed certificates of some sort. Harry thought that if he could get a handle on who this guy was, it might be helpful.

Madox noticed Harry's gaze and said, "The one on the top left is my certificate for the Silver Star. Next to it is the certificate for the Bronze Star, then the Purple Heart. Then there's my commission as a second lieutenant in the United States Army. Next row are the usual service medals, including the Vietnam Campaign Medal and a Presidential Unit Citation. I served in the Seventh Cavalry Regiment of the First Air Cavalry Division. The Seventh Cav was General Custer's old unit. That's part of the reason for the name of this club. I might tell you the other part later, but if I do, then I'll have to kill you." He laughed. "Just joking. Hey, *smile*. Just joking."

Harry forced a smile. *Asshole*.

"The last row is the Combat Infantry Badge, my Expert Rifleman Badge, my Jungle Training School diploma, and, finally, my Army discharge. I left the service after eight years with the rank of lieutenant colonel. We made rank fast in those days. Lots of dead officers opened up the promotion list. Did you serve?"

"No." Harry decided to play along. "I was too young, then they ended the draft."

"Right. They should bring it back."

"Absolutely," Harry said. "They should draft women, too. They want equal rights, they should have equal responsibilities."

"You're absolutely right."

Harry was on a roll and continued, "My son still had to register for the draft in case they ever bring it back. But my daughter didn't. What's that all about?"

"Precisely. You have a son and daughter?"

"Yeah."

"Married?"

"Divorced," Harry replied.

"Ah, me, too."

"Women will drive you crazy," Harry said.

"Only if you let them."

"Well, we let them."

Madox chuckled. "We do. Anyway, you're here on surveillance for the Federal Anti-Terrorist Task Force. Why?"

"How long were you in Vietnam?"

Madox looked at Harry Muller for a few seconds, then replied, "Two tours of one year each, then a third tour that was cut short by an AK-47 round that missed my heart by an inch, nicked my right lung, and broke a rib on the way out."

"You're lucky to be alive."

"I tell myself that every day. Each day is a gift. Have you ever been shot at?"

"Five times. Never got hit."

"*You're* lucky to be alive." Madox stared at Harry. "It changes you. You're never the same again. But it's not necessarily for the worse."

"I know. I've got friends who've been hit." He thought of John Corey, but he was fairly sure that Corey was the same wiseass both before and after getting hit. He said, "Sometimes, I think I should have volunteered. Vietnam was over, but I

could have still served. Maybe I would have caught the Grenada Invasion or something.”

“Well, don’t be hard on yourself. Most American men have never served. And to tell you the truth, war is a damned scary thing. And now we’re engaged in this war on terrorism, and you, Mr. Muller, are apparently on the front lines. Correct?”

“Uh . . . yeah.”

“And by ‘terrorism’, we generally mean Islamic terrorists. Correct?”

“Yeah . . . but—”

“So, are you looking for Islamic terrorists here? Can I help?”

Harry was forming a thought, but Mr. Madox went on, “If there’s anything I can do, Mr. Muller, just let me know. There’s no one who feels more strongly about winning the war on terrorism than I. How can I help?”

“Uh . . . well . . . here’s the thing. About five years ago, I was on this case of Irish Republican Army guys—terrorists—only about fifteen miles from here. They had a training camp.” Harry filled in Madox on the case and concluded, “We sent eight guys to Federal prison for terms ranging from three to twenty years.”

“Ah, yes. I remember that because it was so close to here.”

“Right. So, this is the same thing. We’re checking a lot of private preserves to see if there’s any suspicious activity involving the IRA. We’ve had intelligence reports that—”

“So, this has nothing to do with Islamic terrorists?”

“No. Not today. We’re doing IRA.”

“Seems like a waste of time and resources in light of 9/11.”

“Well, I think so, too. But we need to keep on top of everything and everybody.”

"I suppose." Madox thought for a moment, then asked, "So, you think the Custer Hill Club is . . . what? A training camp for the Irish Republican Army?"

"Well, the bosses had a tip about activity in this area, so I got picked to take a peek. You know, in case people were using your property without you knowing."

"No one can enter my property without me knowing, as you just found out."

"Yeah, I see that. I'll report—"

"Certainly not people engaged in paramilitary training."

"Yeah, I—"

"And that doesn't explain why you were taking pictures of my *lodge*. You should be out in the woods looking for these IRA people."

"Yeah. I got turned around."

