



An Owl from the Styx
by Jim Hargrove

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1. Sleepless Knight

Preston Salomon did not consider himself an ornithologist, though many people did. Nor did Preston think of himself as a *birder*, since he had no idea what his life list totaled, and no genuine birder would ever lack such an elementary statistic. When asked, he also denied being an entrepreneur, despite several magazine articles crediting him with inventing the ecotourism industry. Instead, Preston always portrayed himself as a guide to the beauty of nature, a gentle knight errant in the service of *Gaia*, a Don Quixote tilting against the windmills of pollution and environmental degradation on behalf of the members of Class Aves.

In fact, Preston was a bird guide, President of EcoTours, Inc., a complicated travel operation devoted to booking well-heeled clients on extended trips to obscure locations filled with equally obscure birds to add to their lists.

Standing five feet three and a quarter inches — don't leave off that *quarter* — Preston had a pleasant round face sporting a white mustache and numerous wrinkles, the latter the result of many years peering through binoculars. Known to his friends as “Barbet,” his bird name, he was called “the elf” or “Napoleon” by other acquaintances, depending on whether they were customers or competitors.

Preston provided exceptional service for his clients, combining an encyclopedic knowledge of birds with an ability, much admired by his competitors, of coaxing a decent meal from the most unpromising kitchen. His birding companions had learned to expect frequent ornithological lectures, peppered with proverbs in languages unfamiliar to his audience, which Preston then translated for everyone's benefit. This skill provided him an unwarranted reputation as an accomplished linguist.

He would probably have been surprised to learn that the Malagasy expression used for him in Madagascar, which he rendered as “the little General,” actually meant “the little shit.”

On the last morning of April 1998, Preston sat by the side of the road in Bentsen State Park near Mission, Texas, listening to the White-tipped Dove's dawn song, which, as he always pointed out to anyone listening, sounded like someone blowing across the top of a bottle. Soon, he knew, the Chachalacas would wake up and drown out the soft, mellow sound with their raucous calls. He watched dew drip from the chaparral and the branches of small oaks onto the ground beneath. Though the sky showed blue, the air had not yet warmed up to the ninety degree norm for spring in south Texas.

Ordinarily, Preston would have worried about whether the staff back in Houston could handle everything without him. However, if he were to worry, he had more pressing items to consider, since during the past two weeks he had lost an excellent source of income, seen his friend and co-founder of EcoTours murdered, and almost been killed himself.

None of these worries intruded on his thoughts, which focused on a single question: *What did the Stygian Owl sound like?*

No one, so far as Preston knew, had recorded the calls of the owl. He'd spent a sleepless night sitting by the side of the road in his fruitless quest to be the first. Now, with the owl settled down to rest for the day, he realized his quest had been in vain, and let his frustration show in a mumbled, “Damn.”

“What did you say, Mr. Salomon?”

Preston paused before answering, trying to remember the kid’s name, which he finally dredged up from his vaunted memory banks. “Nothing, Jason. Just talking to myself. Does your mother know you’re out here?”

“She’s asleep.”

“You’d better go tell her not to worry.”

“She didn’t get up early. I’ll do it later.”

Preston smiled at the twelve year-old’s enthusiasm. What should he call the lad? Jason deserved a bird name for spotting such a rare bird. Logically, he should be the Stygian Owl, but there was already an Owl, and one of long-standing. *Can we have two Owls? No, I’ll have to think of something else.* Preston let his mind wander for a while, trying to form an association between this dirty-faced kid kneeling by the thorny scrub and a bird. Nothing came to mind.

What will the Vireo think when she hears? Will she finally agree that I could be a real ornithologist? The discovery of the Stygian Owl represented a major find, a fact that Preston was the first to realize. Though not the first sighting for Texas, or even the second for that matter, this event, finding the owl *again*, and in the same place, meant that this spot formed part of the owl’s territory. Instead of a visitor, the bird assumed new status as a resident, a remarkable, almost incomprehensible development. Preston smiled again, considering the public acclaim that would surely be his.

Mark and Joan appeared next to him without warning. Preston’s hearing had really deteriorated. The battery in his hearing aid must be getting low. It had been quite a while since he’d checked it. Too much traveling lately. Joan handed Preston a sandwich: bacon and egg on grilled sourdough bread. “Has it come back?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. You can just make out its silhouette against the sky. There. See?”

“Ah, yes. That’s great.”

“When can we get moving, Preston?” Mark asked. “I’m getting worried. Don’t want to hang around any longer than necessary.”

“Understood,” Preston assured him. “We’ll leave as soon as someone arrives to hold down the fort.” He took a careful bite of the sandwich, not wanting to dribble yolk on his moustache, but found the eggs cooked hard enough so they didn’t run. “Mmm,” he mumbled to Joan. “Camping out always makes breakfast taste better.”

“Car coming,” Mark said. Preston turned and saw a maroon minivan approaching. The first birders of the day! Soon people from all over the country would crowd into the park, rarity chasers who dropped everything to fly to Harlingen on the chance that the owl would stay longer than a single day. Preston rose to greet the people he thought of as his guests.

