

A photograph of an orange tree with green leaves and ripe orange fruit. A thick, dark red liquid, resembling blood, is dripping from several of the oranges and leaves. The background is a clear blue sky. A yellow banner is superimposed diagonally across the top left of the image.

SNEEZE

Bakoda Pak & Company Mysteries #2
By Hank Johnson

Sneeze

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Bakoda Pak & Company Mysteries #2 Featuring Bakoda Pak

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Like the uncontrollable urge to sneeze, then to sneeze again, Bakoda Pak returns to The Outfit after attempting to adjust to day to day life in the real world. He has been an assassin, would always be his old boss told him and assigned him to infiltrate a citrus in California and discretely dispatch the politically untouchable owner. Bakoda expects to find total exploitation of undocumented workers there but finds what could be considered a paradise instead. And as in Eden he is tempted to his own peril.

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Credo

Be vigilant of self, your mission and your conclusions.

Prologue/

He sat on the other side of the desk from me steepling. That's the authoritative gesture where you have your hands clasped in front of you, generally just below your chin and your index fingers pointing up like a steeple. It's pretty much unconscious and people use it when they feel they are in control of the situation and the conversation.

He said, "I like to call this a 'sneeze'."

"Yeah, so what does that mean and what does it have to do with me?" I asked with a bit of an edge. I could tell that he was enjoying this as he paused, his hands still poised just under his chin.

He continued, "Hey, man, you know the feeling. You know you can't stop it. It's going to happen. And then you sneeze. And not once, never once, always at least twice or more. It's nature and you can't control it no matter how hard that you try. Then sometime later you feel that tickle and a message is sent to your brain and it happens again, no matter how hard you try to control it because it is beyond physical or psychological control."

I just looked at him, bewildered and after a pause asked, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

It took enough mental energy and compromise for me to end up here, and now to put up with this from my old station head. I just wanted my old job back, pure and simple, not some abstract lesson about the mind, self-control and the physiological need to sneeze.

But he was my old boss and held the floor. He was clearly enjoying it—he always did as I knew that from years of experience. He really wasn't a bad guy, he just enjoyed getting on my nerves when he figured he could get away with it. Then again I got a buzz out of upsetting his wagon from time to time as well.

He ignored my question and continued, "I'm talking about things that are beyond one's control, and no matter how hard we try to control them, things that must happen over and over again no matter what. No matter how our rational vision of our life's plan contradicts our absolute and total need to continue on what we know deep inside is one's true destiny."

"Again I ask," I rolled my eyes and shook my head slowly from side to side like a petulant teenager, "what does that have to do with me? You aren't making a lot of sense, at least from my perspective."

“Well, this is all about you and your perspective; it’s why you’re here, Bakoda, that is, Bakoda Pak or whatever you want to be called. That’s a pretty unorthodox choice of names, you know, but that’s your business. American Indian by any chance?”

“No, just a name I took. There is a story behind it but it doesn’t have anything to do with anything but to fuck up you guys, your profile and psych guys. It’s just a name, but there is a story and reason and I’ll bet you have someone or more than one of those folks working on it right now in their spare time to figure out. You figure everything else out about us, those like me, so I thought I would give you a challenge. I would even bet that you have a bet on this too, same as the one about when I would come back.”

He waved his right hand dismissively, trying to act like he didn’t care and returned to steepling and considering thoughtfully before continuing. But I knew that I was right. It was going to drive him nuts until he figured it out. I particularly enjoyed that leverage over an agency that prided itself in knowing more about its people and others and their motivations than it even knew about itself.

I sat back and steeped with my hands clasped together. Quid pro quo.

He still tried to ignore me.

A few moments later he broke the silence and resumed, “Again the sneeze thing is all about you and your basic compulsion. You can’t stand to be away even though you said that you gave it up. You are what you are and you always will be. I wouldn’t want to be in your head but you are and I can use you.”

He was right, so I said, “Ok, what’s up?”

Then I reflected about how I ended up here back in a world that had I walked away from. Had promised myself that I would never come back to again.

But somehow I had to admit, if only to myself, I was comfortable being here and looking forward to what the future would hold.

Part 1/The Setup

Chapter 1/

I had left “The Outfit” after a long tour of duty and just was tired. Tired of what I had been doing. Maybe a midlife crisis, maybe a move toward a passage but I felt that it was time to move on.

I went to Taos, New Mexico, to settle my mother’s estate which mostly comprised of her home with a reasonable amount of equity, a modest savings and some personal property which I liquidated. I had some money saved to boot so I had a pretty good stake to set out toward a new horizon after I succeeded in settling her estate.

I had given my employers notice but they simply had told me, “You’ll be back, this is what you do. Take a break, but you *will* be back.”

At that moment I had been confident that they were wrong.

I settled my mother’s affairs in New Mexico but became embroiled in a situation, actually something very like the issues that I had addressed in my old occupation. I took it on—and in the process met a fascinating but dangerous woman named Erica—because of having lost a wonderful woman who I had known briefly and had come very close to my heart but died tragically. A victim of vengeance and necessity in the killer’s mind, but Erica and I took care of that. We took the part of someone who had no one else and was dumped in an alley one night by a stranger in a small tourist town. She had come there seeking refuge but suffered a violent death instead.

Things worked out for us for a while, Erica and I. But she was restless just like me and also worked for The Outfit and was on her way up there and that was where her highest priority was. I was good at what I had done for them; she was just as good I had to admit. Totally focused, committed and reliable in a situation and could carry through.

After the fascination with each other and the sex wore off and turned into just a regular routine, we parted friends, both with a better understanding of our inner motivations, yet appreciating the time we had spent together.

She continued her climb in her field of work and I tried to turn my back on it, at least I thought I did. But then you don’t always know when looking from the inside out. Self-evaluation is a very deceptive thing and most often wrong, especially from the perspective of the evaluator.

I traveled for a while, living off the proceeds from liquidating my mother’s bequest and what I had put ahead, and then after the traveling lost its luster I decided that I needed to reestablish myself in a new career, a business venture.

I bought a bar in Phoenix on Cave Creek Road as it diagonals out of the northern part of the city with the balance of the proceeds and it made me money, more money, but I was hollow, hollow inside.

It didn't take me long to figure that out. This, even though profitable, was not for me.

My previous life with The Outfit was not only exciting but it filled a void. A void that couldn't be fulfilled by cajoling and commiserating with the same crowd every afternoon at a neighborhood down and dirty beer and sports bar, one that catered to Social Security recipients with nothing better to do and those who carped about not having a job while the "undoc'd illegals," the "wet backs" that they complained about and wanted to ship back to Mexico climbed palm trees and trimmed them at a mere twenty dollars apiece—a filthy and dangerous job—mowed lawns and prepared the complainers' food in the back of my bar and covered other menial forms of employment and sent most of what they made in "El Norte" back to relatives in Mexico. And in the meantime maintained a low profile so that they wouldn't be sent back, living for the most part quietly in the barrios. Relatively speaking though, this was paradise to them. It would be hell to me to live a life like that in the shadows, I have to admit, and as to the carpers who sat on the other side of the bar, it was my opinion that not one would be capable of enduring it.

"Commiserating," I love words and where they come from but most people don't really listen or care what they mean. Commiserating—complaining about your miseries with others who complain about theirs. Anyway, I quickly got sick of hearing it all and because I owned the place and tended bar in the afternoons with that same crowd in concert I had to listen to it over and over again while I played the role of the genial host agreeing with every complaint and speculation of the conspiracies of society and the liberals against the honest working man.

Standing there day after day, looking at the same faces drinking Buds and Miller Lights and saying the same things over and over again and exchanging the same comments and getting into the same discussions, never with a resolution, and disagreements sometimes ending in one or another party walking out of the place vowing never to return but showing up a week later only to resume the soap opera, forced me to face reality.

"Cheers," the old TV series "where everybody knew your name and everybody's glad you came . . ." Well that was overrated. Even on "Cheers" everyone was completely dysfunctional and resented each other in petty ways, not always "glad you came." I saw the same drama play out day after day across the bar in my place and it didn't take long to get fed up.

I missed my old life. Missed it a lot. Compared to this drudgery and tedium, it was, to put it least dramatically, stimulating.

I had been a professional assassin for about twenty years working for a government agency, clandestine and buried under mountains of red tape to obscure it, but it was the judge and jury of last resort. It, through me and others like me, took care of eliminating those who evaded the traditional legal system for heinous crimes that they thought that they had gotten away with until I came into their lives, which then would be simply a matter of a very limited amount of time before they left this worldly plane and I left town or wherever.

At first I wondered if I was just a homicidal sociopath who legitimized his compulsions but I set that aside as a consideration a long time ago. I felt that I was no different than a sniper. Highly trained and professional and efficient and could do my job and after the mission was complete could sleep well.

Maybe it was because I thought I was on the side of the “good guys,” or maybe that was just a rationalization. After a while I didn’t care and stopped thinking about it. I just did what I did extremely well and was well compensated for it.

As I stood on the other side of the bar as owner and bartender I couldn’t imagine doing the things that I formally did in this world. It would seem totally criminal to the choir that congregated here every afternoon drinking their beers, and yet in the context of the world that I lived in it wasn’t even a remote consideration. It was simply a job that I accomplished with complete efficiency with not a feeling or concern of immorality, responsibility or remorse.

I often wondered what my patrons would think if they knew that their smiling and convivial host had killed more people, people who deserved it, than even he could or wanted to maintain a count of. And was protected because of the professionalism that he demonstrated in executing his craft and by the cover of the federal government.

It was mildly amusing to think about it, but one day I knew what I had to do: sell my dive bar and go back. It wasn’t the only thing that I could do and do well—hell, I’m a talented guy and can do and master virtually anything—but it wasn’t me, the bar business that is. No, my former life was a part of me and I finally realized it. So I came to a decision and put the bar up for sale.

It was a good place with a loyal following in a good location and I offered it at a fair price but with a reasonable profit. I sold the place in two weeks with not much haggling, which I hate, and pocketed a nice but reasonable return. I got the amount that I had written down on a piece of paper before putting the place up for sale.

I called a telephone number that corresponded to the account number on my Visa card. When a voice answered at the other end, it simply said, “We’ve been waiting for your call. Welcome home. We have an assignment for you.” He paused and continued, “Get an airline ticket and fly back. As usual we’ll reimburse you. First class if you want. You’re worth it to the taxpayers even though they will never know who you are or what you do.”

I knew that I was hooked again and felt satisfied entering a black world that after about two decades I could not totally understand. But it was me, and they let me do things my way because I was good at what I did, very good indeed.

And I never asked any questions other than the details of my assignments.

It always amazed me over the years, these people knew me better than I even knew myself.

Chapter 2/

He wasn't letting me off that easy, my boss that is, me just asking what the assignment was; he had a little gloating to do.

"Do you know we had bets?"

"About how long it was before I came back?"

"Sure," he was smiling like the Cheshire Cat. I could swear that I saw his eyes glowing a little bit.

He smiled, stillsteeping his clasped hands with his index finger pointed up while he reclined back on his two thousand dollar cordovan leather executive chair behind a five thousand dollar desk. He was clearly enjoying this and I would indulge him. After all he had never given me anything but latitude, first class tickets and a virtually bottomless expense account. 007, James Bond eat your heart out.

The Outfit is federal but really doesn't exist. While most government employees toil behind old Steelcase gray desks with matching chairs that have been painted and repainted the same industrial gray for decades, The Outfit was ensconced in a high end high rise and presented itself to the world as "Olympus Worldwide Productions, An Exclusive Agency." It was ambiguous enough and anyone who inquired was told that all of the clients were proprietary and there were no positions or additional representations available at the time.

After almost two decades I had no idea who actually ran The Outfit or what agency it was accountable to. Maybe my boss didn't know either, but there he sat self-satisfied having won the bet, leaning back on his expensive chair, smiling.

I let him indulge himself—it was the least that I could do. Finally I said, "And, let me guess, you won the bet."

"To the month."

"Well, you know me better than anyone."

"No," he replied, "*we* know you better than anyone."

"Granted," I acknowledged. Then added, "How much did you win?"

"Five hundred. Office pool, fifty a piece."

"But you had an advantage; I worked for you, rather, work for you now."

“Well, P. T. Barnum said it best . . .”

I finished it for him, “There’s a sucker born every minute.”

And at that moment I wondered if I wasn’t one for coming back, but set it aside because I felt like I was home.

Finally we got down to business. He put his palms down on his desk pad and moved forward on his chair.

“People are missing in California. Migrant workers, undocumented aliens, farm workers male and female mostly undocumented. We think that we know who is responsible; he’s a citrus and vegetable grower on a large scale named Vydor Haines. We more than know but no legal force has been able to put enough evidence together to bring even an indictment. In the meantime very vulnerable people, people who avoid or won’t go to authorities with their concerns are being exploited and murdered.”

I nodded in understanding.

He nodded back and continued, “We have enough evidence for our purposes. We have a directive: Go out there, get next to this Vydor Haines and do what you do best and that includes anyone who is involved with this. Do it as discretely as possible. Use your own methods, they always have worked, and just get the job done before someone else, someone who doesn’t trust our government because they don’t want to be sent back is killed or exploited. Those poor bastards. From what we can tell they live in a compound on his ranch, a virtual prison camp,” he concluded, and slowly shook his head from side to side while he looked down at his desk pad.

Then he looked up, looked directly at me as only he could do and added, “And one more thing, this is one of those challenges.”

I nodded. “No problem, I’ll figure out a way to make it not look like he was taken out, but just an unfortunate accident or a victim of circumstance.”

“That’s right,” he said, “has to be that way. No trace, no trail, no indication of any involvement. If we wanted just to get rid of the guy we would have sent someone else, someone just as effective as you but with less craft. Vydor Haines is well connected and we can’t have any backwash from a political standpoint. We believe, or rather know, that he is a monster but he is considered a pillar of the community and is the head of the local growers’ association. Too many important people are involved in this,” he paused and casually pointed a finger in the air, “all the way up.”

I wasn’t too worried about the folks up where he was pointing. I just thought again of the guys in Phoenix, brown faces coming to my door who trimmed my palm trees, brown-faced men who toiled from dawn to dusk just to take care of their families and be in the United States with all of its promise.

I also thought about how my boss always used the phrase, “do what you do best.” We both knew what that meant, and to do it with “craft.”Nuff said.

He brought his hand with the pointed finger down, paused, then added, “And he is connected in other places. We’re pretty sure the ranch that he runs is a conduit for money laundering for Eastern European and Russian mob illegal business interests in the States. His real name is VitorHannachek. He came to the United States after the collapse of the USSR and was flush with cash.”

“Sounds like the only thing that he isn’t guilty of is changing his name.”

“No, he did that quite legally. He seems to be the model of what we want to attract: smart, an entrepreneur with money to invest in the good old USA. But he is dirty, as dirty as they come.”

“Just brief me, boss, and I’ll be off.”

Chapter 3/

I had fallen asleep, my seat reclined a bit as the big bus droned on.

I had flown into Phoenix and gathered my gear. Everything that I needed was in a long-in-the-tooth military surplus duffle.

I was costumed as a transient agricultural worker who was Anglo but of manager caliber with several days' worth of scruffy beard and a few days without a shower.

It wasn't much of a challenge, just packing or wearing several pairs of half worn out jeans, a few worn utility quality work shirts that had a generous patina and the other necessities, but not too fancy and everything well worn.

I pulled a pair of hiking boots out of my closet; they had served me well over the years and were comfortable and bullet proof in the sense of durability. They fit the total package and because of my many years of association with them in some way gave me a sense of security. Funny how small things, familiar things can reinforce your confidence; it's just human nature.

* * *

My destination was Oxnard, California, initially. North and west of Los Angeles up the coast, south of Santa Barbara in Ventura County. Home base of the U.S Navy Construction Battalion or Seabees at Port Huaneme.

Besides being the home of a naval base it was also an agricultural community. Major producers of strawberries and fresh vegetables and most major companies that pack and distribute produce are predominant there.

Located on the fertile Oxnard Plain ten million pints of strawberries are harvested and shipped from there every day every year between April and June. Eighty-five percent of strawberries in the United States are produced in that area. Cucumbers, sugar beets and cut flowers are also produced there with Del Monte being a major economic presence as well as Green Giant.

The adjoining Pacific coast also has a wonderful stretch of beaches that have been the getaway destinations and the homes of Clark Gable and Carol Lombard, Rudolph Valentino, Pat Sajak, Donna Reed, Charlie Chaplin, George Kennedy, Walter Brennan, Sonny and Cher and John Caradine.

Oxnard is rich in Hispanic tradition and culture. It is also the location of one of the largest barrio communities in California.

And because of the abundant agricultural enterprises it is also the home of migrant farm workers and packers. Some legal and some not. As you go inland from Oxnard and over “The Five” and to the north, adjacent to Oxnard is the Santa Clara River that separates Oxnard and the city of Ventura. Ventura is the county seat of Ventura County and if you continue to follow the Santa Clara River toward its inland source on State Route 126 you’ll come to a part of Ventura called Saticoy where the beach city transitions again into agricultural enterprises. And just fourteen miles further up from the center of Ventura is the town of Santa Paula.

Saticoy and Santa Paula rest on one of the three areas of the world, thanks to the flood plain of the Santa Clara River, with sixty feet of rich topsoil and on the surface of that topsoil is an abundance of production of avocados, lemons, oranges and strawberries.

Its history goes back to the Spanish settling of California and the area was originally a part of the 1843 Mexican land grant of Rancho Santa Paula y Saticoy.

Probably most notably in more contemporary times Santa Paula was the home of the actor Steve McQueen during the last two years of his life where he flew his biplane and lived with his wife, model Barbara Minty, following his divorce from another model and actress Ali McGraw.

I’m certainly no Steve McQueen though I have enjoyed many beautiful women, never any super models. Too tall. I enjoy a closer and petite fit. Just a matter of personal preference. Besides guys my height, somewhere north of five seven with tall women, well both of us would find it uncomfortable. Yet if I really loved a tall one and she me, all bets would be off, but that hasn’t happened yet.

As of the last U.S. census Santa Paula was 79.5 percent Hispanic or Latin in terms of population, and that of course in the real world is based on those who actually reported their race and ethnicity to the census takers. The actual percentage was in all probability much higher.

I would, as did many other agricultural workers, hitchhike up from the bus depot in Oxnard ostensibly looking for work, but I had really only one place in mind. I wanted to get a job on or as close as possible to VyHa Growers. The vast spread that belonged to my target Vydor Haines.

* * *

In my experience, the first place to go when you want to become comfortable and make the locals comfortable with you is the center of community congregation, and that is generally a church or a bar with a clientele that matches the demographic that you’re interested in integrating with.

I'm not by any stretch religious, so I scouted out the local emporiums of libation, ones that would attract the blue collar class or, more specifically, agricultural workers, preferably of the worker management and production supervisory level.

Beer and shots mostly and some TVs showing sports. Earthy, nothing fancy, pool tables and some reasonable food. The growers, owners and general managers did their drinking in Ventura at country clubs and tonier establishments.

After some reconnoitering of the rather small downtown center of Santa Paula, I settled on Randi's Revenge—Home When You Don't Want to Go Home. Just what I had in mind: I knew it would have a cadre of regulars who would congregate around the large central U-shaped bar every afternoon, and after they got used to me, an outsider, would confide all forms of opinion, gossip and local lore to me, and perhaps connect me to an employment opportunity.

Patience, patience I told myself.

My mission for the present was to become an amiable presence, someone who would accept the wisdom of the locals, the denizens of Randi's, and ultimately gain their trust and solicit their direction toward my purpose, though none of them would ever have a clue as to what that purpose would ultimately be. As far as they would be concerned I was just an average Anglo farm worker of supervisor capacity looking for a job.

My family were farmers and I grew up on a farm in Ohio until we moved West because of my mother's health, so I had a grasp on the profile and could make the cover convincingly. I was simply Skip Hite in my persona, my dad's old foreman on the family farms. I walked like him, talked like him and, well, became him.

Skip was a serious guy. A natural leader, a foreman and someone who an owner would naturally select as a boss. He had a demeanor, a serious intent that he demonstrated. All that you had to do was to look at him. He could pick out the best field workers, cull out the slackers, maintain a positive production atmosphere and supervise with just a certain look. And at the end of the day would share a *cerveza* with everyone who toiled under his supervision and would dole out the day wages, liberally. To those who produced, the little extra money was appreciated beyond comprehension and a small bonus to pay for a hard day's labor. And it guaranteed that the best would return for more.