"You certainly did. The point is you *are* on surveillance."

"Well, yeah. I need to check about a dozen properties in the area."

"I see. So, I shouldn't feel singularly honored?"

"Huh?"

"I shouldn't feel picked on?"

"No. Just routine stuff."

"That's a relief. By the way, do you have any sort of government warrant for these activities?"

"I do . . . but not with me."

"Aren't you supposed to carry the warrant with you?" He waved his hand over the desk and said, "We didn't find anything, even when we looked up your rectum." Mr. Madox smiled.

"Hey, fuck *you*! Fuck *you*!" Harry stood. "You motherfucking scumbag piece of shit!"

"Excuse me?"

"Shove it up *your* ass. I'm walking the fuck out of here—" He reached for his things on Madox's desk and an explosion of pain ripped through the right side of his body. He heard a crashing sound and a thump, then nothing.

He realized he was lying on the floor, and a cold sweat covered his body. His eyes were blurry, but he could see Carl standing over him, tapping the cattle prod into his palm as if to say, "You want another jolt?"

Harry tried to stand, but his legs were rubbery. The other guard got behind him, lifted him under his arms, and dropped him back into his chair.

Harry tried to steady his breathing and his quivering muscles. His eyes were still unfocused, and everything sounded tinny in his ears.

One of the guards gave him a plastic bottle of water, which he could barely hold.

Mr. Madox said, "It's amazing what electricity can do to a person. And there's almost no visible evidence. Where were we?"

Harry tried to say, "Fuck you," but couldn't get the words out.

"I think you were trying to convince me that you were on a routine assignment looking for IRA training camps. I'm not convinced."

Harry took a deep breath and said, "It's true."

"Well then, let me reassure you there are no members of the Irish Republican Army on my property. In fact, Mr. Muller, my ancestry is English through and through, and I have no fondness for the IRA."

Harry didn't reply.

Madox said, "Okay, let's cut the IRA crap and go right to the heart of this matter. What, exactly, do your superiors think is going on here?"

Again, Harry didn't respond.

"Do you need electrical encouragement to answer my question?"

"No . . . I don't know. They didn't tell me anything."

"But they must have said something like, 'Harry, we suspect that the Custer Hill Club is . . .' what? How did they characterize this place and its members? This is really important to me, and I want you to tell me. You're going to tell me now or later. Now is easier."

Harry tried to clear his head from the electrical jolt and think about his situation. He'd never been on the wrong side of an interrogation desk, and he'd never had the experience or training that would guide him in a situation like this.

"Mr. Muller?"

He couldn't figure out if he should stick to the IRA story, or if he should just tell this bastard the little he knew. The goal, obviously, was to get out of here alive, though he could hardly believe that his life was in danger.

"Mr. Muller? We did bird-watching, then the IRA—which is actually a good story. But not the true story. You seem a bit confused, so let me help you. You were told that the Custer Hill Club was made up of a bunch of rich, old right-wing crazies who are conspiring to do something that may be illegal. Correct?"

Harry nodded.

"What else did they tell you about us?"

“Nothing. I have no need to know.”

“Ah, yes. Need to know. Did they mention that several of our members are very highly placed and influential people in society and government?”

Harry shook his head. “I have no need to know that.”

“Well, I think you *do* need to know. That’s why you’re here, whether you know it or not. Fact is, the members of this club hold a lot of power. Political power, financial power, and military power. Did you know that one of our members is the deputy secretary of defense? Another is a top national security adviser to the president. Did you know that?”

Harry shook his head.

“We don’t appreciate some government agency conducting an illegal surveillance of our activities, which are entirely legal. We hunt, fish, drink, and discuss the world situation. The Constitution itself protects our right to assemble, to free speech, and to privacy. Correct?”

Harry nodded.

“Someone in your agency has overstepped his bounds and that person will be made to answer for his actions.”

Again, Harry nodded. He believed Madox. This wouldn’t be the first time one of his bosses screwed up and ordered surveillance on some group or some person who wasn’t guilty of anything. On the other hand, that’s what surveillance was for—to see if a suspicion of criminal activity was accurate or justified. Harry said, “I think they screwed up.”

“Oh, I *know* they did. And you just got caught in the middle.”

“Right.”

“You’re not an FBI agent?”

"No."

"Or a CIA officer?"

"Hell, no."

"You're . . . what? A contract agent?"

"Yeah. Retired NYPD. Working for the FBI."