Skip Hite was my model and becoming him wasn't hard. He was a model for me as well. I worked next to the migrants when I was a kid on our farm. I didn't do it for subsistence and survival as did the workers but to put money in a savings account that my parents had set up for a car someday in the unbelievably far off future from a kid's point of view when I would finally be old enough to get a driver's license.

Even though I was the boss's kid I got no slack. Skip expected everyone, and maybe me by a bit more, to put in a diligent effort. And though as a kid I chaffed at the discipline and expectation I ended up respecting him for it. He pushed me and made me realize the toil and labor that the fellows at my side would always endure, never to attain a college degree or at the minimum a hot rod with that driver's license in the distant future.

I have never forgotten Skip Hite and his lessons. I became him to take out someone who was taking advantage of those who toiled endlessly and were rewarded with a life of endless striving simply to attain what most of us take for granted. Those who simply wanted a basic standard of life and decency and were deprived of both by a man named Vydor Haines.

* * *

Daze Inn.

I looked at the sign and thought, *Oh really*, not the chain with a similar name but twenty-seven dollars a night, twenty-two per night on a weekly rate, and almost-white-with-a-light-yellow-patina sheets and pillow cases adorning the double bed with Magic Fingers for just a quarter that didn't work. I couldn't help but plug a coin in just for the novelty.

The bedding included a couple of pretty flat pillows (at least there were two on the double bed so I could stack them). That same old cigarette smoke smell even though this was a nonsmoking room. My bet was that it was designated nonsmoking just since the last tenant checked out.

It was home for now until I was established so I settled in. I had been in worse and I can adapt. Besides it had a kind of tacky charm.

I like to eat in, canned sardines and fish steaks especially with mustard and cans of chili con carne; I don't mind eating it cold. Smoked oysters. Anything that can be opened with a can opener or a pull tab and can be accompanied with plastic and reinforced paper service. Some canned stir fry vegetables and beans of all varieties for protein along with the fish product and the meat in the chili. Works well, is cheap, does the job and fits the profile.

I set up my bar. Jug red wine, the cheapest. Aged at least two weeks and in a big bottle with a thumb handle and a screw cap. No luxury items here such as a microwave or bar-sized mini fridge. I was lucky to get clean glasses from day to day, those ones that always have cardboard covers over the top to make you think they've been sanitized. I've never been convinced.

Cheap hotel, cheap hooch and cheap eats, and well-worn clothes to match. I'm a happy guy and it gives me a reason like all of the other guys who are living like me, or the Skip Hite guy I am supposed to be, to hang out at Randi's. Part of the cover.

Yet with all my basicness I still tried to portray confidence in my stride, in my attitude, not cockiness but dignity and certainty of self and purpose.

Every afternoon I would show up there, Randi's, buy the cheapest draft and hang. Eventually the regulars took me in and began trying to figure me out and who I was and once they were convinced I was "a good old boy" they started filling me in on the local landscape both good and bad.

I asked plenty of questions about VyHa Growers. I figured word would eventually get out that a stranger was in town asking questions.

The Daze Inn had another benefit: it was within a convenient walk to Randi's out on the edge of town.

After hanging out at Randi's for about a week and having set up some basic precautions in my room to determine if anyone was checking me out, I found a few strategically placed things out of place, drawers opened and not closed precisely as I had left them and things subtly moved like a yellow legal pad top page with some scribbled notes about employment opportunities flipped over to see if anything was written on the page underneath and creased when it was returned to its original position at the top of the pad. It was nothing that a cleaning person would disrupt; no, someone was checking me out and what I had there.

But, far from being intruded upon I knew this was a good thing. I had gotten the attention that I was looking for.

Chapter 4/

It wasn't a surprise when someone tapped me on the shoulder at Randi's one afternoon and I turned from the bar and my draft to see a cop.

"Sir, would you mind stepping outside?" he said.

"Is there a problem, officer?" I responded, my hand still on the beer glass.

"No, but you are new in town and we'd like to know who you are."

"Officer, I'm not being a smart ass but is it a violation of some kind of ordinance or something to be 'new in town'?"

"Maybe in this town, stranger," the officer said and kept his right hand resting on his gun. "Let's just make it easy and step outside so we can talk."

"No choice?"

"No choice unless you want to be detained."

"For what?" I asked.

"I'll figure something out. Let's just go outside and we'll get this settled. Easy or hard, same to me. Your choice but either way that's the way it will turn out."

I took my hand from the cool sweaty beer glass, turned on my stool, looked him up and down, stood up and walked out of the door, the "cop" behind me.

He put his hand on my shoulder to direct me.

I wanted to kill him. I have this thing about being touched, being violated but I had noticed something when I stood up and took a good look at him. He was wearing a very official western peace officer's uniform complete with a Stetson but he wasn't a Santa Paula cop or a Ventura County Sheriff. His shoulder patch and badge, as shiny as it was, was simply inscribed "VyHa Growers Security" and his name plate above his right breast pocket said "Capt. Max Tudor."

I knew that I had made an impression and this was an opportunity. My opportunity to get in. I planned to play Max like a Stradivarius and if things turned out right turn his secure world upside down. Less than a minute after meeting Captain Max I was totally looking forward to it.

He continued to guide me forward from Randi's entrance across the parking lot toward a newer model forest green pickup truck with dual rear wheels, spit shined and with plenty of chrome-plated goodies. On the door was a crest, similar to the patch he wore on his shoulder and below it was **VyHa Growers Security**.

We continued across the lot until we got to the truck by the driver's door and he turned me around. "Got any i.d.?"

"I've got i.d., but you aren't a local or county cop. Why should I have to show you anything and why should you give a damn who I am?" I asked indignantly.

"Because I am the law right here on this parking lot."

"How so?" I shrugged and straightened my shirt at the shoulder as if trying to shake away the effects of his hand on my shoulder.

"Because this is not Santa Paula, this is private property. The city limits are about half a block back that way," he pointed to the west, and continued, "and since you are on private property, land that Randi leases for her joint here from VyHa, my employer, I in the name of VyHa have a right to know who is on the company's property and can consider you a trespasser and require you to leave if I so choose."

"So do you put every one of the bar flies in there," I pointed toward Randi's front door, "through this routine?"

"No, only strangers in town. Strangers who ask questions. Strangers like you. The regulars we know, you we don't."

"Sounds like you and this VyHa outfit may have something to hide," I said, knowing it would twist him a bit.

"No, we just like to know who's hanging around our property and technically this is our property. So, who in the hell are you and why are you here? You've been staying in the Daze Inn up the street," he nodded toward the town, "no visible means of support and asking questions."

"Well," I said, a bit of a scowl on my face, "my means of support is a thousand dollars I managed to save from my last job. I was ramrodding a lemon and lime packing operation in Glendale, Arizona, the crop thinned out and production slowed. Figured I'd come up here and look for work working the Washington Naval Orange harvest in November and December. It's about the first of November so here I am. I had some money so I wasn't in a big hurry, just getting a feel for the lay of the land."

He took it in and nodded, then his brow furled a little and he asked, "So why so many questions about VyHa?"

“Not rocket science,” I replied, “you’re the largest grower in the area and in my mind the best prospect for a job. That’s why,” I stated a bit defiantly.

“You work with Mexes, wets?”

“Who else does this shit, works these fields?” I stated still with an air of irritation.

“You picky about papers?”

“Look, I’m picky about production and I can get more out of any workforce. I grew up in the business. The rest ain’t any of my affair. That’s the boss’s concern. I don’t check green cards, just how many sacks are full and dumped in wagons or whatever else needs to be counted.”

“What you looking for?”

“Bed and board on the property, a pickup to use so I can get away to a place like this when I need to and five hundred a week cash every Saturday. Cash, no W-2s or withholding.”

“You got no vehicle?”

“No, hitched in, figured you or whoever hires me will.”

“Driver’s license?”

“Yeah,” I answered and then acting annoyed, “you still want to see it?”

“Any outstanding detainers or warrants?”

“Hell no, I’m just a working boss who can produce who’s looking for a job. I’m not running away from anything, just coming here to find something. If I could have ever put enough together I’d have my own place and be your strongest competitor but that’s never worked out.”

He lightened up and patted me on the shoulder, “All right, Skip, we might be getting back to you.”

“You know my name?” I said with an inflection of surprise.

“We know everything about who is here and what goes on,” Tudor said. “It’s a pretty small town and people talk, especially if certain people ask the questions.”

“And you ask questions about people who ask questions?” I said.

“Some, but we mostly listen. Me and my deputies. New people in town, people talk, we listen.”

He tipped his expensive Stetson, opened the cab door as I automatically stepped back. He climbed in and closed the door; then with his arm resting on the door sill turned his head and leaned his left shoulder toward me as he turned the key and the truck's engine sprang to life.

"Hang around for a few days. And do yourself a favor," he said with a half-smile and an air of superiority.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Don't be so damned noseey."

He turned his head forward and drove the big green pickup out of the parking lot and on to the road directly across heading east. I watched him until he disappeared down the long straight road with citrus groves on either side toward the foothills.

I turned and ambled back toward Randi's front door. Figured I'd celebrate with what was billed as her "Ultimate Tacos" and another cold draft.

I had gotten to first base. The squeaky wheel, as the old sage said, gets the grease. I had squeaked enough to gain attention and that's what I wanted. Now it was time to sit back and see what happened. In the meantime I would enjoy a couple of Randi's ultimate *carnitas* tacos, fairly priced and tasty.

* * *

I found out that there actually was a Randi in the flesh.

In my daily banter I had asked the regulars if there really was a person named Randi who owned the place and was assured that there was and was told the story of the name of the place.

According to the denizens who held court every afternoon, Randi's Revenge got its name because Randi had gone through a nasty breakup and divorce but had gotten the bar, her "revenge" as part of the settlement from her ex.

Sounded plausible.

But one day I was sitting at the bar and Suze, who I had decided over the few weeks I had been coming there was my favorite bartender, brought an attractive but obviously sassy blonde over to where I sat at the bar.

"Skip Hite," Suze said and turned toward the blonde presenting her with a turn of her palm in the lady's direction, "Randi."

“Well,” I said extending my hand over the bar toward Randi, “my pleasure.”

“Mine too,” she said and shook my hand. “Hear you’re new in town and already got the VyHa shakedown a few days ago.’

“No big deal. Just a wannabe cop with a gun, an expensive hat, an inflated ego and a big truck.”

Randi furled her brow and shook her head slowly, “Don’t take him so much for granted. He has a lot of pull around here and especially over there.” Randi pointed toward the east.

“He said that they own the land you’re on.”

“I lease it from them.”

“The building?”

“That too, but I built it out to make it a bar and restaurant.”

“Good deal?”

“Seemed so at the time, but they act like they own the place.”

“Can’t do anything about it.”

“Would rather not. Not good politics and I want to stay in business.”

I decided to shut up. I had pressed too far, so I changed the subject. “Your tacos are great,” I said.

“Thanks, we do our best, and you’ve probably heard the legend.”

“The legend?” I asked quizzically.

“You know, how I got the place, the divorce and all?”

“Oh that,” I answered, “I heard a story.”

“Not true. This wasn’t part of a divorce settlement. I did get a divorce but opened this place on my own. That was *my ‘revenge’*, moving on with my own business and a new life.”

“Looks like it’s doing pretty well.”

“Not bad,” Randi said, and took my empty glass. “Let me buy you another one. Kind of a welcome to the neighborhood.”

“Much appreciated,” I smiled and gave her a thumbs up.

She smiled as she drew the draft into the glass, then said, “Tudor, the captain, the gun thing, he usually doesn’t wear it unless he wants to roust someone like you. Thinks it’s intimidating. Generally speaking, even when he isn’t wearing the gun he’s a bully.”

I raised my glass and nodded, “Good to know,” I said. *Good to know*, I thought, *about the gun*.

I enjoyed my comp brew and figured Randi had more to tell given a bit of time and patience.

Patience, I reminded myself.

Chapter 5/

I thought that I needed wheels but quickly discounted that possibility. It would be a convenience but not a necessity.

I wanted to go down to that orchard-lined road that Captain Max Tudor had driven his truck down when he left Randi's five days before.

I could have come into town with a beat up old pickup as part of my cover but it would in the long run possibly cause complications. In my work, with my assignment, if completed anything left behind could potentially create questions. A truck is a difficult thing to make disappear with no trace and even though my mission would be covered with reasonable explanations by The Outfit should any complications arise, even little things can cause potential inquiries that are hard to resolve even with the most sophisticated subterfuge, so I bussed to Oxnard and hitched in. No vehicle, one less potential issue, one less thing to leave behind to be questioned, for someone to ask, who was this Hite guy and why did he up and disappear leaving his truck?

So, no wheels, but I had feet and could always use the exercise. Besides it was a way to kill time while I waited for the next step to materialize, so I decided to do a little reconnoitering.

As it turned out, the entrance to the fenced off area of VyHa Growers was just under three miles down that road. The expanse of property to that point, including Randi's, was owned by VyHa as were the surrounding thousands of acres, but the actual perimeter of the formal ranch, orchards and buildings began at a gate down that road lined with citrus trees, acres and acres of orange groves on either side.

I decided not to be overly nosey as Captain Tudor had suggested and began my trek at about ten at night skirting the road, walking briskly through the groves about fifty feet on its parallel.

I had been briefed on the basic layout of the farms but carried no hard copy on my person or left in my room. I had seen aerial photographs of the property before coming here, but if I were found to have that much background on the place, my cover would have been completely blown or in severe question. Blue collar produce production foremen don't usually or never travel with aerial photographs or maps of the agricultural operations that they hope to work for.

I continued using some basic security measures in my hotel room to determine if anyone besides the cleaning personnel had entered and snooped in my stuff.

So far nothing since the earlier incident but that was not a guarantee that there would not be future intrusions—it could be a guarantee that there probably *would* be. Since then nothing had been opened or disorganized, but then again if these folks were good I probably would have a hard time determining that anything was compromised, so I made sure I didn't have anything to hide or indicate my purpose. I maintained the security measures though to determine if anyone looked.

What I was most interested in was the compound. I had seen it in the aerials and it was where all of the migrant workers were housed. From what I could see it reminded me of the pictures of the camps that were set up for Japanese Americans all over the Southwest during World War II.

Row after row of long barrack-type buildings and what appeared to be some form of security fencing around it and a secondary fence surrounding the interior fence. A Japanese internment camp, a Southern chain gang facility like in the old Paul Newman movie *Cool Hand Luke* or the prisoner of war camp in *The Great Escape*, but it couldn't be that bad.

It couldn't be that bad.

No, not that bad, I thought as I started out from the Daze Inn, walked past Randi's and began skirting the company road toward VyHa Growers headquarters.

I made my way at a brisk pace through the groves of orange trees. I figured about three miles, about an hour if I could maintain the pace. It wasn't difficult and the night air with the scent of the trees was quite pleasant.

I enjoyed the workout after weeks of relative inactivity.

I moved quickly but with some degree of stealth. It wouldn't do to be found intruding on Vydor Haines's core, center of operations, his home and God only knew what else.

As I recalled from the aerials, there was a decorative portal where the company road ended and transitioned into a lane that continued about six hundred feet to a main house, a grand three-story affair, very California, probably California Colonial style, white stucco with a tile roof, a covered portico on the front of the house that partially covered a circular drive and what appeared to be a roof garden on the back half of the building.

In addition to the house and compound there were the typical produce ranch type buildings for storage of equipment, commodities and packing sheds. There was no fencing around the house or out buildings. The only fencing that had been visible from the air was around the compound.

Just about exactly an hour after I set off from the Daze Inn I saw the portal. A decorative wrought iron affair that straddled the end of the road and beginning of the lane and rose in an arc to about fourteen feet at its highest point. At the apex of the arc in wrought iron script, very artfully executed was a header that read *VyHa Growers*.

The compound was quite visible from my vantage point on the opposite side of the road set back about two hundred feet from where the groves ended.

Carefully, I crossed the road and moved through the grove quietly toward a point where I could survey the compound.

What I saw . . .

It was worse than I thought. What appeared to be a prison camp complete with perimeter fencing, lighting that illuminated the entire interior of the compound and perimeter at night and a building next to the fence where a sixteen foot wide gate was located, presumably for entering and leaving the compound. The gate ran on a track back and forth and was apparently operated electronically and controlled from the building, a gatehouse.

The gate was closed and a light was on in the gatehouse. Presumably there was someone who controlled the gate and those who were permitted to enter or to leave on a round the clock basis.

It did look like a prison camp and was bathed in bright white light. Visible was the interior fence of chain link about ten feet high that surrounded the entire compound, and surrounding that was the secondary perimeter fencing about six feet high. It didn't take long to figure out what the secondary fencing enclosed. It was a dog run around the entire compound complete with dogs, guard dogs that paced the run. It was obvious: anyone inside of the compound could not come and go at will and were literally prisoners.

How could this be?

Pretty simple and part of the reason that I came here. Vydor Haines was very well positioned and protected, and the residents, or rather prisoners, were illegal and had no recourse or redress.

In my briefing I had asked why INS, immigration, had never had a successful raid on the farms. The answer was pretty straightforward from my vantage point.

To my right and parked on the east side of the compound were six buses and a new model ten passenger Dodge van all painted in VyHa Growers forest green. The buses weren't the typical buses that you would see in a similar setting to transport laborers; they looked like high end public transit buses that you might find in a city but with row by row seating and cargo storage underneath. Not the Spartan school type buses that transported most migrants to and from fields and other destinations on an agricultural property. These looked pretty cushy, the windows were clean and the buses washed, not typical.

Every time the INS had attempted to raid the VyHa operation they found empty barracks and a handful of legal green carded workers but no illegals.

It was obvious that the illegals had been spirited away on the buses.

It was also obvious that there was a leak in INS forewarning Haines of the raids. Giving him enough time to evacuate his workforce before the arrival of investigators. INS was working on that and it didn't concern me. They were bound by law.

My mission was to break it because following the letter of the law didn't work when it came to people like Haines. He was beyond the law, but so was I and that would be his undoing.

I had seen enough. I moved back toward the road and an hour later I was back in my room at the Daze Inn.

As I lay in my bed I couldn't help wondering what went on beyond that portal and in that compound. But then again wondering is just speculation and speculation without foundation achieves no purpose. I had to wait until I could get beyond those portals and assess the facts.

I tried to stop speculating, a complete waste of time, but being human I kept doing it, doing it until I finally fell asleep at about one in the morning.

Chapter 6/

I was at Randi's having tacos and a draft for lunch two days later.

Randi had stopped by my bar stool and offered some light companionship while I waited for my tacos. I hadn't pressed her for any more information, just kept things conversational.

I figured it was time for the curtain to rise on the next act, and right on cue he came through the door, Captain Max Tudor, Stetson and all.

"Hite," he announced, haloed by the open door behind him, "I need you to come with me."

I raised my hand in acknowledgment, took a final bite of my taco and a swig of beer, dabbed my lips with a napkin, pulled out a ten, threw it on the bar, turned around on my barstool and slid off, said "See ya," to Randi and walked around the bar toward Captain Tudor who was waiting for me.

The moment had come. The beginning of the end for someone, maybe more than one. Time would tell.

* * *

I followed him and his Stetson across the parking lot. I noticed that he wasn't wearing his gun this time. He was on an errand to get me for the boss to talk with, not to intimidate me, a newcomer asking a lot of questions.

Interpretation: probably no guns were worn on the premises of the VyHa main operational premises as a matter of course. I noted my conclusion; finally I was dealing with logical conclusions, maybe not totally correct but not unsupported speculation.

"The boss wants to see you. Get into the truck," Tudor said.

I got in and turned toward him saying, "You don't like me much, do you?"

"Don't know you but you have an edge and you are a cocky little bastard."

"Push me and it gets worse," I assured him.

"Doesn't sound like someone who's looking for a job."

"I'm not being hired by you," I told him.

“But I might have a say,” Tudor replied and gripped the steering wheel a little tighter as he stared forward and pulled out of Randi’s lot and onto the company road to the farm.

“We’ll see, but we’ll probably end up being best of buddies. A team. I already feel like I’ve bonded with you so let’s dispense with the formalities.”

He was driving, eyes forward, “What do you mean?”

“Well,” I answered, “you call me Skip. And I have a pet name for you since we are bonded buddies.”

He still stared forward and accelerated a bit more. I don’t think he was doing it to go faster, it was a reaction. “So what’s my name as far as you are concerned, Skip?”

“Instead of Captain Tudor I figured I would call you Tooty. Now that’s just on a one-to-one basis among buddies. In front of your superiors, peers and subordinates you will be addressed as Captain Tudor, but between you and I you will just be Tooty. Ok with you, Tooty?”

He didn’t answer, he just continued to stare forward, grip the wheel harder and suddenly the truck was going twenty miles per hour faster.

His face was red as a beet.

And I was as happy as a clam.

I settled back on the passenger side and waited for a meeting with Vydor Haines. I assumed that was the boss who had summoned me. If it wasn’t, maybe one of his supervisors; it would be a stumbling block but I would get to Vydor Haines soon.

Tooty didn’t realize that he was part of my strategy, one that developed from the moment I had met him.

He had a tremendous ego and he felt that he represented all of the business and the personal interests of VyHa and Vydor Haines. I intended to drive a wedge between him and the things that he felt he controlled and dealt with in confidence: his boss, his staff, his peers and the workers.

If I could do it successfully Tudor would ultimately self-destruct, lose control and as a result of me, his nemesis, begin to make really stupid mistakes and lose credibility in the organization.

He would lose his influence.

He would lose his sense of control.

He would lose it all because of his hatred of me.

And because of me his hatred would make him do it over and over again.

I looked across the cab at him; he was seriously pissed.

And he had already made his first mistake—he wasn't carrying that gun. Now I knew with fair reason when and where he probably wouldn't be carrying it.

* * *

We covered the three miles in no time and Tudor slowed only marginally as he passed through the wrought iron portal and continued toward the big house.

As the road transitioned from blacktop to pea gravel beyond the portal, Tooty pushed on aggressively, throwing gravel, and slid to a stop under the portico in front of the house.

He stared straight ahead and said simply, "Get out of here, you bastard."

I smiled and said, "Nice ride. You know, you might make a better chauffeur than a security supervisor, Tooty. Might consider a change of career path." Then I added because I couldn't resist, "You gonna come around and open the door for me?"

"Fuck you," was all that Captain Max Tudor said. He was still looking straight ahead, an iron grip on the steering wheel.

Then, exasperated, he opened his hands releasing his grip from the wheel, drew them back several inches, jammed them palms forward into the steering wheel, turned toward me, his face a vivid red and said, "Get the hell out of my truck!"

I didn't push it any farther; I got out of the truck, shut the door and turned toward the entrance to the big house.

Behind me I heard the engine rev and then pea gravel spray, gravel banging on the back of my jeans as Captain Tudor put on the power and turned hard right blasting around the remaining one hundred and eighty degrees of the circle drive in front of the house

I was in front of the big house, about to enter and meet Vydor Haines.

Chapter 7/

The big house was huge. It was as I had seen it on recon, Spanish California Colonial. Very impressive, well executed. Whoever Vydor Haines was he had the resources I had been briefed about. From driving up and looking at the three-story artifice I estimated it at eight or nine thousand feet livable at least.

My family had been in the building and development business way back when and I grew up around it after we left the farm and moved west. I'm pretty good at rough guesses when it comes to structures.

I shrugged and composed myself knowing that my strategy was dependent largely on what would happen in the next half hour or so.

I was dressed as a farm foreman but just as when I went for any interview in my other more conventional life, if you could call it that, I straightened myself up a bit, retucked my shirt into my jeans and walked up the stairs beneath the portico and toward the front double doors.

I was ready to press the doorbell but before I could the door opened and a nicely dressed Hispanic man smiled at me. He was probably in his early to mid-thirties, good looking but not in a masculine way, trim, medium height and very proper.

"Mr. Hite," he said in a measured tone and very distinctly, "Mr. Haines is expecting you. Please come in and I will tell him that you have arrived."

I have to admit that I was somewhat set aback. I had expected to enter the depths of evil and I was greeted in a cordial and courteous manner.

"Thank you," was my reply.

The gentleman nodded and said, "Feel free to take a chair if you want but I am sure he will be seeing you in a minute or so."

I looked around the spacious entry hall and the opulent furnishings. The décor was straight out of a Southern California decorator magazine.

"No thanks," I said. "I'll just wait here."

"As you wish," the gentleman said. Then added, "By the way my name is Marco and I'm pleased to serve you. I will tell Mr. Haines that you are waiting."

"Thank you, Marco." I smiled and nodded toward him. He nodded his head in acknowledgment, turned and walked toward a set of double, rich mahogany panel doors at the far end of the entry hall. Beautiful wood and finish. Matching perfectly.

Marco opened the doors and walked though.

A few moments later he returned through the open doors and approached me smiling. "Mr. Haines will see you now. Please follow me, Mr. Hite."

I nodded and he turned walked toward the double doors.I followed.

Vydor Haines was behind that set of doors.

* * *

The study or rather office was vast and beautiful. The entire wall behind the desk where Vydor Haines sat was glass panels easily forty feet wide and looked out on the orchards beyond a beautifully manicured garden that had to be several acres in size behind the house or more appropriately the mansion.

The walls where there were no windows were paneled; not in a dark oppressive wood such as a dark stained walnut, no, in a medium light pecan that made the room bright but warm and not sullen and dark.

I was given the advantage of a broad education as I grew up and an appreciation of art as both of my grandfathers were artists. It was just a hobby but one of my earliest memories was sitting in my grandfather's studio as a little boy and being taught to paint with oils. Consequently I've enjoyed artwork since, and Vydor Haines had an amazing collection of what appeared to be original pieces, most modern or contemporary, executed in several mediums and bronzes.

As pragmatic as I try to be, especially in a situation like this when coming face to face with a mark, this time I have to admit I was impressed, very impressed.

Vydor Haines sat behind a beautifully crafted cherry desk and was a very impressive figure.He was straight as an arrow. Appeared fit. Maybe fifty years old and his full head of hair was wavy and salt and pepper. He was handsome. I judged him to be a bit more than six feet tall if he stood and he was impeccably dressed.

He was dressed in what I called California business attire. He had a blue summer sport jacket on that accented his blue eyes that were contrasted by his tan face. He wore an open-collared tapered slim-fit button down small-checked blue and white shirt that appeared to be custom tailored. On his right hand he wore a large signet ring, gold with the initials VH engraved and a large blood red ruby inset.

He was sitting but I assumed that below his waistline was probably a crisp pair of jeans, probably pressed, and judging from what I observed an expensive pair of fine leather loafers on his feet. Sox maybe, possibly not.

I walked up in front of his desk. He was smiling, rose and extended his right hand.

“Mr. Hite,” he said, “it’s good to meet you.”

“Thanks, Mr. Haines,” I said staying in character, lowering my head a bit as I extended my hand toward his. An agricultural worker, albeit a foreman meeting the boss, hoping for a job. I was shaking hands with the man who I came here to murder. Assassination, sanctioned termination, call it what it is, murder.

“Please sit down, Mr. Hite. And do you mind if I call you Skip?” he asked as I raised my head and withdrew my hand from his.

“No, sir,” I said, “Skip is fine.”

“Well, Skip, take a seat.” He pointed to one of the two leather upholstered chairs that were in front of the desk on either side and a foot or so behind me.

“Thank you, sir,” I replied and moved a step backward and to my right and sat down.

Haines gave me a moment to settle in, then asked, “Would you like water or coffee? Marco can take care of that for you.”

“No thanks, Mr. Haines,” I replied, “but I appreciate the offer.”

When Marco heard that I had no requests he turned and left the room, closing the doors behind him.

I commented, “Marco is quite efficient and very courteous.”

Haines smiled, nodded and clasped his hands together as they rested on the pad on top of his desk. “Marco has been with me since before I came here and bought the property. He takes care of many things here in the house and is a true asset. He is also a good friend. We actually have a lot in common even though I am the boss and he is a servant, but he enjoys his position and excels at it and is well compensated. I take care of him financially and make sure he enjoys a lifestyle that he hoped to attain before I employed him years ago. I pride myself in rewarding people for doing a better than good job.”

“That’s a productive approach,” I replied.

He still had his hands clasped together and his brow furrowed a bit; he became more serious. “I’m kind of in a bind and maybe you can help me.”

“How so, sir?”

“I understand that you have been inquiring about my business and are interested in working here as a production supervisor, foreman or whatever you want to call it.”

“That’s right, sir. I came up here and have inquired about your operation hoping for a moment just like this.” I nodded my head acknowledging the privilege of being in this office and the potential of a position.

“There is an opportunity,” Haines said. “Just ten days ago my foreman Jim Becker left. No notice, one day he was just gone. He was good, worked well with the help, and then just disappeared.”

I nodded.

He continued, “It happens in this business. Who knows, maybe some issue back where he came from, possibly a legal problem that caught up with him or a past debt. I would have helped him resolve whatever he had to straighten out. Or maybe he just got the urge to move on. Anyway he’s gone and you are here so that’s where we are.”

“With all respect sir,” I said, “you don’t know anything about me.”

“True but I do know that you have said that you can maintain or increase production.”

“I did say that, sir.”

“Well,” Vydor Haines said, “I’m going to give you an opportunity to prove that. We have a picking coming up, Washington Navel Oranges. I’ll put you on, strictly on a provisional basis for a month. If you are worth your salt and can maintain production efficiently you have a job, assuming that we can work well together. If you exceed our average production you will get a bonus. If you don’t maintain production or exceed or if it simply isn’t a good working relationship, we part friends. Sound fair?”

I nodded. “What are the financial terms?” I didn’t want to seem too easy but this seemed more than fair just from what I had heard. I waited for the shoe to drop, but it didn’t.

“I understand that you want five hundred a week, room, board and a vehicle. For the probation period, one month I’ll go three hundred a week and the rest of the package. If the harvest goes well I’ll bring you up to five a week and a bonus for added production if you excel in the first month.”

I took my time and gave him a considering look, then said, “I can do it, sir. You won’t be sorry.” I raised my hand and extended it toward him.

He rose, extended his right hand with the gold signet ring and ruby and we shook on it.

“Please sit down,” he said, “I’ll call Captain Tudor in and we can get you oriented. I have a cottage that you can live in. It is comfortable with its own kitchenette and there is a cafeteria in the workers’ quarters for the employees that you can use if you aren’t into cooking for yourself. I will give you the use of a pickup as well.”

“That’s generous.” I said.

“Again,” he said, “you are on a tentative basis but I want to make the pie sweet so that you will perform. I really hope this works out for you because if it does it will work out for me as well.”

I nodded again and he pushed a black button on the top of his desk.

A few moments later Marco opened the double doors and said, “Sir?”

Five minutes later Captain Tudor came into the office with another uniformed security officer. He was introduced as Sergeant Cruz. He shook my hand but said nothing.

Haines told them that he had employed me. I could see that Tudor’s neck flushed red only moments after being told. Cruz showed no expression at all.

Haines opened his right side top drawer on the bank that flanked his legs and pulled out a key ring with about a dozen keys and gave the ring to me.

“These are the keys to the out buildings and the buses. Captain Tudor will give you the keys to a bungalow and vehicle. Tudor and Cruz will orient you.”

I nodded, took the keys and put them into my pocket.

“I know that you’re at the hotel in town, so if you check out in the morning we’ll have the bungalow ready for you. Why don’t we say you report for your first day at about ten tomorrow?”

“Sounds fine,” I said.

“We’ll give you a truck today before you leave. I understand you have a valid driver’s license, no outstanding tickets, anything like that.”

I shook my head in response and said, “Thanks, Mr. Haines, I won’t let you down.”

He smiled and replied, “If you do you’ll be letting both of us down.”

Captain Tudor did not look pleased. Cruz appeared to be a mirror of his displeasure, the first hint of emotion or personality that he had exhibited since entering the room.

The three of us turned and left the office of Vydor Haines.

Chapter 8/

I walked from the house following Tudor and Cruz and over the pea gravel toward the gatehouse at the entrance to the compound about three hundred feet from the big house, the ring full of keys in my jeans pocket.

Neither Tudor nor Cruz said a word; they just walked purposefully in front of me. The tension could be cut with a knife.

Tudor opened the door to the gatehouse and entered while Cruz stayed outside. Tudor walked directly to a desk in front of the window looking out on the entrance to the compound and the electronic gate.

He addressed the uniformed guard who was sitting at the desk. "The boss just hired this man as foreman. He gets a company truck for his personal use and a bungalow. Assign him a truck and a supervisor's crib, give him his keys and turn him loose after he signs for everything. He can have the truck today. He'll move in tomorrow. Any questions?"

"No, sir," the guard at the desk replied.

"Then take care of it," Tudor said, turned and left.

I was insulted; he didn't even congratulate me on getting the job. I just stood there waiting.

The guard turned and said, "I'm not sure what your name is but I'm Adam, Adam Thrift. I'll help get you situated, and about them," he nodded toward the door where Tudor had just left and joined Cruz outside, "be careful if you are working here; stay out of their path. They don't trust any new help. Lots have left. Just friendly advice."

"Advice well taken, Adam, thanks," I answered and extended my hand. "Name's Skip Hite. Why don't you show me around?"

Adam shook my hand, and I got the tour after Adam put a sign in the window that looked out on the gate that said "Sorry, I'm on a fifteen minute break" with one of those clock representations with the movable hands. He set it on the time that we would return before he put it in the window.

He seemed like a nice enough guy. Not out of the mold of Tudor and Cruz.

Adam Thrift and I walked up the property past the gate in front of the compound and about three hundred feet beyond to the bungalow that was to be mine.

It proved to be a nice clean little bungalow, actually a small house with a living room complete with a couch, side chair, end table, floor lamp and a TV, a kitchenette with a small table for two and a bedroom with all of the usual furnishings and a desk and chair. Adam said that one of the female workers would freshen the linens daily and clean twice a week and take care of my laundry once a week as well.

The bungalow was kind of secluded from the rest of the ranch's out buildings and the compound by an extension of the groves that cut between the compound, out buildings and the four bungalows for supervisory personnel that included mine. I was the only supervisor or employee that occupied a unit but it was nice, very nice.

I was given an almost new, pristine but basic three-quarter ton pickup in the company forest green with the VyHa Growers logo on the door and my title under the logo—SUPERVISOR.

Adam explained that the truck and all of the vehicles that were not used for farm production exclusively would be washed and cleaned once a week by the employees, including my truck. He said that Mr. Haines insisted on it.

All of the buildings on the ranch were pristine: the bungalows, the out buildings, even the compound. In the world of Skip Hite, agricultural worker, I was moving up in the world. Really, this was more than I expected.

Then on the other hand Tudor and Cruz were exactly what I expected. And Adam Thrift, if I was right, was just what I hoped for, a potential ally.

* * *

I drove my ride, the company pickup, down the three mile company road and into Santa Paula.

My first stop was a True Value Hardware on Main Street. I bought a large key ring about an inch and a quarter in diameter and thirty inches of chain. A strong but narrow set of links no wider than three-eighths of an inch. I also purchased from the electrical department a roll of what my father used to call friction tape; it's a cloth tape, black and sticky. Good to wrap and grip. Finally, I purchased an inexpensive cross-cut hand saw.

From there I turned west on State Route 126 and drove into Ventura to the Target store on South Mill Road. In the sporting goods department I purchased a Rawlings Maple Model 350 FM "Big Stick" baseball bat thirty-three inches in overall length, solid hard maple, and a fish filleting knife, extremely sharp, inexpensive, with a hard plastic sheath.

Outside of Target in the parking lot with the pickup's bed gate down, I used the saw that I had bought in Santa Clara to cut the baseball bat in half, discarding the narrow end and keeping the larger hitting end. I wrapped the larger end of the bat with the friction tape over and over again, building the tape up to create a grip, and when I was finished I had a perfect sixteen and a half inch club.

Then I took the wad of keys that Haines had given me and added the keys to the truck and my bungalow to the ring. I attached that ring to the chain that I had bought from True Value and at the opposite end I attached the key ring so that I ended up with a chain with a wad of keys, nice and heavy, metal and abrasive at one end and a metal circle at the other end that one could anchor a fist around creating what in ancient times would have been considered a mace, the thing you might see in an ancient battle scene in a movie that could be swung with a ball at the end and spikes.

Finally I was armed.

I drove back to the Daze Inn and waited for the next act.

* * *

It didn't take long.

I heard a key enter and turn in the lock set as I stood behind the front door where it would open on the inward swing. I had been there just waiting, virtually certain that I would have a visitor or two that night and from that position I'd be behind someone who came in and obscured by the door as it swung in.

I figured that whoever had been in my room to check it out had to have gotten a key since there was no indication that the locks had been tampered with. No doubt they got it from the front desk because they had enough influence or intimidation to get it with little or no question.

It was about 11:00. I had the TV on for background noise. I had only the light in the bathroom on; the main room was dimly lit from the light shining through the bathroom door but also illuminated somewhat from the outside through the window in the front of the unit, but a full view of the interior was obscured by drawn drapes.

It was just about the time someone would be lying in bed and have the TV on and drifting off. Just the right time for a surprise, a nighttime surprise to beat someone up and convince them to leave town and move on.

Someone like me.

The key caught and the handle turned. The door opened slowly, cautiously.

I beamed the first guy through, Cruz. My new persuader had passed its initiation, and he fell like a log into my room.

I came around from behind the door and stepped sideways over Cruz, out like a light on the floor, and faced Captain Tudor. I had the bat in my right hand and the filleting knife in my left, the blade pointed forward directly at Tudor's gut and ready to thrust forward.

"You want more of this?" Nothing. "I'm not going away and if you stay here you'll get worse than him." I nodded down toward Cruz on the floor, then added, "Trust me, I can do it, Tooty."

I thrust the fishing knife a few times a few inches toward him.

He just looked at me with a cold stare. I knew that he wasn't sure who he was dealing with. I took advantage of the moment.

"Do yourself a favor and drag your buddy out of here. I got the message, your message that you intended to deliver and know what I'm getting into, and my only message to you is don't fuck with me! You have absolutely no idea what you're dealing with. Got it, Tooty?"

He didn't answer, he just scowled, bent over and took Cruz by the collar and pulled him out of my room onto the covered walkway in front of my motel room.

As he raised his head and looked up at me with death in his eyes, I said "Leave me alone or there will be worse for you, far worse. Now I hope that you got my message."

Cruz, still unconscious below him on the walk where he had dragged him, was slowly turning his head and moaning, starting to come around. Finally Captain Tudor said something. "I am going to kill you. I'll guarantee you that."

"You won't. I plan to take the privilege first and I'll thoroughly enjoy it. Your death warrant has already been signed. It's just a matter of time and place, Tooty."

I stepped back and slammed the door, and turned the cheap twist lock on the door handle.

I collected myself and prepared myself mentally for the next day and the days ahead. No kidding, an experience like this shakes you up. You are under control when you have to be and I was, but it would be less than honest to say that I didn't have to sit down and just pull myself together.

I know what I can do and will with resolve but I am also human. Being honest with yourself and your humanity is the key to maintaining control. You can't keep it inside forever. You must exhale and allow yourself to release and settle.

This was serious business. I had made two enemies and I had cultivated their hatred on purpose and now I had to deal with the potential consequences. I also knew that the weeks ahead would be a far greater challenge and would culminate in a major episode that could go terribly wrong and that I was all alone here with no resources beyond the ones that I could create.

I sat there by the little desk on the ancient chair in my bedroom and poured a generous glass of cheap wine. My right hand was shaking, but just a little, as I rose the plastic glass to my lips. I knew it would stop soon. I just had to give it time. Let it settle.

Chapter 9/

I showed up bright and early the next day, having checked out of The Daze Inn, driving my basic but totally utile company ride. I was impressed with the truck—I'm a guy—nice and clean and running like a top.

I had it made, or rather Skip Hite had it made. Now it was a matter of getting in and figuring out the operation and finding or creating an opportunity to do my job and have it appear to be a matter of circumstance, not an assassination.

I would be less than honest if I didn't acknowledge that my initial meeting with Vydor Haines was somewhat of a surprise. I had expected a monster based on what I had been told, a despot, someone who was the personification of evil.

The Vydor Haines that I had met with and been hired by was not what I expected. Not hardly, but then he might be very clever.

I needed and had to take time. Living on the property would give me a perspective. And then there was the fenced in migrants' compound and the guard dogs.

* * *

My initial concern was with Captain Tudor and Sergeant Cruz. In the least scenario I knew that they would be out to undermine me, and in the worst try to eliminate me. But as the first days turned into a couple of weeks they gave me wide breadth.

Neither Tudor nor Cruz wore side arms while on duty on the premises.

The day when I started work Cruz was sporting a rather major lump on his head and I'm sure a headache to match. He hardly acknowledged my presence and Tudor ignored me altogether.

I wasn't even remotely convinced that bygones would be bygones as far as they were concerned. They were just waiting for me to become complacent. Instead, I maintained my vigil and looked for resources to expand my armory.

The keys on the long chain were always in my right pocket and the chain hanging from my pocket and then up and the ring on the end tucked under my belt.