"Low level," suggested Mr. Madox.

"Well . . . yeah."

"I'll make sure you're not punished."

"Yeah, and thanks for the jolt."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Mr. Madox checked his watch and said, "I'm expecting company." He stared at Harry. "Did you know I was expecting company?"

"No."

"You just happened to be here on this particular day?"

Harry didn't answer.

"Talk to me, Mr. Muller. I have a busy morning."

"Uh . . . well, I was told to . . . see if anyone . . ."

"You were told to observe arriving guests, photograph them, take down their license-plate numbers, note their arrival times, and so forth."

"Yeah."

"How did these people you work for know there was a meeting here today?"

"I have no idea."

"Why did you take a photograph of my utility pole?"

"Just . . . saw it. Ran into it."

"When did you get here?"

"Last night."

"Is anyone with you?"

"No."

"How did you get here?"

"I drove my camper up," Harry replied.

"And these are the keys?"

"Yeah."

"Where is the camper?"

"On the logging road south of here."

"Near where you entered the property?"

"Yeah."

"Are you supposed to make a telephone report?"

He wasn't, but he replied, "Yes."

"When?"

"When I leave this property."

"I see." Madox picked up Harry's cell phone and turned it on. "I see you have a message." He added, "In case you wondered why you have such good service here in the middle of nowhere, I have my own cell-phone relay tower." He gestured toward the window. "Now you know what that tower is, and you can label your photograph. You can also indicate that it has a voice scrambler so that no one can listen to my calls." He asked Harry, "Isn't it nice to be rich?"

"I wouldn't know."

"What's your voice-mail code?"

Harry gave it to him, and Madox dialed voice mail, punched in the code, and put the phone on speaker.

Lori said, "Hi, honey. Got your message. I was sleeping. I'm going shopping today with your sister and Anne. Call me later. I'll have my cell with me. Okay? Let me know if you have to stay over. I love you, and I miss you." She added, "Be careful of those right-wing loonies. They like their guns. Take care."

Madox commented, "She sounds very nice. Except for that

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part about the right-wing loonies and the guns." He observed, "She apparently thinks you may be staying here overnight. She may be right." He turned off the power to the cell phone, and said to Harry, "I guess you know these things send off a signal that can be tracked."

"Yeah, that's my job."

"That's right. Amazing technology. I can call my children anytime, anyplace. Of course, they never answer, but they call back after five messages, or when they need something."

Harry forced a smile.

"So," said Mr. Madox, "you seem to be who and what you say you are. To be quite honest, Mr. Muller, I thought you might be an agent of a foreign power."

"What?"

"I'm not being paranoid. The people who are members of this club have enemies around the world. The right kind of enemies. We are all patriots, Mr. Muller, and we've caused some problems for the enemies of America around the globe."

"That's good."

"I thought you'd agree. And these same people are your enemies. So, to use an old Arabic expression, 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.'"

"Right."

"Sometimes, however, the enemy of my enemy is also my enemy. Not because he wants to be, but because we have a difference of opinion about how to deal with our common enemy. But that's a discussion for another time."

"Yeah, I'll call you next week."

Bain Madox stood, looked at his watch, and said, "I'll tell you what. Since you and your agency seem so interested in this

club and its members, I'm going to do something that I've never done before. I'm going to allow you, an outsider, to sit in on the Executive Board meeting, which will take place this afternoon after a welcome lunch for our arriving club members. Would you like to join us?"

"I . . . No, not really. I think I should get—"

"I thought you were here to get information? What's your rush?"

"No rush, but I—"

"I'll even let you take pictures."

"Thanks, but—"

"I think your presence at this meeting can do both of us some good. You'll learn something, and I'll get to see your reaction to what we're discussing. Sometimes, we get into this bunker mentality, you know, where outside reality is excluded, and only our reality is heard. That's not healthy."

Harry didn't reply, and Bain Madox warmed to his idea. "I want you to feel free to comment, to tell us if we're sounding like a bunch of crazy old fools—right-wing loonies." He grinned. "We need your honest opinion about our next project. Project Green."

"What's Project Green?"

Mr. Madox glanced at the security guards, then went over to Harry and whispered in his ear, "Nuclear Armageddon."



CHAPTER FIVE

Harry Muller was led, blindfolded and barefoot, down two flights of stairs into what must have been the basement of the lodge. It was cold and damp, and he could hear sounds of mechanical and electrical motors.