The knife, not quite as handy, was in my right boot in its sheath. It would take some time to get to so I had to make sure that I wouldn't be in a position where I needed to attain it quickly. But then I was always looking over my shoulder. If I wasn't I'd be a damned fool to be here in the first place.

My club that was kept in my bungalow for after hours' protection plus the knife and key mace were my entire arsenal.

And I learned where other resources were. Adam Thrift, the gatehouse guard, and I had become conversational friends. I made a point of coming in from time to time and hanging out with him as I took a cup of coffee from the carafe that was perpetually on a warmer under one of those coffee makers like one might have in a kitchen.

The back room of the guardhouse contained a small arsenal of long arms, shot guns and semi-automatic pistols with plenty of ammunition in a drawer below a gun rack and a pegboard for hanging pistols.

I didn't press Adam for any information about VyHa Growers, Vydor Haines or details of the operation. It was too soon. I limited our interfaces to small talk, sports and the weather and kept my eyes open.

I was just, I hoped, a guy who was happy to have a job as far as Adam Thrift was concerned and trying to fit in.

It wasn't all tension though; there were aspects that made my time at the ranch rather rewarding if not enjoyable.

My crew, my migrant crew were great. Forty or so families comprised the entire force and they were broken down into groups of twenty workers both male and female, each with a crew leader. Altogether there were about eighty adult pickers. Four crews, four crew leaders.

The crew leaders reported to me and spoke passable English. I can speak passable Spanish, a mixture of Spanish and English, so we managed to communicate effectively with words, mixed phrases and plenty of hand gestures.

They worked hard and I worked right next to them. Lead by example and you get satisfaction and plenty of sore muscles as well. I harvested next to them every day and even though I knew that I was an unknown commodity, one of the boss's men, I felt that eventually I could gain a level of trust. Within a short time I was in the best shape that I had been in for several years.

Every night I retreated to my bungalow exhausted. Skip Hite would have been proud. I would fall asleep with my bat, knife and key mace readily at hand and the little house secured as best that I could.

I knew that they would come, Tudor and Cruz, eventually.

* * *

I really enjoyed working the groves with my crews even with the aches and pains in the beginning. It gave me an appreciation for their labor and their personal commitment.

I gauged my acceptance by eyes and smiles. In my first days none of the workers or their crew leaders looked directly at me and maintained a stoic presence, acknowledging me and my questions or directives with only raised eyebrows and a nod or shrug.

But as the first week passed and the second week progressed, I noticed a change as I worked by their side. There was more eye contact and a smile or two every once in a while and finally enthusiastic nodding and a broad smile as we accomplished things together.

And there was the *cerveza*. Every day at the end of a rigorous routine I brought my crew leaders together and we shared a half hour of libation down on our haunches in a semi-circle in the grass in front of the guardhouse in front of the gate to the compound entrance.

At first it was tentative. I'm sure that they weren't sure what to make of me, but it wasn't long before we were relaxing after a long day and sharing a beer and what could pass for male bonding in a multicultural sense.

It is amazing as far how those engaged in common labor with one another become close very quickly. They work hard together and enjoy each other's company when they relax and, what's even more interesting, look forward to the next day of working together and the production that they will be responsible for. Social psychologists would call it bonding and indeed we were. As we moved from the second week into the third of the picking I had an efficient and motivated crew and we were producing.

Then there was Luce. She worked by our side day to day but also acted as the maid who took care of my bungalow. Probably late twenties. About five foot four. Tan and in an earthy way very beautiful. Dark eyes that you could lose yourself just looking into, long flowing black hair, a perfect body, at least in my mind, toned by working with every muscle day by day and a beautiful smile. She was given the gift of virtual perfection.

She had been married and from what I could understand her husband had died in a farm accident several years before and she had never remarried. No children. She was one of the few women who was alone, without family in the compound.

And then there were the children who lived on the ranch. After all, with about eighty workers there are couples and with couples there would be children. About two dozen children and one migrant woman who took care of them in the compound every day while their parents worked. There was a swing set, a teeter-totter, a jungle gym and other playground toys and a room with art supplies and learning tools.

Actually the whole compound was a puzzle. It seemed to be less of a prison than when I first observed it from the perimeter. People came and went until ten o'clock at night, then the compound was shut down and the lights came on and the dogs roamed within the inner and outer fences.

None of the residents left the ranch, but often roamed the property and on weekends I even watched some couples and families picnic in the groves, kids running, screaming and playing.

And a priest came from Santa Clara to say mass every Sunday.

Hardly a prison, I observed.

Very perplexing but I didn't want to ask too many questions. I was, as far as everyone was concerned, just happy to have a job and a good supervisor. But it was very perplexing.

This center of evil as it had been portrayed to me seemed to be a bit of security and approaching a paradise for the migrants who worked and lived here. No one seemed put upon or concerned for their safety or the welfare of their peers or families.

What in the hell was going on?

The only thing I noticed and was not by any means surprised by was that when Tudor or Cruz came anywhere near the workers, the entire general atmosphere changed. No smiles, no eye contact, bodies turned away and visibly folded into themselves and some even cringed.

Besides Tudor, Cruz and Adam in the gatehouse there were two other security guards. They were actually members of the migrant population but wore uniforms and covered two daily shifts and on weekends for Adam in the gatehouse so that it would be manned twenty-four seven.

Then halfway into the third week Adam gave me a message. He told me that Vydor Haines wanted to see me in his office in the big house the following day. I was to be there at eleven-thirty for a lunch meeting.

I told him that I would be there "with bells on." I said that I might look a little silly, the bells and all, but I don't think he got it or just wasn't paying attention.

Anyway, I was going to have a meeting with the boss.

Chapter 10/

“Thank you for joining me, Skip,” Vydor Haines said after I was ushered by Marco through the big house, then up two floors from the ground floor and ultimately to a roof garden literally on the roof of the house overlooking a vista of groves and fields to the east that seemed to go on forever. The same groves I had been working in for the past several weeks. The same roof garden that I remembered from the aerials.

I shook his hand, and he gestured toward a glass-topped table with four finely crafted metal chairs comfortably cushioned near the railing overlooking the view.

We both sat down and settled into our seats across the table from one another.

“Can we start with refreshments?” Vydor asked.

“That sounds fine to me, Mr. Haines,” I replied.

“No, please call me Vydor or even Vy.”

“That would be a little awkward. You are the boss and the owner of all of this, Mr. Haines.”

“I own the place, and am proud of it,” he gestured out toward his acreage, “but I am hardly what I would consider a ‘boss.’ I see this as a collaboration, a collective of sorts where everyone who produces shares in the benefits.”

Just about then Marco came to our table with a silver tray, a bottle of red wine and two glasses. He put the bottle and glasses on the table and gave both of us a liberal pour. Then he bowed slightly, nodded, turned and left us.

I said as I raised my glass and nodded in appreciation and Vydor raised his, “It, your ranch, is unusual compared to other operations I’ve been involved in.”

We both drank from our glasses, then Vydor replied, “Yes, Skip, but with a purpose.”

“How so?”

“Well, I was actually born in Eastern Europe, part of the Communist Soviet Block. My family were of the privileged class even though according to the propaganda everyone was supposedly equal. Not so, hardly. It was a two-class system. There were those who toiled daily, stood in line for limited amounts of resources in stores with shelves that were never totally stocked with food or other goods, lived just a step above poverty. And then there were people like my family—caviar, the finest food, wine, vodka, servants, vehicles and access to the largess of the government if we needed more.”

I nodded and actually was fascinated by his story.

He continued, "Then when the whole thing fell apart we came here. It was only natural because everyone comes to America, the land of opportunity. But we didn't come here to succeed; we came here financially successful, having stolen as much as we could take from where we came from and the masses that worked day in and out there."

"And so you ended up here?"

"Yes, Skip, after my father died. Heavy smoker, they all smoked there and it caught up with him. My mother is in an assisted living facility down in Thousand Oaks. Very nice and she is comfortable there."

"Whya citrus and produce ranch?" I asked.

"Always something I was interested in. I actually got a degree from university in agricultural management."

I turned my head and looked out over the railing and commented, "It's a beautiful spread."

"Thank you, Skip. I wanted to tell you today that I appreciate your efforts over the last few weeks. The crop is coming in at a very satisfying pace. That's the key, pick at the right time, especially oranges since unlike other fruit they don't continue to ripen after picking, so timing is important to the quality, the sweetness, the sugar content, the color and getting the harvest to market before the crop turns and you get culled out."

"I've done my best."

"And I've watched from up here. You work side by side with my people."

"Your people?"

"Well, I think of them as such, Skip," Vydor answered, leaned forward, refilled my glass. "I'm trying to create a better life for them. Maybe making up for the exploitation that gave my family and me the resources to create this, but I'm not a shrink and into self-psychoanalysis."

"Most of us can't be that objective," I said. "I know that I'm not."

Vydor seemed to appraise me more closely than before I made that statement and there was a pause.

"You don't seem to be the typical production foreman, Skip. I mean, you have a lot of insight and more awareness than the typical farm worker. Tell me about yourself."

I had rehearsed this, knowing that ultimately I would have to account for myself and my background. “Middle class, blue collar family, Midwest, Dad worked at Champion in Toledo making sparkplugs for the Big Three. Wanted more for me but I was a kid with just enough to take it for granted. Never liked school but I was smart and read a lot and always enjoyed working outside, even hoeing fields on the farms around Toledo in the summer for pocket money and helping bring in the crops. But my folks pushed me on toward more school and I served two semesters in community college before I dropped out and hit the road. Been there ever since. I’m sure a disappointment to my family. Not a prosperous life but I make do and can’t complain. I’m doing what I enjoy and working with people that I like and managed to put a bit ahead.”

Vydor Haines leaned back in his chair, steeped his fingers below his chin like my boss and seemed to consider what I had just told him.

“I see we have a mutual passion,” he spoke through his fingers in front of his face and continued, “a love of the land, what it can render and the people who work it.”

“Yes.” I wasn’t lying.

He lowered his hands and asked, “And if you stay on here, what would you be looking for?”

I didn’t hesitate to answer, “More of the same, more money and some questions answered.”

Vydor Haines smiled and said, “Shoot.”

Part II/The Turn/

Chapter 11/

Vydor Haines opened his hands and gestured toward me inviting my questions.

I had waited for this for a long time and considered how to proceed. Not too intrusive, just the kind of questions a foreman might ask. Someone who had been on the property for three weeks or so, questions that would fill in logical gaps.

I began, “On most of the operations that I’ve worked when the harvest is over, the workers move on, but these folks seem to be pretty settled.”

Vydor Haines nodded, “Yes they are, Skip. This is their home. They aren’t leaving unless they choose to. You see, they aren’t seasonal; they live in their quarters year round. Now they are harvesting fruit, and when it comes time they will plant and harvest field crops that we grow.”

“So they’re permanent employees?”

“Yes, Skip,” he replied, “and when they aren’t planting or harvesting they keep busy with maintenance around the farm.” He broadened his hands and arms, turned in his chair and looked toward the fields and buildings. “They are guaranteed a monthly stipend, or rather a salary for staying here, quarters and meals and other necessities included. It works for them and for me. I don’t have to break in crew after crew and they are protected.”

“From what?” I had to ask.

Vydor Haines became more serious and his tone more earnest as he answered my question. “I’m sure you have figured out that they are all undocumented. Not unusual in this business and we have had raids from INS, but I have connections and have been forewarned. We move them off to a refuge until the threat is over and my colleagues provide me with documented workers who take up residence in the compound until the INS is satisfied and leaves. I hope that you understand that at this point I can’t divulge to you where my people are taken, but they leave in the buses behind the compound with all their belongings and come back when the coast is clear.”

“I understand,” I acknowledged. It all fit together with what I had surmised.

“And I’m sure you wonder about the dogs.”

“True,” I said.

“Well, besides the INS we have been raided, so to speak, by legal groups of harvesters who believe that my people are depriving them of jobs at lower wages. Nothing in terms of causing harm, just harassment and usually at night. We never know when it is going to happen but the dogs are a good alarm system and a deterrent. Nobody wants to take on a guard dog, even if they are behind a fence.”

“Certainly not me,” I shouldered back in response to the thought.

“So,” Haines continued, “to answer your apparent concern, one which anyone would have, the dogs aren’t to keep the workers in, they are to protect them. The outer fence, the gate. If anyone comes on the property they can raise all the hell they want until my security people and the local cops, if necessary, can throw them out but they never get to my people, never confront them directly. My people are safely behind a barrier, a barrier that creates security for them.”

I nodded again thoughtfully and replied, “That certainly addresses some of my questions and to a degree my concerns.”

Vydor smiled broadly, white perfect teeth in array contrasted by a perfectly tanned face, and then changed the tone. “Enough business,” he said definitively, “let’s enjoy lunch and a beautiful day.” He raised his glass.

“Fair enough,” I said and smiled with my reply as I raised mine.

I didn’t mention my issues with Tudor or Cruz. At this point that was between us.

But the puzzle pieces were definitely not fitting together. After all, I was sent here to kill this man.

* * *

I left the big house after lunch with questions, but time, as they say, resolves most issues, so it was a matter of patience, more patience and consideration.

Best place for patience and consideration, of course, the local watering hole so I got in my pickup and headed down the road to Randi’s.

Randi’s was a welcome oasis at the end of the three-mile road from the ranch, and I retreated there every other day or two to reprise my thoughts, considerations and plans.

I really didn’t socialize much; I’m not much of a socializer but realize that it is something that I had to cultivate as there is a lot of information that someone in my profession can glean from conversations with the locals. It always seemed like a lot of work, making small talk. I had a mission, an objective, went in and did it. I like things cut and dried without complications.

This was different, though, more below the radar, so local intelligence was critical to my final plan of execution and I made up my mind to cultivate the local garden of information and gossip.

I arrived at the end of the three-mile road and the tee intersection with Randi's facing me head-on on the other side. I crossed, entered the parking lot, parked and walked into the establishment to be welcomed by Suze, my favorite bar tender.

She knew by now that I liked wine and when she saw me walk through the door she started a pour of the house Pinot Grigio and a glass of water, no ice, no straw that I always ask for.

"What's going on, Skip?" Suze asked, her beautiful eyes and blonde hair cascading over her shoulders.

"Huh?" I said.

She handed me the pour and the water. Suze has a beautiful smile to top off the package, a warm and inviting one. "I'm curious, Skip, when you first came you drank our draft, now wine, why the change?"

"Prosperity, Suze, prosperity," I replied, "I indulge my tastes when I can afford it."

"You definitely aren't the average guy."

Her comment made me think. Maybe I was stepping out of character, but then it felt good to indulge in a personal preference, a glass of wine, so I set aside my concern. How could a minor lapse hurt in a place where I felt somewhat secure?

"Thanks," I said in response to her comment, raised my glass to her, nodded and took a drink.

Suze, besides being a great bartender and beautiful, also had a husband. A nice guy who I met once on a lunch break for tacos at Randi's when he stopped by, a firefighter from Ventura. Hell of a nice guy, lucky in my mind. And three cute kids that Suze loved to show off on her smart phone.

Suze was a great bartender and played the crowd well. Smiling, cajoling, encouraging people to stay for two instead of one. It's the way you make a bar work. It reminded me of my stint owning a place like Randi's. Cultivate regulars, listen and laugh, make them feel appreciated. You're working for tips if you're a bartender, and the regulars don't always tip a lot but they come every day literally in a place like Randi's and they are your bread and butter if you are Suze, and if you are Randi.

Suze asked me what was going on. "Same old thing," I said, "just figuring things out. Working the harvest out at the ranch."

“There’s a guy who comes in who was asking about you,” she said as she tossed her hair over her shoulder.

“Who?” I asked, shifting on my stool and settling in.

Ever notice, bar stools because of their height and construction always get rickety. Now that’s not always in a beer, shot and pool bar like Randi’s but in almost any place. Given enough time and enough people, the stools become shifty beneath you so you kind of need to settle your weight and lean toward the bar to stabilize things; maybe in the long run that works in the establishment’s favor.

That’s what I did while I waited for Suze to respond, shifted my butt around and my shoulders. We all do it. It’s just something that we don’t notice.

“The guy’s name is Frank Mayfield.”

“You know him?” I asked.

“He comes in once in a while, used to come in a lot more.”

“How so?” I asked as I raised my brows in her direction and raised my wine glass to take a drink.

“He was a friend of the foreman who worked out at VyHa, the guy who came up missing; left town, I guess. But this Mayfield guy said he wanted to talk to you.”

“Did he say why?” I asked Suze, but just then the door opened and a shaft of light shot across the part of the central U-shaped bar near the door and a guy walked in and took a seat.

Suze raised an index finger in my direction in an “I’ll get back to you in a minute” gesture and walked around behind the bar to take an order from the newcomer. After pouring a draft for the guy and doing some magic on the cash register terminal, she came back and turned toward me as I sipped on my wine and water.

“Got any idea why he wants to talk to me?”

“No, but he seems like a pretty good guy. Never any trouble. Used to come in with his buddy for a few beers. A pretty decent tipper.”

I raised my right palm to my chin and worked it and my fingers around in a thoughtful gesture, then said to Suze, “I’m not sure what he wants but I’ll talk to him. If you don’t mind, Suze, next time he comes in find out when I can get together with him here for a beer.”

“I can cut to the chase. I have his number on the house list. We keep it in case we need to contact a regular, usually about walking out on a check because they have had too many and forgot to pay. Innocent mistakes fueled by alcohol and familiarity.” She paused to pour me a little more from the dregs of the bottle and continued, “If you want I’ll call him and see when he can come by.”

“We start early out there,” I threw a thumb back toward the ranch, “but finish late afternoon. Five-thirty or six would work.”

“Got it,” Suze replied. “Got a cell?”

“Not that prosperous, just wine at this point but I’ll be by in the evenings. Set it up a few days out if he is available and let me know when I come in tomorrow or the next day.”

Suze smiled her award-winning smile and nodded.

I left her a ten dollar tip for a six dollar glass of wine. Take care of the people who take care of you. It works.

Chapter 12/

A few nights later I was in the guardhouse having a cup of coffee with Adam Thrift. One of the other security personnel, a migrant, had a family issue that needed to be attended to and Adam took his shift working a double. Adam had mentioned it to me during the day when I stopped in to say hello so I decided to stop by that night, provide some company and keep my ears open.

Adam was a good kid, I had decided. Married and living in Santa Paula with a wife and kid, a true “company man” who needed a job and would do what was required to keep it. Mid-twenties, good looking, blonde, fair, tall and athletic. Hitler would have loved him. On looks alone and dedication to task Adam would have fit into the Aryan profile that the Nazis cultivated.

Over the weeks I became convinced that he really cared for his charges, but as I came to find out that night, Adam worked almost exclusively during the day as did I. I would learn that night that what happened in the compound after dark was a completely different thing.

Adam wasn’t surprised when Captain Tudor walked in front of the window and to the gate. Tudor turned toward the guardhouse window and waved. Adam raised his right hand in recognition, then lowered it and pushed the button that activated the mechanism that opened the gate.

It opened and Tudor walked through.

I kept sipping my coffee. Adam didn’t say anything, just kept looking through the window.

A few minutes later Captain Tudor walked up to the gate, still open, and ushered a woman through.

It was Luce, the attractive Latina who maintained my cottage and worked in the groves. Tudor waved toward the window after he walked through behind her; Adam waved in return, pushed the button and the gate closed behind them.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“Oh, no big deal, she goes up to the big house three or four nights a week. Mr. Haines’s squeeze. Tudor or Cruz will check her back in around 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning, depending. Then again sometimes she’s up there all of the following day and night.”

“Nice to know if my bed isn’t made or my cottage isn’t tidied up some day.”

“There’s someone to cover for her so you won’t have a problem. If she doesn’t come back someone subs for her.”

“She seem all right with it?” I asked.

“None of my business. He’s the boss. Never noticed anything wrong with her. Don’t have a reason to think there would be one. No law against it. He’s a man. She’s pretty hot if you like Latinas. Works for both of them, I guess.”

“You guess?” I said.

“Again, none of my business. She’s legal age, wise by a long shot, so again none of my business what they’re doing up there,” Adam gestured up toward the big house.

I nodded and raised my mug and took another drink of coffee. “None of our business,” I agreed.

Adam Thrift nodded in response.

Plenty of my business, I thought.

* * *

Tudor and Cruz had given me wide breadth for several weeks. I had to wonder why. I knew and made sure that they hated and resented me, I cultivated that. It was like lighting a fuse behind a pack of dynamite.

I had figured that the fuse would be short because they were so volatile, but it wasn’t proving out to be so. I had been at the ranch for almost a month and nothing had happened beyond the altercation at the Lazy Daze the night before I came on the job.

I watched my back, knew it would come eventually but realized that this was a long fuse so I just had to wait.

Patience, patience was always the key.

* * *

“You greaser bastard!” I heard Tudor yell.

The harvest was almost over and I was several rows of citrus over from what I had heard.

“*No mas, no mas!*” I heard one of my workers yell.

I ran in the direction of the commotion and found Julio, a crew leader, pinned against the trunk of a tree and Tudor with a billy club raised to deliver another blow.

Julio was already sporting a bruise on his forehead that was angry red, turning black and blue.

I pulled out my keys on the long chain and ran toward the pair. Tudor's back was toward me and the noise of ranch harvesting equipment muffled my approach.

Tudor had the club poised ready to deliver another blow when I let loose with the chain and keys.

An ingenious device, a self-defense weapon that anyone can fashion. You hold the keys in your left hand and the other end of the chain with the ring on it to keep your hand from slipping off, like the hilt of a sword, and the chain dangling between your hands. Then you look at the point that you want to hit, in this case the back of Tooty's head, and snap your right arm. The keys fly forward probably at a speed approaching a hundred miles an hour depending on how strong you are and crack into the target. The bundle of keys are a very unforgiving implement. The least damage would be tearing the flesh; the worst if full impact of the skull was involved would be a concussion. I was hoping for something in between so I held back a little when I snapped and knew that the felt hat would mitigate the impact. What I was hoping for in the least was a sore scalp, a headache and a tender spot that would be a reminder for almost a week.

And to get his attention which it definitely did.

I heard the snap and the keys crash against Tooty's hat, the expensive Stetson, and it was like stop motion. He literally stopped his arm with the club in mid-air and seemed to freeze there for several seconds which seemed more like minutes.

Julio saw his opportunity and bolted seeking refuge somewhere in the groves.

Tooty shook his head from side to side and up and down as if trying to gather his wits and maybe reorganize his brains.

I had dropped the keys and already had the fishing knife out of my boot and in my right hand, poised in case he decided to get serious.

He shook his head for a few more seconds, and then slowly turned to see where the assault had come from. He still had the billy in his right hand and when he saw me uttered "Arggh," like a pirate, his eyes on fire, and raised the baton and started to advance.

"Tooty, take that step and it will be your last one. I guarantee it."

Captain Tudor froze for the second time in mid-air, then looked down at the filleting knife and finally lowered the billy.

“Now get the fuck out of my grove and leave my workers alone.”

He didn't say anything. He was as good at that as was Cruz.

I stepped back about three feet to give him room.

He straightened his hat that had been knocked askew by the key snap, collected himself a bit, taking his time just for show like nothing had happened, tucked in his shirt and began to walk away.

I turned to watch him as he left.

He had gone maybe fifteen feet when he turned and gave me the finger. “You'll get yours, Hite. Just a matter of time.”

I shook my head at him and laughed. It wasn't for show, I really enjoyed the moment.

He turned and kept on walking.

I put the knife back in its hard plastic sheath and tucked it under my belt for the rest of the day and the next instead of carrying it in my boot, and the next.

Just a matter of time.

None of my workers questioned the visual presence of the knife. They knew.

Chapter 13/

“So Luce hangs out several times a week with the boss at the big house,” I said to Adam Thrift, raising my eyebrows and kind of chuckling after I said it. Small talk, employee gossip. I was taking a break the following morning and sipping my mug of hot brew in the guardhouse. Now a usual morning stop.

“Oh yeah, she’s the flavor of the month or rather the season.”

“Been others?”

“Sure, they come and go.”

“Really.” I took another sip. The coffee was still pretty hot but good. Adam brewed a good pot. Said he had his own blend and brought it from home. Guard shack work can be pretty tedious and boring so the caffeine shots definitely help, and if you rely on them they might as well be top notch.

“The last one, Teresa, she must have gone back to Mexico or something.”

“How so?”

“Oh, it was the same routine. She was young, way younger than Luce, legal I assume but young. Cruz or Tudor would escort her up to the house every few days like Luce. She had her family here, the Esperanzas, Marta and Julio. Julio is one of your crew leaders.”

“Yes,” I acknowledged and took another sip of coffee. It was starting to cool.

“Well, she saw the boss for some months and then I didn’t see the captain or Cruz come for her anymore. Wasn’t long before Luce started being escorted up there.”

“Ever ask her folks where she went?”

Adam’s usually amicable demeanor changed for the first time since I had met him and he cautioned me as he did on that first day. “I don’t ask any questions and I would suggest that you keep your concerns and speculation to yourself as well,” he advised with a tone of gravity.

“Thanks for the advice. I’ll keep it in mind.”

The coffee had cooled enough by now. I took a long drink and drained the mug, wiped it out with a napkin and put it back by the coffee machine until the next visit.

“Thanks, Adam, great coffee and plenty of food for thought.”

Adam nodded and flicked his right index finger toward me in a “gotcha” gesture with a smile.

* * *

“How you doing out at the ranch?”

Randi patted me on the back while I was bent over two tacos and enjoying a Pinot Grigio and a glass of water.

I turned, my mouth full, nodded and smiled.

“Sorry,” she said, “didn’t mean to catch you with a mouthful, but I’m glad it’s full of my stuff.”

I swallowed and said, “No problem, the tacos are great, and the job is good too.”

“You getting along with Vydor’s goons?”

“Oh, as best I can. Vydor seems all right though. So far he’s been fair with me, gave me a full-time gig, the wages I asked for and a bonus for exceeding production quota. He lets me run my own show.”

Randi took the stool next to me, settled in and turned toward me. “Never met the guy really even though I lease this place from him,” Randi waved her right arm around to the array of the Revenge’s interior.

“I got the impression that he had a pretty heavy hand from what you told me when I first started coming here.”

“Oh,” Randi replied, waving a wisp of her blonde hair with her hand from her forehead, “it really isn’t him directly. Tudor and his guy Cruz act like they own this joint and I don’t mess with them. Figure comping a few beers and tacos every few days is a small price to pay for being left alone.”

“They tip?” I asked.

“Hell no, you’ve got to be kidding.”

“Cardinal sin,” I replied.

Randi nodded and rolled her eyes. She’s very attractive in a tough sort of way. The way you have to be to be an independent woman and run a place like this.

“Ever met a guy named Frank Mayfield?” I asked. “I’m supposed to meet him here tomorrow afternoon after work.”

“Oh, Frank. Haven’t seen him for a while. He used to come in with Jim Becker. He used to have your job, Jim, that is.”

“Pretty straight shooter?” I asked.

“Guess so, just knew they were drinking buddies. Hung out, shot pool, that kind of stuff.”

“And his buddy Jim?” I queried.

“Oh, he probably moved on. Probably like you will someday. He was pretty much a regular, driving that VyHa truck that you drive now, coming down a few times a week, then one day gone. About two months ago. Just left. Probably a better deal somewhere or makes and warrants were catching up with him, who knows?”

“Guess you got us all figured out,Randi,” I said after I wiped my face with a napkin and tossed it down on my empty plate.

“Not rocket science, you guys are all cut from the same cloth.”

“So we are,” I agreed, “so we are.”

* * *

The Esperanzas, I wanted to talk with Julio and find out why Tudor had assaulted him the day before and where his daughter had gone.

It wasn’t easy even though these workers were my charges during the day and we shared *cervezas* after labor. There still was a gulf between us. It was a matter of trust, after all I was an Anglo who worked for the boss and his people. I knew that they worked hard for me and I tried to be more than fair with them, but that’s where the communication ended. The barrier between me and genuinely knowing them and their lives and concerns was as solid as was the barrier between them and the compound that they lived in, that gate controlled from the guardhouse.I would have to work on that if I were to find out what was really going on here.

It all seemed to revolve around two people, Tudor and Cruz. They seemed to control everything here while Vydor Haines maintained himself in his manse and convinced himself that he was the benevolent benefactor.

Chapter 14/

“Mr. Skip,” he almost whispered it.

The welt was still evident on his forehead and had turned blue, maroon and yellow around the edges.

“Yes, Julio,” I said looking down at the quiet little brown sun-dried man with his hat in his hand.

“Thank you.” He lowered his eyes, his hat in his hand in front of him, and kind of bowed.

“Thank you, Julio. If you or your wife Marta need anything please tell me. You’re a good worker and I will always protect you.”

Julio, his head still bowed, nodded.

“This is my crew, my responsibility and no one will mess with any of you.”

Julio nodded again, then raised his head and fixed his brown eyes on me and said softly, “Mr. Jim, he said the same thing. Then one day he disappeared.”

* * *

After work the next day I drove back to Randi’s to meet Frank Mayfield, Jim Becker’s friend.

Suze was working the bar and set me up.

About ten minutes later the door opened and a fellow walked in and looked around. Suze caught his eye and gestured toward me with a nod of her beautiful head and flaxen hair.

The guy was Frank Mayfield. I turned toward him and opened my hand in the direction of the bar stool next to me inviting him to take a seat. He joined me, and I told him to order a beer.

Two hours later I drove back down the road to the farm under the wrought iron entrance and parked next to my bungalow.

I kicked off my boots, laid down on the bed, stretched out and tried to put it all together.

* * *

Three days later I went to one of the out buildings where we stored bags of fertilizer. They always have a pungent odor, ammonium nitrate. Really gets up your nose. I was told that the building was used for storage and nobody went into it very often. It was my first visit since beginning work at VyHa.

The building was solid block with no windows and a wide steel door. The roof was also metal and the open rafter system was structural steel as well. It was almost a bunker the way it was built but then again ammonium nitrate is extremely dangerous and flammable. It can be a component in constructing very potent explosive devices. An example was the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that Timothy McVeigh blew up in 1995. A rental truck full of ammonium nitrate brought down that high rise and 168 men, women and children died.

The building was within thirty feet or so from the outer perimeter fencing of the compound and the migrant housing within about sixty feet or so.

I was looking for a particular implement that might have been stored there that wasn't in any of the other buildings. I didn't find the implement.

What I found was the ammonium nitrate odor and another that I recognized. It was masked by the searing ammonium nitrate smell but I knew it: it was the odor of decay.

I went to another shed that we used to store tools and got a shovel. After moving about twenty bags of fertilizer from the stack of at least fifty bags and following my nose to the dirt floor beneath them and digging a few feet I found something.

A body, most probably the body of the previous foreman, Jim Becker. It was most probable because what was left of him appeared to be Anglo and another factor made it conclusive. No one who has never experienced the odor and putridness of a decaying corpse can imagine what it is like, but I knelt down and inspected the body, dressed in a plaid wool work shirt and work jeans. He had boots on, good quality work boots.

Every fly within a mile seemed to immediately converge on the scene, covering the decaying flesh. I swatted them away as I continued to inspect the body and rolled it to its side in the shallow grave.

The motive for his murder was obviously not robbery, no, because there was a bulge in the right rear pocket of his jeans—a wallet with a hundred dollar bill inside and several twenties, tens and ones. And there was something else: a driver's license in the name of James K. Becker.

There was no question anymore as to where Jim Becker had gone.

I covered the partially decomposed corpse back up, tamped down the disrupted soil and stacked the bags of fertilizer back to where they had been. The flies, no doubt irritated that their feast had been reburied, dissipated and finally the incessant buzzing ceased.

I had noted that he appeared to have a broken jaw and a hole in his left temple and the right side of his skull was missing in large part. That pretty much told the story of Jim Becker's final moments on this ethereal plane.

I was sure that a similar fate was awaiting me if Jim Becker's killers had their way. As Tooty had said, "It's just a matter of time."

What they didn't know was that they were dealing with a full-time pro. They were only part-time thugs and killers.

It would be no contest.

I hoped that my confidence wasn't simply bravado.

* * *

"Suze told me that you were a good guy and I figured you should know, watch your back out there." I remembered what Frank Mayfield had told me at Randi's a few days before.

"How so?" I had asked Frank.

"Oh, Jim, he loved to read. The old pulp fiction paperbacks. You know, Sam Spade, *The Thin Man*, stuff like that. He picked up the old paperbacks wherever he could find them along the way, yard sales, libraries that sold donated paperbacks and such."

"Yeah," I said.

"Well," Frank continued after taking a swig of his beer and returning the bottle to the surface of the bar, "he said things out there were hinky."

"Hinky?"

"Hinky," Frank repeated. "The old detectives used the word. It meant something that didn't quite make sense. When they got a hinky feeling it usually meant that things weren't adding up."

"So," I asked, "what does that have to do with me?"

“Like I said, Suze thinks you are a good guy and I wanted to give you a head’s up. Jim was my best friend, we traveled together and worked together and drank together for the better part of seven or eight years and then out of the blue he just disappeared.”

“Any idea what happened to him?”

“Not a clue.”

I asked, “Any reason that you can figure? Personal issues, a reason to run, anything that made him take off without a word?”

“None that I can figure. Like I said, we’ve been together,” he paused, looked at me and continued, “not like that if that’s what you are thinking, just buddies, best friends for years, not the other thing.”

“Got it, but nothing wrong with that either.”

“Anyway,” Mayfield tossed a hand in the air and nodded his head in my direction in a “whatever” gesture and continued, “the last time I met him here for a beer he said that two of his workers and a girl had come up missing. And he said some of the workers had told him that they weren’t the first. Over the years a lot have disappeared, including several young men and teenage boys.”

“Maybe they just left.”

“No way,” Frank Mayfield said emphatically.

“How so?”

“Nobody leaves out there. The place is a prison. Run by sadists, maybe worse.”

Chapter 15/

Luce knocked on the door to my bungalow.

It was Sunday. The day off and the local parish priest had come out a few hours earlier after a regular mass at his church in town and set up a makeshift altar in the compound as he did every Sunday and conducted a service in Spanish.

“Luce,” I said, “*comoesta?*” I was somewhat surprised but pleasantly so. Every red-blooded male loves to open his door and see a beautiful woman waiting outside.

“*Muy bien, Señor Skip, muy bien.*”

I wasn’t quite sure why she was there. Sunday was the one day of rest for the workers and the only day that Luce didn’t come to tidy up my quarters. I opened my palms in front of me in an opening gesture as if to say, *How can I help you?* and waited.

She just looked at me for a few seconds, then said, “We can talk, no?”

“We can talk, yes,” I answered and gestured her in.

She came in tentatively. The same young woman who had come in every day except Sunday to clean the bungalow and make my bed since I had begun work here. She certainly knew the place and I’m sure was comfortable here when I wasn’t present, but now I was here, this was my territory and everything was different from her perspective.

I tried to make it easy. “How can I help you?” I asked.

She shifted nervously, her feet moving from toe to heel, left to right.

I walked into the little kitchenette and to one of the chairs at the small dining table, pulled it out and turned it around and gestured to her to take a seat.

I couldn’t help but notice once more that she was absolutely beautiful in a very vulnerable way.

Her eyes had not made contact with mine since I had opened my door though.

She didn’t do anything for a few moments, her eyes and head lowered and her hands clasped in front of the full skirt she was wearing. Finally she nodded and moved toward the chair, took a seat and settled. I pulled out the chair on the opposite side of the table and took a seat.

Her eyes still were somewhat down and her hands still clasped as if in prayer before her forearms resting the table’s surface.

“Agua?” I offered.

“No, gracias,” she raised her right hand a bit and waved the invitation off.

“Habla English?” I asked.

“Poquito, señor, poquito.”

Again I asked, “How can I help you?”

Then after a few moments her eyes rose, beautiful brown eyes, and she opened up tentatively at first, then it came gushing out. Her English, once she started talking and lost her self-consciousness, was actually very good. She told me that she had come because the workers and particularly the Esperanzas felt that I was a good man, like Mr. Jim had been a good man before he went away. She said Mr. Jim had stood up to the guards. Julio had told everyone that I had saved his life.

I asked her why Captain Tudor was beating Julio.

Her eyes dropped again, and finally she told me that he had been beaten because he had found out that his daughter had died in Mexico and wanted to know why.

I said that losing a daughter was terrible but why would Captain Tudor beat Julio because his daughter died in Mexico?

Luce said because she used to work here, then one day she was gone. She was only eighteen and beautiful. When the Esperanzas asked what had happened to her they were told by Captain Tudor and later by Sergeant Cruz that the ranch had people that they did business with in Los Angeles and San Diego, rich people and that one had called and wanted a house woman and would pay big dollars for the right girl and wanted her to start the next day.

“She never told her folks that she was leaving?” I asked Luce.

“No,” Luce told me and she also said that she hadn’t been the first one to leave like that either.

“And she ended up dying in Mexico?”

“Yes, at her aunt’s home. It was about two months ago but the Esperanzas didn’t find out until just a few days ago.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“She never told what happened after she left here but her aunt told the Esperanzas that she was sure that the girl was beaten and was hurt down here,” Luce pointed down toward her skirt between her thighs.

I nodded and shook my head.

“She finally bled to death,” Luce said.

Then Luce said that the aunt felt that Teresa would not say what had happened after she left VyHa because she was afraid for the safety of her family if they knew.

I got the picture and it fit with what I was told when I was sent here.

We had navigated the language gulf pretty well, but I finally had to ask, “Luce, may I ask,” I said, “was the Esperanza’s daughter also going up to the big house several times a week like you do?”

Her eyes dropped again and as she sat her feet began to fidget. Finally she raised her head, looked at me and nodded, then said, “But *Señor* Haines, he is a good man. He is good to me, to us. It is *El Capitán* and Cruz who are devils. He doesn’t know what happens here.”

“So what can I do?” I asked.

“The Esperanzas and most of the workers they want to know if you will meet.”

“Tell them I will, Luce. Tell them that I will.”

Then Luce volunteered, a bit self-consciously, her eyes dropping but with a littlesmile while thinking of what she would say, “We have a joke here.”

“Really, what is it?”

“This place is called VyHa, sounds like Spanish ‘*via*,’ ‘the way.’”

“Yes,” I said.

“We call it *VyHa Diablo*, the way to the devil.”

She nodded, got up from the chair and walked toward the door.

“Tell me when, Luce, but make sure none of the guards know.”

She nodded once more, turned and opened the door and walked out into the Sunday sun. It was a beautiful day, and I enjoyed watching her walk from my bungalow. She was indeed a natural beauty. A natural, quiet beauty.

Then I thought about what she had said about *VyHa Diablo*. Some joke. More like reality from what I had learned so far.

* * *

“Adam,” I asked, “tell me about Jim Becker, the guy that I replaced.”

“Hard worker, seemed to work well with the folks, but he had an edge.”

“An edge?”

“He never confronted me directly but he didn’t like the gate, or the idea of securing the perimeter around the compound, the curfew, the dogs, and he let us know it.”

“Us?” I asked.

“He made a big deal out of it with Captain Tudor. And,” Adam added, “he asked a lot of questions. Not a popular thing around here.”

Adam looked down at the pad on his desk surface in front of the window that looked out on the gate, tapped his pen a few times up and down on the pad, turned to me and said, “Look, I’m just a guy who works here, a guy who needs a job and I’d rather not talk about this. You know, company politics. Not my thing, nobody wins and I could lose. All I know is that he left. I figure he just wasn’t getting along and couldn’t do anything about the system here and moved on.”

I nodded, raised my coffee mug in Adam’s direction and said, “I’m sure that you’re right. He moved on.”

I didn’t bother Adam Thrift with any more questions.

* * *

It was four days later and the harvest was in its final phases when I was told that a meeting had been set up.

I had surmised that it couldn’t be in the compound since if I wanted in that would be suspect immediately. Why would I want to have access to the quarters of working personnel, they were just the people that I managed in the groves? I had cafeteria privileges but everyone knew that I never used them and cooked for myself so there was no sense drawing attention by making an exception to the rule.

The workers crafted the ruse: we met late in the afternoon, far back in the groves. Tudor, Cruz and their minions would never venture that far back, and the workers posted lookouts just in case to provide fair warning.

Thirty-four of the forty families were represented.

The leaders and I crouched low in a rough circle, the group had elected a spokesman, Julio Esperanza.

It was very straightforward.

Chapter 16/

Julio extended his right hand and I extended mine and we shook. Both rough, dry and cracked after the harvest. Our boots were planted in the fertile soil of the Santa Clara alluvial plane and the fragrant scent of citrus filled the air.

I nodded and Julio began.

“Mr. Skip, I come from my people,” he looked around at those congregated in the groves behind him, “but I come also by myself.”

“Yes, Julio,” I said in acknowledgment, maintaining eye contact with the sincere little brown man.