He heard a door open, then he was prodded forward. The door slammed shut, and he heard a metal bolt sliding.

He stood there, then said, "Hey. You. You there?"

Silence.

He listened awhile, then pulled the blindfold off and looked around. He was alone.

Harry stood in a small room walled with concrete blocks painted the same gray enamel as the concrete floor. The low ceiling was covered with corrugated metal.

As his eyes adjusted to the glaring light of an overhead fluorescent fixture, he saw that the room held only a steel bed, which was bolted to the floor. On the bed was a thin mattress, on which were his camouflage shirt and pants, which he put on. He checked his pockets, but they hadn't given him anything back.

In a corner of the room were a toilet and a sink. The toilet had no seat and no water tank. Just like in a prison cell. The sink had no mirror over it, not even the plastic or steel mirrors they used in jail.

He went to the steel door that had no handle and no window, and pushed on it, but it didn't budge.

He searched the room, looking for anything that he could use as a weapon, but it was completely bare, except for the bed and a rusty radiator that wasn't putting out much heat.

He noticed now a small swivel eyeball camera mounted in the corner of the ceiling, with a recessed speaker beside it. He stuck up his middle finger and shouted, "Fuck you!"

No one replied.

He looked around for something that he could use to smash the camera and the speaker, but there wasn't a single loose item in the room except for himself. He took a running start, jumped, and smacked the camera with his hand. The camera continued sweeping the room, then a shrill, high-decibel sound pierced the room, and Harry covered his ears and backed away from the speaker. The painful noise continued, and Harry shouted, "Okay! Okay!"

The sound stopped and a voice said, "Sit."

"Fuck you." *Bastards. Wait until I get out of here.*

He had lost track of time, but he figured it must be about ten or eleven in the morning. His stomach growled, but he didn't feel particularly hungry. Only thirsty. And he had to pee.

He walked to the toilet and the camera followed him. He urinated, then went to the sink and turned on the single tap. A trickle of cold water ran into the basin. He washed up, then used his hands to drink from the faucet.

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There was no towel, and he wiped his hands on the sides of his pants. He went back to the bed and sat. He thought about his conversation with Bain Madox.

Nuclear Armageddon.

He said to himself, *What the hell is that asshole talking about?*

And what was this meeting that he was invited to? None of this made too much sense unless . . . unless this was all a setup.

He stood. "That's it!" *This is one of those stupid training camps. "Holy shit!"*

He thought about the whole assignment, from his ten minutes in Tom Walsh's office, to the Tech guy, to cutting through the fence, to the guards, to this prison cell in a private house—this whole thing was a test . . . one of those SERE courses—Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape.

Well, he definitely didn't pass the evasion part, which was why he was in the cell. He went over in his mind the interrogation from the guy named Madox—the resistance part—*Oh shit! Did I blow that? What the hell did I say? I told him to go fuck himself and stuck to my cover . . . then I did the IRA rap, which was smart . . . right?*

He thought about the cattle prod. *Would they do that? Yeah . . . maybe.*

And later, there'd be the escape thing, then the evasion thing again and survival in the woods . . . *Yeah! That's where this is going.*

He replayed everything in his mind, slanting it toward his new belief that this was some crazy FBI or CIA thing. *It had to be.* This was just too weird otherwise.

They had their eye on him for something big, and this was the big test. They did this kind of thing to see what you could

take. The Custer Hill Club was like the CIA Farm in Virginia, right?

He said to himself, *Okay, good. I passed the first test. Now, we do the meeting and see what that's all about. Keep cool, Harry. Stay pissed.* He shouted at the camera, "Assholes! I'm gonna rip your fucking heads off and shit down your necks!"

He lay back on the thin mattress and smiled to himself. He yawned and drifted into a restless sleep.

The glare of the overhead light and the cold made him dream that he was outside again, walking through the woods. He was taking pictures of birds, then he was arguing with some men, then he was talking pleasantly to Mr. Madox, who gave him back his gun and said, "You're going to need this." The men suddenly raised their rifles, and dogs were running toward him. He pulled the trigger on his Glock, but it didn't fire.

Harry sat up quickly and wiped the cold sweat from his face. *Holy shit . . .*

He fell back on the bed and stared up at the metal ceiling. Something was bothering him. It was Madox. Something about that guy seemed too . . . real. *No. Can't be real.*

Because if this was all real, then his life was in danger.

The door opened, and a voice said, "Come with us."