“For me, I thank you,” and he pointed to the still visible welt on his head.

“I would defend any of my workers,” I replied.

“Si, and that is why we want to talk with you. You helped me, I believe you are a good man, a fair man and I told them that,” Julio gestured behind him again at the group.

“What do they want?” I gestured toward those behind him, now moving closer to listen.

“We want out, *Senor* Skip.”

“Out?”

“We mean that we want to leave. We have been here for years. The food is good, our pay is fair and we have a good place to live but . . .”

“But you can’t leave,” I concluded.

“No, *Senor* Skip,” Julio replied. “Some have supposedly left to work on other farms but we never heard from them again and their families in Mexico didn’t either.”

“Who were they?”

“All young men, not married, all young men.”

“Were they the only ones?”

“No, but Luce told you,” Julio replied and lowered his eyes.

“Your daughter Teresa,” I said. “I’m very sorry.”

“Can you help us?” I saw a tear welling in Julio’s right eye as it began to glisten. “We can’t go to the police, we’re illegal.”

“Give me a week, please,” I answered.

Julio shook his head to the side from me, the tear streaming down his cheek, and grabbed my right hand with his right again, clasped it firmly and cupped his left hand over the clenched hands and shook them earnestly.

He got up and the gathering moved away down the groves back toward the work.

I hoped that I could meet their expectations and mine.

* * *

“Suze,” I asked, “if you can get away for two days with an overnight I can give you a thousand dollars.”

Suze smiled, “Sounds like something a good girl doesn’t do.”

“No,” I laughed, “this is legit and you can maintain your dignity, moral code or whatever. I can’t give you the details yet. It’s something I am putting together to help out the workers at VyHa and I’ll need help.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re concerned about my morality,” she smiled that smile again. “I might be interested but would have to get off depending on what day you’re planning to do this.”

“That’s part of the deal,” I told her, “I want to offer Randi the same proposition and I’ll take care of hotel and meal expenses. Like I said, it’s a two-day project and it will include an overnight stay in San Diego.”

“We get to go out and party?” Suze asked, a little mischief in her eyes.

“That’s up to you guys. I don’t think I’ll be along for the ride, but the entertainment is on your dime.”

“Well, as long as we’re there we might as well have some fun.”

“Whatever you want to do after you get my job done. You should be finished by the evening of the first night, then come back up here after an overnight on the second day. Just one question, think the two of you can handle driving a bus, each of you driving a bus that is?”

“Santa Paula Elementary School District relief driver here,” Suze responded pointing a finger toward her chest in a mock authoritative gesture. “If Randi is on, I figure I can give her the basics before we do it if she’s never driven one before, mostly negotiating the length and anticipating the turning radius. But I’ll have her follow me. Should work. The buses are automatics, power steering?”

“Sure enough, actually pretty state of the art.”

“That definitely makes it a lot easier. Thought they might be those ancient things most of the farms use; then it would be a much steeper learning curve.”

“No, not these.”

Suze nodded and said, “This seems pretty out of the picture for a foreman on a citrus ranch. Don’t take it wrong but you’re throwing some pretty serious money around.”

“All I can assure you about, Suze, is that this is for real. I’m working out the details but I’m not a bullshitter.”

“You look solid, but then again . . .” she looked around the bar and gestured at the array.

I acknowledged her with a smile and a smirk and a “so what’s new?” look.

“See my point?” Suze said. “Everyone has a story and a proposition.”

“Got it. All that I can tell you is that this is for real if everything comes together. And one more thing,” I added.

“What’s that?” Suze asked.

“Not a word to anyone, even Randi. I’ll ask her on my own. Anybody finds out about this, if word gets back to me because anyone talked, the deal’s off.”

“Serious?” Suze asked. “And a thousand bucks?”

“A thousand bucks.”

“Must be a big deal.”

“Yes, Suze, it’s a big deal, a surprise,” I said. “I don’t want to ruin it.” Then I added, “It’s really a matter of personal safety for my workers; there’s a hazard at the ranch that needs to be addressed and I’ve taken the initiative.”

Suze nodded.

* * *

The harvest was finished. It came in early and it was just a week before Christmas when Vydor Haines summoned me to the big house once more. I had been working there for well over a month.

We sat on the roof with the view as we had before. A couple of wine glasses sat before us on the table's glass surface.

Vydor Haines began after the normal amenities and the libation was served, "Skip, I am very pleased. Thank you."

"Thank you, Mr. Haines," I replied.

He raised his glass and toasted it toward me, "No, the crop is in, we had very good production in a short time so that means little or no culling of overripe fruit. No, Skip, thank you and, remember, I am Vy, not Mr. Haines."

I looked down a bit sheepishly, then raised my eyes and said, "All right, but it's hard to do. You're the boss but I'll try, Vy."

He smiled and nodded. "Now that the harvest is over I have some assignments for you, that is, if you want to stay on."

"What do you have in mind?"

"The workers earned some benefits. I want you to consider how we can improve their quarters."

"They seem adequate," I replied.

"Oh they are good but I'm sure we can do some improvements. I'm willing to spend some money. You take a good look at what's there and what might make their daily lives a little easier. Last year we built the playground, and the cafeteria the year before, but there must be more."

"All right, I'll make a study and get back to you."

"And," he added, "consider assignments for the workers, that is, what we need to do between the harvests in the groves and fields and the planting and maintenance of the fields. Here, take these."

On the table before him he had about a half dozen pages that looked like they had been printed and stapled together. He gathered the papers and handed them to me.

“This is a list of maintenance and improvement tasks that we need to complete. Get your crew on it,” Vy Haines said.

“Fine, I’ll review the list tonight and develop a strategy to get everything done.”

“I know you will. You have about six weeks to complete the tasks that have been outlined.”

“No problem.”

“And one more thing,” Haines said.

“Yes.”

“I’m increasing your pay another two hundred a week beginning at the first of this coming month.”

I was actually set back, somewhat stunned and said, “I’m not sure what I can say but thank you, Vy.”

“That’s plenty, just keep up the good work,” he said and raised his glass of wine and smiled.

I did the same.

I walked out of the big house a half an hour later asking myself, *Who was this guy anyway?*

Part III/The End, or So It Would Seem/

Chapter 17/

It's harder than hell to find a pay phone these days. They are about as rare as dinosaur bones. I had supposed that a cell phone could probably fit my cover since everyone, even the most menial laborers, seem to have them, but they leave a trail and if lost or taken your call history can be recovered. So I chose to go old tech.

After I made my thousand dollar proposition to Randi—I think she figured that I was nuts but since I was a regular humored me along—I asked if I could use her phone to make a few calls.

After a basically, as far as she knew, possibly close to itinerant farm worker had offered her a thousand dollars for a two-day gig plus room and meals, asking to use the phone really diminished my credibility, so I laid down a fifty dollar bill and told her to give me change back after the phone bill came in since the calls were long distance and told her to keep twenty for the trouble. I was calling blind numbers, numbers by record associated with businesses that were pretty innocuous but the calls were actually destined to organizations that The Outfit used for support on projects and to The Outfit as well.

She snapped the fifty up and motioned me behind the bar.

I said, "You got an office? It's business and personal."

She pointed to a door aside of the entrance.

She came around the bar and I met her at the door. It was a small office with a chair and desk facing a wall with a phone and a file cabinet.

Randi motioned for me to take a seat at the desk. I did and she closed the door.

I started calling some numbers and asking a few favors.

* * *

"You want to get about a hundred and twenty illegal aliens back over the border without question? You must be nuts."

"I thought I'd be doing the INS a favor, and the Tea Party," I responded.

"Always a smartass," he said. "I've got to say that it's a novel request."

“Seriously,” I said into the receiver of Randi’s office phone, “it has to come off without a hitch. Their welfare is at stake.”

“I won’t ask why but I need details.”

“I’ll give you a window of time of arrival. They’ll be in three buses and one ten-passenger van crossing at Tijuana. I’ll provide the license plate numbers of the buses and the van and any DOT information printed on them; they’re agricultural commercial vehicles. There will be three Anglo escorts who will be driving the buses and I’ll be driving the van using an alias, Skip Hite. We’ll drive across, unload our passengers and be coming back with empty vehicles.”

“Not a major project but it will take some work.”

“You know me, I’ll make it up to you.”

“An Outfit deal?”

“Can’t say,” I said.

“Nobody ever can. I don’t even know why I ask,” he said.

“Thanks, I’ll get back to you with the final details,” I said and hung up the phone.

Then I made a couple of other calls; one was to arrange the money to fund this. Not a big obstacle, just twenty thousand but when you’re basically living week to week as a foreman in Santa Paula, twenty thousand in cash is a hurdle.

Besides needing the money The Outfit probably wanted to know what was going on. I couched my report a bit because I was considering lying somewhere down the road and wanted to cover my ass with a preemptive credibility strike.

* * *

The shotgun blast rang out and in a few seconds I heard the pellets raining over our heads. The next thing I heard was Julio shouting, “Leave him alone or I’ll kill you both!”

I was on the ground, pretty sure that I had a broken rib or a damned bruised one, maybe two, with Tudor and Cruz looming over me.

I looked toward the sound of the shotgun’s report and Julio’s authoritative command and saw the little brown man with a double-barrel twelve gauge shotgun. It looked pretty worn. Stock beat up, but it did the job; a wisp of smoke was wafting from the left barrel.

“Julio, stay out of this. You already got enough trouble,” Tooty said, his billy still poised over me ready to deliver another blow.

“No,” Julio replied as he lowered the barrel to aim dead on to the pair over me, “I think *you* got the trouble—I got the gun.”

“Julio, you and this asshole will pay for this.”

“Maybe, but not today,” Julio said. “You walk away now or I’ll fucking blow you both away.”

“You have only one barrel left,” Tudor said.

“Maybe you, maybe him, but from back here this old thing can get both of you. If I don’t kill you, I can really fuck you both up.”

Tooty pulled down his billy club and said to Cruz, “Sergeant, I think he means it. We can settle this later. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Tudor gave Cruz a look of resignation as he made the statement, then turned to Julio and said defiantly, “Hey, you little bastard, remember I can hurt you and you have a wife too and that one kid that’s left, Enrique, or you call him ‘Hito,’ right?”

Julio replied, the shotgun still poised, “You already killed my daughter so you can’t hurt me much more.” Then Julio added, “Give him his knife back.”

It’s funny what goes through your mind under certain situations. There I was lying on the ground beaten up and I heard what Tudor and Julio had said. I knew Enrique, Julio’s boy, a good looking kid in his late teens and they called him “Hito” or in English “milestone” or “landmark.” I got the nickname, these were old cultures and he was the male son, the one who would carry on the bloodline; of him they were very proud.

Cruz scoffed but threw my knife on the ground.

“Now leave or I’ll give you the second barrel,” Julio threatened, “and I mean it.”

Tudor kind of sunk his shoulders, falling a bit and shook his head. He stepped back from his position over me, put his billy back into its holster on his belt, nodded his head in a motion toward Cruz that meant follow me, and they walked away leaving me in the dirt in front of the utility barn door.

I was hurting, still in a fetal position on the ground as I was trying to protect myself from the blows only moments before, but Julio had saved me.

About half an hour later I was back in my bungalow, and Marta, Julio's wife, was tending to me. He had ventured back into the compound and found her, then brought her to my bungalow.

I asked Julio, "Where did you get that thing?" pointing to the old Western Field twelve gauge double barrel that he had positioned butt down on the floor of my quarters next to him as he sat in my desk chair that was turned toward the bed. It was ancient, two triggers and all.

"Yard sale Santa Paula, thirty bucks, *Señor* Skip."

He twisted the barrels, the gun pivoted on its butt, showing me one side, then another. You could tell he had a lot of pride in his weapon.

"You left the compound to buy that?" I asked.

"Oh, Mr. Becker, he would let us leave as long as we promised to come back."

"And so you went into town and bought a shotgun?"

"*Si*, and it came with a box of shells. It breaks apart into two parts so I brought it back in a large gym bag that I bought at the same house for two dollars more."

I nodded and winced as Marta wrapped my torso around my ribs.

Julio continued, "*Si*, Mr. Becker even drove me in. We rode in the truck you drive now."

"Sounds like he was a pretty good guy," I replied as Marta continued to wrap.

"*Si*," Julio said, "a lot like you."

I hoped I didn't end up like him.

Chapter 18/

Captain Tudor and Cruz had ambushed me pure and simple. As vigilant as I had tried to be or anyone might be over time, you get lax, it's human nature.

They caught me as I was closing the door to the utility shed after retrieving some tools that I needed and had my back turned.

I was sliding the bolt closed on the door and ready to place the padlock and snap it closed when I felt Tudor's beefy hand on my shoulder and a moment later I was spun around to face him and Cruz.

"All right, hot shot, the picking is finished and so are you. Right now."

"You've been waiting for this," I said as he raised his club and Cruz pulled the knife from my belt before I could reach for it.

"Priorities. You're a good producer so we figured we'd wait until you finished. For the good of the business, you know."

"So, let me think what your plans are," I said.

"That isn't rocket science, Einstein."

"I'll bet I know the final scene that you have in mind."

"What's that?" Tudor said brandishing the club toward me.

"I'll be buried next to Jim Becker in that storage building over there," I threw my head in the direction of the cement block bunker, "under more than fifty bags of fertilizer."

Captain Tudor barely blinked but said, "I told you when I first met you that you were nosey."

"That really bugs you, doesn't it, asshole, 'cause you're such a fuckin' idiot."

That's when he started going to work on me. In that flash of recognition I understood how Becker had gotten the broken jaw. Tudor started on my ribs as I twisted and turned and blocked with my arms but he was fast and strong.

It seemed like hours but was probably only a minute or two before I heard Julio's shotgun report and the whole ordeal came to an end.

I did a physical inventory; other than bruises and maybe a cracked rib or two I was all right.

If Julio hadn't showed up it would have gotten progressively worse and I was sure ultimately terminal. They hated me and would have killed me but they wanted to do it systematically and as painfully as possible. Then if I was lucky a coup de gras, like Jim Becker had gotten, a shot to the head or maybe they would have beat me into semi-consciousness and buried me alive. Neither prospect was beyond comprehension.

Now I sat on the edge of my bed and Marta had finished wrapping me and brought me three aspirin and a half-full bottle from their quarters. It was all that she could offer for the pain but I dutifully took the three down with a glass of water from the tap. She placed the rest of the bottle on my night stand and said, "Three more in four hours."

"*Si, Marta. Muchisimo gracias,*" I replied, and patted the bed indicating that she should sit down.

She sat and got a grave expression on her face. I knew that she was trying to express something, perhaps something that was hard to say, something that crossed a psychological chasm. Finally she said, "*Señor Skip*, I know you will kill them. I know you can kill for good. They are evil and you are good. I believe that you are an avenging angel."

"Marta, I've never been called an angel."

"I could see it in you from the time you came. I prayed for you to come every Sunday when the priest would come to give us the Mass."

"Maybe your prayers were answered," I said, "but we'll see soon."

"*Si, Señor Skip*, my prayers were answered. I only ask one thing, please, not from God because he has granted my request but from you."

"What's that Marta?"

"I want to help. It's for my Teresa."

I thought a moment and nodded.

Julio nodded too and said, "I know this woman, she means it, *Señor Skip*."

She was in. There was no way that I could deny her.

"If you are ok for now, *Señor Skip*, we will be going," Julio said.

“Julio,” I leaned forward a bit and winced, “you can’t go anywhere. You have to stay here with me tonight. Tomorrow you’ll be going somewhere. I’ll drive you to Oxnard and you’ll be on the first bus out.”

Julio just looked at me and slowly shook his head.

Marta interjected, “Julio, now Julio, listen, he is right.” She shook her finger at him. “You can’t stay here. They will get you now that you saved him.” She pointed at me.

“She’s right,” I said, “and this time it won’t be just a beating. Far worse.”

“You can take the bus tomorrow south to my sister’s in El Monte,” Marta said. She got up and walked to the desk, took a sheet of paper off a yellow legal tablet and a pen. She wrote on the paper, then handed it to Julio.”

“Here is Bella’s address. You remember where her and Jimmie live. We were there two summers ago before we came here. When things are over here we can get back together; she has a telephone, I’ll call when I can.”

I reinforced her case, “Julio, in a week I’ll have everyone out of here. It has to be that way but it is extremely dangerous for you to stay. It’s not only dangerous for you but for everyone. If they believe you’re gone things will settle down in a day or two and we can go about taking care of business, *comprende?*”

Julio looked me in the eye and slowly nodded.

I turned my head toward Marta, “Go back to your quarters. My bet is that the captain and Cruz will come to find Julio there,” I nodded toward Julio, then turned back to Marta. “When they do tell them that he left through the groves running after coming back to your quarters and grabbing some clothes and a gym bag and you have no idea where he is. Can you do that, Marta?”

“Si,” she replied. I had no doubt.

“They’ll also be looking for the shotgun. Just tell them that Julio took it with him.”

“I’ll tell them that he is a loco bastard, running off and leaving me behind.”

Both Julio and I smiled.

Then Julio pointed his right index finger toward himself and said, “Marta, *mi hermosa*, she always calls me a loco bastard, *Señor Skip*.”

“Julio, you are pretty crazy with a shotgun,” I said.

“Si, si,” Julio replied and smiled.

As did Marta. Then things got serious, quiet and serious.

Marta leaned toward me and patted my hand, turned and kissed Julio on the cheek. “Be good for *Señor Skip*, Julio,” she admonished and left the bungalow.

I got up a bit tentatively and stepped over to where Julio was seated on my desk chair that had been turned toward the interior of the room and my bed.

“The shotgun, Julio, we have to hide it.”

“*Señor Skip*, I have these as well,” he raised himself on his hip, dug into his pants pocket and pulled out four shotgun shells and handed them to me.

I took the shells. He leaned the barrel of the shotgun in my direction and I took it in hand.

The bungalow had a small natural stone-faced fireplace in the living room. I knew that if the shotgun couldn’t be found in Julio and Marta’s quarters, mine would be suspect; so rather than under the bed or the couch or in a closet, the obvious places, I put it pretty much in plain sight but in shadow. I stood it up in the fireplace with it leaned forward against the room-facing façade and placed the shells next to the butt of the gun. Not foolproof but unless Tudor and Cruz were really resourceful it wouldn’t be considered.

The old gun was very dark and as I stood back and looked into the fireplace I couldn’t see it sitting on its butt propped against the back side of the façade and its barrel pointed up the chimney.

After all, I figured that I wasn’t dealing with geniuses. I just hoped that I hadn’t underestimated them.

I had replaced the spent shell that Julio had fired with a fresh one. It was only prudent. I had two loaded barrels and a few extra shells and that was more armament than I had earlier that day.

Once I verified the obliqueness of the hiding place I brought the gun out to have at hand just in case.

I was somewhat sore, but intact and more completely armed. It could have been worse, much worse.

Then again, there was always tomorrow.

* * *

Unlike me, Captain Tudor and Sergeant Cruz didn't live on the ranch. Cruz had an apartment in Santa Paula and Tudor lived in Ventura. They came on day shift at 7:00 in the morning about the time the workers came out to start their day and left about 4:00 in the afternoon.

It was dusk now and I figured that they had probably left for the day. Other than a cursory look for Julio in his quarters and the gun, there would be no reason to pursue things farther today. There had been no witnesses to the altercation and the shotgun episode. They wouldn't call the police because with no evidence of the gun what would they tell them? They certainly wouldn't take a chance on me being interviewed, knowing about the body under the fertilizer pile, and if they believed that Julio had hightailed it, then what was left but another try at me and that could come another day.

It was only a matter of time and that worked both ways. I figured we were covered until the next morning at 7:00 when they came back on, and before then, before dawn I planned to have Julio in my truck and on his way to the bus station in Oxnard.

Chapter 19/

"*Señor Skip*," Julio said at about 10:00 that night. We were watching the small TV that was in the living room, the lights off. We had eaten a makeshift meal of what I had accumulated in the refrigerator and the pantry.

Julio was on one end of the couch and me on the other. The shotgun, the bat and the knife lay between us in case we needed them. We had talked out a defense strategy and who would use which weapons.

"What, Julio?" I asked.

"I can't leave without the money."

I hit mute on the remote and turned to him, "What are you talking about, what money?"

"My nine hundred and thirty-two dollars."

"I'll give you enough money to get you to El Monte and some more to tide you over."

"No, *Señor Skip*," he was shaking his stubborn brown head again, "I don't want your money, I want *my* money."

"Look, Julio, Marta can bring it when we leave."

"She doesn't know where it is, only me. I hid it well."

"Tell me and we'll find it."

"No, I worked hard and saved it dollar by dollar. It's the most money we have ever had and I can't leave it behind. When I leave I can never come back and I won't leave it here."

"Where is it?"

"In a secret place in the compound."

"So, Julio, you're telling me that you won't leave unless you can go back in there," I pointed in the direction of the compound, "and get your money before we leave in the morning."

He nodded solemnly.

“Es mi dinero,” he added emphatically, set his jaw, raised his arms and folded them in front of his chest.

“Shit!” I had to say it.

* * *

There was no getting around it, this little man who had saved my life had set his course and nothing was going to sway him. My only alternative was to keep him secreted here until we evacuated the workers and dealt with Tudor and Cruz. But that just complicated things and things were already complicated enough.

As much as I hated to I had to acquiesce. He was an adult and it was his money, but I had to get him off the property and hopefully to safety so I could complete my mission. I started thinking but everything that involved Julio remaining would involve more risk. The little guy was a stubborn son of a buck.

About 11:00 I turned to Julio who was stoically watching the set, his jaw still set. I hit the mute again.

“Julio.” He turned and faced me, jaw still sternly in place. “Look,” I said, “I think you’re taking a hell of a chance and it’s foolish but this is how we’ll do it.”

* * *

I was at the guardhouse at five in the morning when Adam Thrift came on.

He pulled up and parked in the drive next to the building and got out, a brown bag lunch in hand, and gave me a wave.

Adam came on at 5:00 and the gate was opened at 7:00 when the workers would go out during planting, harvesting and site maintenance. That was also when Tudor and Cruz came on duty. I needed to get Julio in and out before then.

“Adam, I need your help.”

He evidently noticed how I was moving, bound around the ribs and pretty sore.

“It looks like it. What happened?”

“Oh, I had a damned stupid accident. I was in the implement shed and in a hurry and didn’t turn on the overheads and stumbled over a plow shear and fell right into the plow. I think I cracked a rib. I’m bound up and I’ll be fine in a few days but it was pretty dumb.”

“So that’s not what I can help you with,” Adam said as he was putting a filter into the coffee maker, then reached for the can of coffee with his special blend on the shelf above.

“No, there was a bit of a ruckus yesterday afternoon and Julio Esperanza is in a jam with Captain Tudor. He figures he’ll get fired if he stays here and he plans to leave and move on.”

“Yeah,” Adam said after he drew some water from the tap above the small sink set into the counter and poured the carafe two-thirds full into the coffee maker, put the carafe in place and pushed the brew button, “it doesn’t pay to be on the captain’s bad side.”

“Anyway,” I said, “he’s been a good worker and I let him stay with me last night but he has to get a few things from his quarters before he leaves. His wife will be staying but he wants to get in and out before Tudor or Cruz come on. Would you let him in at 6:00? He’ll be back out in ten minutes.”

“His wife is staying?” Adam asked.

“Yeah, I figure once things settle down I can smooth things over with Tudor and he can come back.”

“Good luck at that,” Adam said.

“Well, we’ll see but is he ok to go in and out before the gate officially opens?”

The coffee maker was beginning to gurgle and pop. Adam looked up and smiled, “No problem, 6:00 in and then out in ten minutes. I’ll keep an eye out. Just have him at the gate on time.”

* * *

“All right, Julio, you be at the gate at 6:00 on the dot in about thirty minutes. It will be opened for you. You have ten minutes or less. Come back here and we’ll leave by 6:15. I’ll have you in Oxnard at the bus station by 7:00 or maybe a few minutes before.”

From my cottage to the compound gate there was that strip of the groves in between secluding the bungalow.

“You can go through the groves and not be out in the open coming or going except when you have to go to and from the gate. Got it?”

Julio said, “No problem, *Señor* Skip.”

“I’ll be waiting and we’ll leave the minute you come back. I don’t want to run into Tudor or Cruz coming to work on the company road, so don’t make love to Marta or anything like that.” I smiled.

Julio laughed, and said, “Maybe.” Then quickly added after seeing my natural reaction, “A joke, *Señor* Skip, only a joke.”

“A joke, just a joke,” I said, and added, “don’t forget it.”

I moved forward and turned him to his side and slapped him on the back. He started to do the same but his hand stopped in mid-air as I winced, my rib. It was a joke. We both laughed. It hurt a bit, the laugh, but was worth it.

I loved this hardheaded brown leathery skinned picker.

He left at 5:55.

He didn’t come back. I never saw him again. I only heard that the body of a vagrant Hispanic male with no identification who was beaten and shot in the head was found in an irrigation ditch in Saticoy that afternoon by some kids playing in the fields after school. It was on the local news at 6:00 that evening. It hardly merited a mention. He had no identification and was assumed to be illegal.

I didn’t tell Marta. I figured it was best if she thought that he was safe in El Monte.

I had put the shotgun back into the fireplace but had plans for it in the not too distant future.

* * *

“Marta,” I said, “since Julio is gone we need someone to work with to coordinate with the workers, to represent them.”

“We have already discussed this in the compound the night after Julio left and the workers elected a new representative.”

“Good, who is he?”

Marta smiled and pointed to herself.

“I couldn’t have thought of a better choice. We have a lot of work to do. It’s Monday and we’re going to do this Thursday morning early before the gates usually open. Ok with that?”

She didn't hesitate, "*Si*, the sooner the better. We are used to going. We have had to leave the ranch many times before when the immigration people came. The workers and families know how to do it quickly. They take everything and they will now but won't be coming back."

"Good," I said, "but we need to cover one final base. I know that Hector Sanchez and his son are responsible for vehicle maintenance. We have to be sure that the three buses are in good enough shape to make a two hundred and fifty mile trip and topped off with fuel."

"The fuel is no problem,*Señor* Skip, and the buses, well they are like new, very nice, clean inside like new."

"I know, we have gasoline tanks and pumps on the ranch. Just have them make sure the buses and the van are in top running shape. I know they are nice but have the men check over three buses, the best three, that's how many we'll need, because we want to be sure that there is no chance of a breakdown or delay."

"*Si*," Marta replied, "I'll talk with them when we finish talking now."

I paused for a moment collecting my thoughts, going through my mental checklist. "Oh yes," I added, "we'll need a final meeting. Wednesday afternoon in the groves where we met the first time."

"Wednesday afternoon in the same place as the first time," Marta confirmed.

Chapter 20/

Twenty thousand dollars in cash, all hundreds, had been delivered in a FedEx box to Randi's. She didn't know what it contained. I just told her that I needed a delivery address.

Randi had agreed to drive a bus as had Suze and I needed one more driver. I recruited Frank Mayfield, Jim Becker's friend.

I didn't give them any of the details, just said they would be transporting the workers back to the border since the harvest was over and that there was a safety hazard on the ranch that needed to be taken care of while they were gone.

"That's unusual," Randi said, "they are usually here year round."

"Mr. Haines asked me to renovate and improve the housing so they are getting two months' paid leave, so to speak, while we do the work. They all wanted to go back to their families south of the border so he agreed to take them down to Tijuana." Then I added, "And there is a safety concern that I feel needs to be taken care of, a fire hazard near the compound. They'll be back in two months."

"If they don't get caught," Randi commented.

"Well," I said, "they got here in the first place, I figure that they can make it back. Oh by the way, I've wanted to ask," I said in an offhand sort of way, "since I travel around a lot, if I have to move on can I leave Randi's Revenge as a forwarding address? I'll check in with you from time to time in case anything comes in and to keep up with the local scene."

"Thinking of moving on, Skip?"

"You know us," I replied. "Crop is in and you get antsy. Not sure I want to be a remodeling foreman even though I have a pretty cushy deal out there. We'll see, but I'll take care of this business first."

"No problem. You guys never like to get too comfortable in one place," Randi said. "You'll be back for the planting season."

"Why don't you give me a couple of your cards and I'll check in from time to time."

She walked to her small office off the bar area and returned with a few cards in hand and gave them to me.

I had a fifty dollar bill waiting for her.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know, that’s why I’m doing it because I don’t have to.”

“All right, Skip, but I’m covering your tab today.”

“Good,” I said, “and I’ll take an order of your famous tacos with extra cheese.”

She laughed.

* * *

“Marta, I need some men with strong stomachs.” I told her why I needed them and what they were to do.

“This must be done Wednesday evening after the captain and sergeant leave. Also, you and I will stay behind after the buses leave early Thursday to take care of business. We need three of your best men to help us, remain with us. Ones who are totally reliable and can follow through with what we plan to do.”

“There are such men. They have felt like prisoners here and thirst for revenge and will do what they must for their families and the others. One had a young son who disappeared like my Teresa did. We have never been able to do anything, we are all illegal.”

“I understand,” I replied.

It was something that had been said before; to me it was simply a fact, but to them it was a consideration they lived with every day, a threat to their security and livelihood. It dictated the way they lived every day north of the border.

“I’ll talk with them today. They will be the same men with the strong stomachs.”

“That’s what I hoped,” I said. “The first thing I want them to do is to fill up every gas can that we have on the place and put them somewhere where they won’t be noticed for the next few days and tear up towels into strips about four inches wide and a few feet long. Tell them not to hide the cans in the shed where the fertilizer is stored. That is very, very important, Marta.”

Marta nodded.

“And one more thing,” I said, “all of the families have to leave on the buses. No one can be left behind. I know that a few families were not represented at our meeting in the groves, but there are no exceptions. Once we leave there will be nothing left anyway, the ranch will be shut down.”

“How will you do that, *Señor* Skip?”

“I can’t tell you that. Finally, don’t share any of what we’ve discussed with anyone until you absolutely must. The families that did not participate in the meeting won’t be told until the morning that everyone leaves. This must be secret or the whole thing could blow up in everyone’s faces. As far as they are concerned, the ones who don’t know what we are sharing with the other families, they’re just getting on the buses because the immigration people are coming like before.”

Then the mood of the meeting changed, I could feel it.

She stood there in front of me and a solemn look came over her face and she lowered her head.

“Are you all right, Marta?”

She slowly nodded, looked up and her eyes were glistening.

“I know,” she said, slowly raising her right hand to wipe away tears that streamed down her cheek. “The dead man they say that was found in a ditch. It was Julio, wasn’t it?”

I could only say, “I think so.”

“So do I.”

I raised my hand and patted her slumped shoulder, feeling inadequate as I said, “We’re going to take care of that too. You and I.”

“First Teresa, then my husband, now just me and Hito, just me and my boy, my beautiful little boy.”

I said it again, “We’re going to take care of it.”

Somehow it felt like hollow assurance.

* * *

“Marco, would you give this note to Mr. Haines?”

“Certainly, Mr. Hite.”

Marco took the folded note from my hand in his formal but cordial manner, nodded and turned from the entry door to the big house.

“Thank you, Marco,” I said as the door closed.

It was Tuesday and I had given Marco a note requesting a meeting to discuss the renovations to the quarters and assignments for maintenance on Thursday morning early, the day of the operation.

Later that day I returned to my quarters and there was an envelope on my desk. I assumed that Luce had left it when she had cleaned.

I opened it.

Haines had suggested that I join him for breakfast on Thursday at 8:00. *Perfect*, I thought.

* * *

On Wednesday it was time to put everything together, a final check.

The day before Marta had asked me to do her a favor. No tears, no emotion, this was a tough woman. She gave me a piece of paper.

“Please, Mr. Skip,” I noticed that she didn’t call me *Señor* but bilinguals fall in and out, “call this number. It is my sister in LA and ask if she has heard from Julio. It’s the last number I have but I think it is good.”

I didn’t want to call from the ranch. I drove down to Randi’s. It was the right number. The news wasn’t good. Julio had never arrived. I hated to tell Marta but I had to.

Late in the afternoon we met with the families in the grove. She had mentally prepared herself for the news. She just nodded when I told her before the meeting.

Marta and I told everyone that we were taking them back to Mexico. To be ready to leave at 5:45 in the morning. We told them that they could bring only a minimal amount of possessions but most had little to bring, mostly clothing and portable keepsakes. The migrant life was by nature portable.

We said that after they were over the border they would be on their own but each family would have three hundred dollars in cash to help them get to their destinations.

I spent the rest of the late afternoon and evening with Marta stuffing envelopes with hundred dollar bills. There was no mention of Julio; we just sat quietly and put money in envelopes.

At 9:00 we had finished. Marta got up from the small kitchenette table where we had been working and walked to my front door. I followed her.

She turned and said, “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” I replied.

Then she left.

Chapter 21/

At 4:50 I was at the gatehouse on the parking area side. I greeted Adam Thrift when he drove in with a wave. He waved back from behind his steering wheel and put up one of those cardboard sun screens that fold to keep the interior cool and the dash from cracking.

Eventually he opened the driver's side door and got out, brown bag in hand as usual.

"How you doin', Skip? Up pretty early. Second time in about a week. Getting to be a habit."

"Well, Adam," I said, "I promise this will be the last time. It's a busy day and I'll be getting plenty of sleep from here on in."

"Hey, the picking's done, what's so pressing?"

"Just things that need to be done today and then a break."

"Got it," Adam said. It was just a social response. He was more intent on the task at hand, relieving the night gatekeeper who was also one of the migrants living at the camp.

He knocked on the door with his right hand, his brown bag dangling from his left, and in a few moments, Manuel, one of the migrants who covered for Adam on the night shift and on the weekends, opened it. It was apparent that his shift was over and he was ready to leave.

"I've signed out, boss," Manuel said to Adam.

"Gotcha covered," Adam responded and gave Manuel a high five with his right hand while he held his brown bag suspended from his left.

Manuel said, "I'm going to my quarters and cash in my chips. I left the gate open. Would you close it behind me?"

"Not a problem, just let me get to my desk and I'll close it behind you."

Adam stood back on the stoop and gave Manuel room to pass. I was still standing on the gravel behind the stoop.

Manuel walked out of the door, stepped off the stoop and turned toward the gate.

Adam turned to me before entering and said, "I could walk in unannounced," he fished in his pocket and raised his key ring for me to see, "but it's a matter of respect, you know? Knocking, you know?"

“Got it,” I answered and we both entered the gatehouse.

Adam went to the window and closed the gate and came back to where I was standing by the coffee maker and started to make the brew.

He turned his head looking over his shoulder toward me while he was putting the second scoop in and asked, “What’s so important about today?”

“Just a lot of cleanup work. It’s long overdue.”

He noticed a hand towel that was hanging from my right back pocket. “I see you came equipped,” pointed toward the towel. “Mr. Haines likes the place to be clean as a whistle. I guess that’s your off-picking-season assignment.”

“You got it right, Adam. And I’m pretty good at cleanup work,” I replied blandly.

The coffeemaker was popping and gurgling and Adam, by habit, sat down in his chair and assumed his usual position looking out at the gate.

The coffeemaker continued to pop and gurgle.

I walked up behind him and looked out the window toward the gate. “You like working here, huh, Adam?”

“It’s a job, but I could do worse.”

“A company man, loyal and all to superiors.”

“That’s the way to get ahead, or at worst stay even,” he nodded still looking forward.

I patted him on the shoulder with my left hand, then let my palm rest there. “So you told Captain Tudor or Sergeant Cruz that Julio was coming into the compound after I asked you to admit him the other day; you called them, told them when he was coming in and leaving.”

I could feel Adam’s shoulders tense and I grasped his shoulder. “You know they beat him brutally and then shot him and threw him in a ditch like a piece of shit. The same little brown man who saved my life, who worked his ass off here, who didn’t deserve what he got.”

Adam tried to rise and I pushed him down into his chair.

“Hey listen, Skip,” he said, sudden panic in his voice, “I have a wife and family and need a job and they told me to let them know . . .”

Those were the last words he spoke. I slit his throat with the razor sharp fishing knife and immediately dropped the knife after wiping it in a fast motion on Adam's right shoulder and pulled the towel from my back pocket to stop and absorb the blood that had begun spewing from the wound and held the towel to his throat.

He convulsed but I'm strong and held him down in the chair with my left hand on his shoulder and my right clasped tightly on the towel around his neck.

The coffeemaker popped and gurgled until it was through and so did Adam Thrift until he was dead.

It didn't take long.

The coffee and Adam Thrift were done at roughly the same time.

I released my grip on his shoulder. He had gone limp. I turned his swivel chair and carefully lowered him to the floor. It was brown commercial tile. He bled out a bit but the towel had absorbed most of it. There was still blood on the tile and the surface of the desk though—that had been unavoidable.

We would take care of the residue before we left.

I took his keys and opened the door to the back room and the armory. I brought the weapons that we would need out into the gate side room of the building. I laid them out on the floor after loading them and tucked one, a pistol, in my jeans at the waist.

The ones that we didn't need I took from their racks in the back room armory and deposited into the coat closet in the gate side room along with the spare ammunition. Out of sight, out of place and hidden in plain sight but taking a while to find, just in case.

It was 5:20 when I saw Marta walking toward the gatehouse with Julio's shotgun in her hands.

I had left the bungalow door unlocked and told her to get the shotgun along with the shells and meet me in the gatehouse. She was right on time.

I let her in. She saw Thrift's body, but seemed dispassionate, no emotion.

"He's the one who's responsible for Julio's murder. He didn't do it, but he was responsible," I said.

She took a few steps, her toes almost touching the corpse, leaned forward and spit on the body of Adam Thrift, then threw her head back, her jaw jutting out, her face still showing no emotion, stone-like, but I could tell that it belied what was going on inside behind that stoic face.

She stayed that way for a moment.

“We’ll have to move him before Tudor and Cruz come on shift but after the buses leave,” I told her as she stood there unmoving, the shotgun in her hands, “then we need some bleach to clean up the blood. I can do it,” I offered.

The statement brought her back into the real world, and she lowered her head, relaxed her jaw and said, “No, *Señor* Skip, I’ll do it. You take care of the big things. We’ve all had plenty of experience cleaning up after trash like him,” she looked down and spat again on Thrift, then looked up and resumed her statement in mid-sentence, “for the last two years or more. My men will move the body after the buses leave.”

I told her where her men should take the body.

“Thank you, Marta,” I said finally and walked out of the gatehouse. Some families had already begun to assemble unorganized behind the gate in the compound with their belongings.

I paused for just a moment, then passed them and walked toward the bungalows.

* * *

By 5:30 Randi, Suze and Frank Mayfield had arrived. I had them park their vehicles by the bungalows as if they were staying there.

I had had the bus keys on my ring at the end of the thirty-inch chain ever since Vydor Haines had given them to me. The night before I had taken them off the ring and affixed tags to designate the bus that each would start; I distributed them to the three drivers. They didn’t say anything, just left and started up the buses.

One by one the buses pulled into place in front of the gate.

Marta was organizing the boarding. First a family was directed what to do, then stowed their belongings under the bus and boarded, then two more, then five, ten, fifteen, twenty and finally the entire camp save Marta’s crew— and two additional men who were standing uncomfortably, surrounded by Marta’s three men in front of the storage shed a few feet behind them.

Each man had one of Marta’s men firmly holding him by his bicep in case they decided to bolt. A third man stood facing the four of them as a defense in case either of the two men wrenched loose and ran. The two men being detained by Marta’s crew were the security guards who had been recruited from the immigrant population.

By 6:15 everyone was finished boarding and after a head count and a sweep of the compound the buses left. Bound for the border to the south.

Marta and her recruits were taking care of business, including moving Adam Thrift's body and cleaning up the blood residue with a liberal amount of bleach.

I had the pistol, a Glock 19 that I had taken from the armory, and kept an eye on the two men who had been relief gate guards recruited from the migrant workers by Tudor and Cruz, still standing with their backs against the wall of the shed a few feet from the door while Marta and her cohorts did their work. I brandished my pistol from side to side for emphasis from time to time and maintained a stern demeanor, as if it were necessary: they were scared shitless.

We were standing in front of the shed as Marta and her men carried Thrift, the towel wrapped around his neck so that blood would not be spilled, from the gatehouse to the shed. One man carried him by his feet, the other by his extended arms and the third walked alongside holding the towel in place.

As the guards saw this they literally turned white and one, Manuel who Adam Thrift had relieved earlier, began to visibly tremble. I kept my gun on them as the body was carried into the shed.

After Marta and her men went in I motioned with my Glock for the two guards to follow and said "*Adele!*" and motioned again with my gun for more emphasis. They hesitated in absolute fear and then their shoulders slumped in resignation—whatever was going to happen in there could happen here as well, so they turned and walked through the single steel door into the shed.

It was a little after 6:30 and Thrift's body was lying on the dirt floor of the shed. On the ground next to him was the severely decomposed body of Jim Becker, and the flies as if from nowhere had returned as they had when I first exhumed him. He had been dug up by the workers that Marta had recruited, the shallow grave refilled and the small mountain of fertilizer bags restored.

As I had instructed they had taken Jim Becker's wallet with his identification out of his pocket and one of the men handed the wallet to me. I put it in my pocket, to be disposed of later probably in San Diego in a public trash receptacle along the way to the border at some strip mall.

The place reeked of ammonia, decomposing flesh and buzzing flies. Marta was right, these men had strong stomachs and so did she. It was a horror scene as the seven of us stood around the two bodies.

"Have they been told?" I asked Marta, tossing my head in the direction of the relief guards.

"They told them, *Señor* Skip," Marta said to me nodding toward her men.

“They know they are going with us or they can stay here like them.” I pointed down to the two corpses on the floor.

The relief guards just stood there terrified.

“They say they will go with us but they are very afraid, they don’t trust any of us.”

“Anyone would be,” I said to Marta, “but they know that they will go to Mexico and if they ever tell anyone what happened here even in the smallest detail I will hunt them down and their families.”

She nodded, then said, “Their families left on the buses. They had no idea what was happening before this morning. They told their families to leave after my men accosted them first thing this morning. They also are very afraid of you, and us.” Marta looked around at her men and me.

“Good,” I said and brandished my pistol toward the guards just to emphasize their anxiety. “Have your men tie their hands behind their backs, silence them and sit them on the floor against the wall at the back of the shed until we’re done. You got the cable ties?”

“Si,” Marta said and nodded toward the men who secured the two guards, then taped their mouths with a roll of duct tape that they had brought along with the ties the night before.

While two of the men were securing the guards, Marta sent one of her men to the guardhouse to get one rifle, two shotguns and three pistols that I had set aside from the arsenal. I meted out a pistol each to Marta’s men, and I had the pistol that I had brought.

Marta had Julio’s shotgun, and we put the two other shotguns and the rifle against the wall in a dark corner of the shed as backup just in case.

Marta had selected one of her men as we had discussed the night before to be my backup so he and I left the shed.

Leaving the rest of the party in the shed, we walked back to the gatehouse, entered. I stationed my backup at the far corner of the room on the gate side of the building where he wouldn’t be seen from outside or from the entry doors but facing my position. Then I walked to the gate control desk and turned Adam Thrift’s swivel chair so that it was facing the entrance door, sat down and waited. My backup man was on my left flank standing in the corner.

It was almost fifteen minutes later to the minute when I heard the sound of two vehicles pull into the parking lot behind the guardhouse, then pickup doors opening and the crunch of boots on gravel.

Chapter 22/

Tudor and Cruz came in together, talking as they walked through the door, Tudor in the lead.

Tudor was talking, his head turned back toward Cruz so Cruz saw me first sitting in the chair with the Glock comfortably leveled at them.

Tudor saw the look on Cruz's face and stopped cold, hesitated for a moment, then slowly turned. "Wha' the fuck?" he said his eyes widening as he said it.

"Hey, Tooty, you're fucked, both of you, the jig's up," I said and smiled broadly. I couldn't help it.

"Says you?" Tudor responded.

"Well, me and him, "I nodded my head toward the far corner of the room where Marta's guy had an equally lethal Glock trained on the pair.

I continued to smile.

We didn't respond to anything that the pair said, their commentary full of vindictive, obscenities and threats; we just gestured with our pistols to go out the door, across the area in front of the compound and to the shed where the door was already open.

As we neared their destination I heard Cruz say what I realized was the first thing I had ever heard him say, "Oh fuck!"

They both stopped before the door as if refusing to enter.

"You can take it here or inside. It doesn't matter to me," although it did.

My backup handed me his gun and stepped forward. He was a big guy and he shoved them both, one, then the other toward the door, shove, shove, one off balance, then another until he pushed them stumbling in.

Marta was standing there waiting with her shotgun.

The big guy pushed them to the block wall at the side of the door, closed it and they were standing next to one another, Tudor and Cruz. I was standing in front of the closed door with my Glock out and handed the second Glock back to my backup. He stepped next to Marta with his pistol trained on them.

Marta was the first one to speak. "First for you, Captain Tudor, for my Teresa."

Tudor jutted out his jaw and said defiantly, spitting out his last words, “Your Teresa was a *punta*, a whore.”

Marta pulled the first trigger. The blast pinned Tudor against the wall of the shed for a moment and then he crumbled.

I had to admit, though not exactly gracefully Tudor took it like a man, no groveling and an attitude to the end. He was indeed a tough guy and a complete asshole leaving this existence with no apologies, dying as he had lived his life.

Then I heard Cruz say the second thing I ever heard him say, “*Señora*,” raising his hands palms forward in a conciliatory gesture, “I am truly sorry about your husband. It was the captain that killed him. I was there but didn’t do it. He was a good worker. His money, your money is under the seat of the captain’s truck.”

“Thank you, *señor*,” Marta said.

Cruz seemed to sigh, demonstrating some relief and nodded in thanks for the apparent concession.

Marta smiled, “This is for Julio,” she said and pulled the second trigger.

The noise from the two blasts inside the closed shed was deafening and the smell that was bad enough as it was when mixed with cordite was almost overwhelming.

The building was substantial, a bunkerso with the doors closed the shotgun blasts would be muffled somewhat especially as far away as the big house.

Marta, her crew and I set about organizing the shed and the bodies.

My ears were ringing as were everyone’s I was sure.

The two guards were both shaking now as they sat against the wall at the back of the shed after witnessing the executions. Their khaki pants were both soaked in the crotch. I felt badly for them. They apparently had nothing to do with this but I wanted them to witness the horror of this morning, to remember it and fear forever what would happen to them and their families if they uttered one word, just one word.

Unfortunately it wasn’t a threat, it was true, but the alternative was to kill both of them as well, something that I might have done at an earlier time but now, well, it just wouldn’t be right, collateral damage, innocents.

* * *

At eight sharp I knocked on the door of the big house for my meeting with Vydor Haines. My shirt was pulled out of my jeans and the Glock was tucked in at the waist beneath it. I had three green canvas Army surplus duffle bags that I had picked up a few days before folded and tucked under my left arm.

Marco looked at me somewhat perplexed, but in his usually efficient manner took me through the house to the roof garden overlooking the garden.

Vydor Haines stood up from behind the table and extended his hand toward me, noted my appearance and commented, "Casual Thursday?"

I stepped to the right and took a step back so that Haines was in front of me and Marco was a few feet to my left and I pulled the Glock and trained it on them. I knelt, still looking directly at them and laid the folded duffles on the rooftop surface next to me and then rose.

"No, there's nothing casual about today. Things are pretty serious, Mr. VitorHannachek."

"You know, I figured you were a little too good to be true," Haines said virtually unphased. Then added, "Marco, if Mr. Hite doesn't mind, why don't you take a seat next to me over here on this side of the table so he can keep an eye on both of us?"

He patted the arm of the chair next to him.

I nodded, first to him and then to Marco. Marco walked around the table and sat down in the designated chair.

I took a seat myself across from them on my side of the table and for a few moments we all just looked at each other.

Vydor broke the silence, "So how can we straighten this out?"

"Pretty simple, you can give me that ring to start with."

He raised his hand and appraised his gold and ruby ring for a few moments. "This seems pretty extreme for a jewel theft. It's gold but you could get more by stealing a lot of things out there," he gestured behind him toward the ranch buildings and the groves, "vehicles, equipment, you name it."

"The ring isn't for me, Mr. Haines, it is for you."

"I already have it," he replied and rubbed his left thumb over the surface of the signet and the ruby.

"I'm offering one of two alternatives, one of which you can choose."

“And they are?” Haines queried.

“The first one is that I can kill you now. That’s what I was sent here to do.”

“That’s interesting, but if you were going to do it I would be dead by now and so would my friend here,” he nodded toward Marco.

“Absolutely true,” I agreed, “but I’ve considered the reason I was sent here, and in exchange for that ring I can offer you a chance to continue your life—with some changes of course.”

“Tell me more, you have my attention,” he paused, “and Marco’s, I’m sure.” He nodded toward Marco as he made the statement. This guy was so cool, unbelievably cool.

“My employers said that this ranch is a conduit for money laundering. Frankly I don’t care about that. It’s not a capital offense punishable by death as far as I’m concerned.”

“Not in most civilized countries,” Haines replied.

“Why I came here was for humanitarian reasons, your ‘people’ as you called them. Some were disappearing, some ended up in prostitution, most terrified and exploited who live and work here, the foreman who I replaced was murdered by your security men, but . . .”

“But what?” Haines said steepling his hands clasped palm to palm, index fingers extended upward held in front of his chin and leaning forward to listen giving me his attention. Very cool, even in this situation.

“I, no matter what I was told and what I was sent here for,” I paused then continued, “I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. I’ve worked for you, watched you, followed your directives regarding your people and I don’t see that there’s a connection between you and what my organization believes happened here and what I have personally determined.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about; I have always been concerned about the conditions here. I know I keep an illegal work force but I feel I’m giving these people opportunity. I’m not aware of any exploitation and certainly not worse. And as far as I’m concerned my foreman up and left, but you say he was murdered?”

“I think that you had this going on right under your nose and didn’t see it, including the murder of Jim Becker *and* just a few days ago of Julio Esperanza,” I responded.

I still had the gun pointed toward them, my forearm resting on the edge of the surface of the tabletop.

“What you are saying is shocking at the least, but if you don’t do this, kill me, I assume someone else will be sent.”

“And that’s why I need your ring. You don’t need to know the details beyond a few things. You are going to die today, at least for the record. I know you have cash here, probably a lot of it, and I’ll outline your second choice.”

“First one is that you kill me. And the second?” Vydor Haines asked.

“You give me the ring and while I wait, actually follow the two of you, you have fifteen minutes to put as much of your personal things in these three duffle bags as you can and then we’ll leave the house. I figure most of your personal things will be the cash that you have on hand.”

Vydor Haines, still appraising, responded, “Then what?”

“We go down to my bungalow. You wait while my associates and I take care of some business. You will be joined by Luce who said that she wanted to go with you if you decided to leave with us and then we will leave VyHa Growers behind. Several hours from now you’ll be dropped off with Luce and Marco before the border in San Diego. Where you go from there is up to the three of you, but as far as everyone is concerned, assuming everything works, you will be dead. Make sure you stay that way or someone will come after you and I guarantee they will get you eventually.”

“And you will be seriously fucked if your employers find out what you have done, let me go.”

“Yes,” I said, “but I think you got a bad rap. I’ll take the chance. I had quit before they called me back to take this on.”

“Maybe your heart isn’t in your trade anymore.”

I didn’t say anything.

Vydor Haines pulled off the signet ring, handed it over the glass tabletop to me, turned and patted Marco on the shoulder who had sat virtually motionless through our conversation and said to him, “Let’s escort Mr. Hite and fill up those bags. We must not forget the alternate passports and of course a change or two of clothing until we get situated.”

“Oh, and one more thing, Mr. Haines,” I said.

“Yes, there’s more?”

“Yes, your wallet with some money in it, your driver’s license and credit cards as well.”

He leaned over on his hip to one side and retrieved a Moroccan leather billfold and handed it to me over the table. “Well,” he said, a quip, “it’s better than getting killed, I suppose. I’ve never been so relieved to be held up.”

“You’ll have plenty of cash and passports with an alternate identity, you should be fine. I have to believe that you thought something like this could happen eventually.”

“As you assumed, Mr. Hite, I live on an edge though a comfortable one. I figured that if I ever had to run it would be from my clients with interests here but who are based in Europe and Russia, not from the country I chose to adopt.”

“That’s the breaks,” I said and rose, raised my shirttail and tucked the Glock back into my jeans.

They got up as well and they proceeded to spend the next fifteen minutes packing up the duffle bags while I watched.

Chapter 23/

We walked down from the house to my bungalow. Haines noticed the compound was devoid of activity but said nothing.

I opened the bungalow door and we walked in, duffle bags and all which from what I could tell from observing the packing contained enough money to buy VyHa Growers ranch and associated assets a few times over. If his associates believed he was dead as well, their money would be a hell of a windfall for him.

Luce was sitting on the couch and my big backup was there as well. He rose and walked to the corner by the TV. I realized that I didn't know his name.

While Vydor and Luce embraced I walked to the kitchenette and retrieved one of the kitchen chairs and brought it in for Marco.

I put it down next to the couch and he sat down. Luce and Vydor were sitting on the couch, Luce nestled under his arm.

I turned to Marta's man and said, "*Como se llama?*"

"Ricardo," he replied.

"*Gracias, Ricardo,*" I said.

He gave me a half-smile and stood there watching his charges.

I left and walked back to the shed. They had arranged the four bodies in an array that would probably be interpreted as the result of an explosion.

Jim Becker, his height and build in life appeared to have been quite similar to Vydor Haines. I put Haines' wallet in the back pocket of Becker's jeans and put the ring on his right hand ring finger.

Then we blew the place up using several gas cans that had unfortunately been stored in proximity to the fertilizer and, well, it was an unfortunate accident. In short, we created a number of Molotov cocktails, lit the towels soaked with gasoline that had been twisted and were hanging from the pour spouts of the cans and vacated the building.

The explosion was somewhat muffled since the building was sturdy, concrete block walls, no windows, the metal door and a proper steel-reinforced roof.

But something had to give, the roof was the first to shudder after the blast and finally it blew completely free of the building and was thrown in the air and landed askew about twenty feet away.

The fire and intense heat though were spectacular and that's what I was counting on. The heat contained within the structure would have been amazing, destroying everything eventually except the outer walls and the radiating heat would set ablaze the structures that were nearby that were of wood frame construction, namely the buildings in the compound.

We didn't hang around to watch. We had to get out of there once I was satisfied that the building and everything inside would be totally destroyed and the radiating heat was such that buildings within a reasonable proximity would be damaged as well.

It was an inferno with flames reaching at least fifteen to twenty feet above the bunker and the heat, even from our vantage point next to the van that had been moved to the other side of the compound to the gatehouse parking lot, was intense.

We piled in the van: the two guards who had been unbound and unsilenced and were happy just to be alive but very quiet, still in shock; Marta with the money that she had retrieved from Tudor's truck and her three recruits; Vydor Haines, Luce and Marco. I drove. We had a full van.

As we drove down the three mile company road I watched the thick black smoke rising behind us. I figured buildings in the compound had probably caught fire as well by now.

* * *

Papers and the local news all over the Southland, Southern California, shared a pretty consistent assessment of what had happened judging from their headlines and sound bites as the days followed.

Varying accounts noted:

"Evacuation of Migrant Workers Prevents Catastrophe"

"Workers Miss Conflagration by Less Than an Hour"

"Local Volunteers Drove Workers to Safety"

"Workers Quarters Burned"

"Improper Storage of Ammonium Nitrate Fertilizer and Gasoline Blamed, MSDS (Material Safety Data Sheet) Guidelines Not Followed"

"Ranch Owner Apparently Dies in Explosion and Fire, He and Other Victims Burned Beyond Recognition"

“Owner’s Body Identified by Signet Ring”

“Santa Paula FD Warned of Hazard but Too Late”

“Ranch Owner Vydor Haines a Local Business Supporter Remembered by Chamber”

“Missing Security Personnel Confirmed Victims”

It seemed that a note was delivered to the Santa Paula Fire Department the morning of the incident warning of a dangerous material storage condition at VyHa Growers. The note, penned by a foreman who didn’t divulge his identity because he was concerned that by whistle blowing he could lose his job, indicated that gasoline, sometimes in unvented and open containers was stored in close proximity to bags of ammonium nitrate fertilizer in a closed unventilated building. “The inside of that building reeks of ammonia and gasoline fumes. All it would take is a spark or someone with a cigarette or an electrical short . . .” the note read.

It was big news for a few days until the next catastrophe came along and then the media was all over that one, and VyHa Growers was forgotten.

Half of the compound had burned to the ground.

The local no kill animal shelter had taken in the guard dogs that had congregated in the farthest corner of the outer fenced perimeter to run away from the fire. They were up for adoption, providing a photo op for local media with kids hugging dogs.

* * *

I called The Outfit and resigned *again*. I didn’t tell them the whole story for obvious reasons.

“You’ll be back, just like a sneeze,” my old boss said.

“Don’t count on it,” I said.

“You are what you are. Something will come up and you’ll do it all over again. It’s you, you can’t help it.” Then my boss added, “Who is or was Bakoda Pak anyway? We’re not getting anywhere.”

“Keep working on it,” I said and smiled smugly.

* * *

Randi, Suze and Frank Mayfield had become local heroes for evacuating the workers. Between the note that I had given to Suze to give to her firefighter husband when he left for work Thursday morning and the evacuation, they just figured that I had taken matters into my own hands and orchestrated the whole thing as a preemptive measure to save the workers' lives. They never asked where the funds came from. They must have figured some questions are best not asked or answered.

I stopped by Randi's Revenge, had a few tacos, a glass of wine with water on the side and talked to Randi. "Mind if I check in with you from time to time?" I asked. "I'm moving on."

"Sure," she said, "told you that you would."

"You said that you knew the type."

"But there's something else I know," she said.

"What's that?"

"You aren't the type I was talking about. I'm not sure what you are but you aren't a produce ranch foreman. I'm not sure who you are and frankly would never really want to know the details, but you are pretty amazing."

I didn't say anything, just finished my wine and toasted the empty glass in her direction.

"You're covered," Randi said.

I put down a five on the bar, gave her a hug and left.

Suze, working behind the bar, said, "Thanks, Skip, take care," as I walked toward the door.

"Always. You do the same," I replied and walked out into the bright daylight.

I left Randi's and Santa Paula behind me.

Epilogue/

For some reason I decided to call Randi's about two months later.

It was a stupid thing to do. After a job you leave no trail, but maybe Vydor Haines had been right, maybe my heart wasn't in it anymore, but this was taking chances and that means getting sloppy. I did it anyway.

She was glad to hear from me, and brought me up on the local news including the issues surrounding the liquidation of VyHa Growers. It seemed that there was no will or trust of record. The courts had assigned an interim trustee to oversee the continuing operation or at the least the maintenance of the remaining facilities until the whole thing could be settled.

She told me about Suze and about Frank Mayfield and then said, "I almost forgot, something came addressed to you. I think it's a CD or DVD."

"Would you mind forwarding it to me? I'll give you an address in Phoenix where I pick up mail when I'm on the road."

I gave her the post office box that I used rather than my personal address. In a few days it came and I picked it up. It was a DVD, a DVD from Vydor Haines.

I sat down in my family room in a comfortable leather chair after putting the DVD into the slot on the side of my TV.

There he was in some nondescript room with white walls and he was talking into the camera looking as self-confident and handsome as ever.

"Skip," he said with that million dollar smile, "I had to send this. I hope you get it. After all Randi's is where you were when we first summoned you and ultimately hired you so I felt that you would maintain contact there."

I smiled, he was altogether a charming character and I settled into the chair to enjoy the vid.

"We want to thank you, Luce, Marco and I," he said, paused and continued, "and we have settled down and following your advice we won't say where." He paused again, then continued, "Marco and I are very happy here. Marco found a new companion, actually he was the son of one of the workers on the ranch, that cute little kid named Hito, the Esperanza's boy. And Luce would tell you how happy she is but she is really tied up now, in fact they both are, Luce and Marco's friend Hito."

I cocked my head and stared at the picture as the camera, obviously on a tripod, panned the room and pulled back to a wider angle. My stomach turned, acid came up into my throat, burning.

What I saw were two people bound and gagged and tied to two straight-backed chairs. One was a teenage boy, Hito. The other, I recognized the eyes, was Luce. Both of their eyes graphically projected the terror that they were experiencing. Both were struggling against their restraints.

Vydor Haines stepped into the frame next to Luce and Marco stood next to Hito.

Vydor Haines said with a smile, "We both want to sincerely thank you for saving us. If it wasn't for you we couldn't pursue our passions, the ones that have sustained both of us all of years, and we choreographed this especially for you. Thanks, Skip Hite."

Then he turned toward Marco and said, "Show time."

With that Vydor Haines and Marco both pulled box cutters out of their pockets, took their time extending the blades, put their hands on their victim's foreheads, respectively, pulled them back against the straight backs of the chairs and held them there and slowly slit their throats while smiling broadly into the camera for my benefit.

I watched in horror as the life drained from Luce's warm and beautiful brown eyes and Hito's as well.

I threw up.

The TV went blank.

I convulsed again, my stomach devoid of content. I rose from the chair, clenched my fists, threw back my head and howled in rage. I began to shake uncontrollably as I thought of Marta, my legs felt weak, and I collapsed back into the chair and broke down in tears.

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