The van stopped beside him. The window slid down noiselessly, revealing a short, stocky man with dark curly hair, most of his face hidden in shadow, wearing a rumpled gray suit. *Definitely not birders. Reporter?*

“Excuse me, sir, but do I have the pleasure of addressing Preston Salomon?” The elaborate politeness and accent bothered Preston, and he frowned as his mind turned over the

possibilities before replying. The voice reminded him of an anonymous CNN reporter. “Yes, indeed,” he replied, a broad grin replacing the frown. “I am Preston Salomon. If you’re a reporter, you’ve come to the right place; the Stygian Owl stayed overnight.”

“Stygian Owl?”

Now, Preston grew confused. “I’m sorry. I assumed you’d come to see our great discovery. We located him yesterday afternoon. The honor belongs to my young pal Jason over there.”

Preston turned to indicate the boy still situated on the roadside, staring up at the trees through binoculars. *Better get rid of these idiots quick before the real birders arrive.*

“I wonder if I might have a word with you.”

“This is not a good time for an interview,” Preston replied, not even looking at the questioner.

“I fear that I really must insist.”

Who is this guy?

Preston concealed his irritation, using his experience from many years of leading tours. He composed a short, cogent explanation, detailing precisely the nature of the inconvenience. Satisfied, he turned to the reporter — if that’s what he was — wearing a pleasant, reassuring smile. However, as he peered in the window of the vehicle, he found himself confronting the barrel of a gun pointed directly at his left eye.

Two Weeks Earlier: April 8, 1998

Guatemala

Sierra de las Minas

Few places are as difficult to reach or as rewarding to those who make the trek, as the Sierra de las Minas Biological Preserve. Located in the mountains of northern Guatemala, the preserve presents the best opportunity in the world to observe the rare and elusive Horned Guan, as well as its close relative the Highland Guan. We should also have excellent views of the magnificent Resplendent Quetzal, the national bird of Guatemala, and a cultural icon of both the Maya and Aztec peoples.

Our trip begins in surprisingly modern Guatemala City. We will leave directly from La Aurora International Airport and drive to the village of San Augustine in air-conditioned comfort through endless cultivated fields, stopping occasionally to search for interesting lowland species. We will have a delightful picnic lunch in the plaza at San Augustine, sitting in the shade beneath an enormous *Ceiba* tree, just as the villagers have done for centuries.

In San Augustine, we will leave our coach and transfer to four-wheel drive vehicles for the trip up the mountain to *Hacienda de las Minas*, a rustic lodge with a stunning view of the area from an altitude of 5500 feet. We will bird around the lodge in the afternoon, where we can expect to see such beauties as the *Blue-crowned Mot-mot*. After dark, we will search for the *Vermiculated Screech-Owl*, a specialty of the area.

Early on the following morning, we will hike up to the preserve, assisted by four-wheel Honda "motos," the only vehicles capable of driving on the road to the top of the mountain. We will allow several hours for the hike to give us plenty of time to enjoy the birds along the way, especially the lovely *Pink-headed Warbler*, endemic to the region.

We will camp in a clearing at approximately 8000 feet, located in the midst of a *cloud forest*. The primary source of moisture for the forest comes as fog or mist, which can appear at any time of the day, and hides trees 200 feet tall and twenty feet around in a diaphanous veil. *Bromeliads*, epiphytic plants that grow on the limbs of the trees, are common and bloom throughout the year.

After four days in this ecological paradise, we will return to Guatemala City, arriving in time to witness the traditional Easter celebration. Parishioners from different parts of the city participate in an informal competition to produce the most elaborate floats depicting Jesus and the Virgin Mary. They carry these huge floats, some a city block long, through downtown streets in a parade lasting well into the night.

EcoTours will supply all food for the trip. Participants should bring tents and sleeping bags. *Rain gear is essential and rubber boots highly recommended.*

For more information, including background information on Preston Salomon, a complete itinerary, bird list, and assistance in travel, contact EcoTours...¹

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2. False Dawn

Mark Talbot, Preston's old friend and birding companion, crept quietly along the trail, shining the halogen flashlight a few steps ahead of him. His feet slipped frequently on the slick mud, especially where roots snaked across the path. Although Mark had seen light in the sky of the clearing, here in the forest he felt the dark closing around him like a cocoon. "5:10" glowed on the face of the large watch on his wrist. Another twenty minutes remained to find the Highland Guan, which called repeatedly, sounding like a giant finger grating along the teeth of a giant comb.

As he hiked along the trail, Mark tried to triangulate the location of the call: listen, move, listen again. The call moved with him, always in front, never behind. He felt irritated with himself, both for accepting a fool's errand trying to bird the forest before dawn, and even more for letting Preston talk him into the trip in the first place.

"Please, Owl," Preston had implored, "I don't think I can stand a week with the Waylands by myself. I crave intelligent conversation more often than that."

Mark knew the Waylands only by reputation, though Millicent was an old acquaintance of Mark's mother. That added to the burden of the trip. Not only did he have to try ignoring Geoff Wayland's inanities, but he had to be polite to Millie, who could be counted on to report on Mark at the end of the trip. After an hour of listening to Preston extol the virtues of the isolated preserve in northern Guatemala, Mark had given in and agreed to meet the party in Guatemala City.

Now he found himself alone in a dark forest, trying to locate a bird using only his ears. Mark was well-known for his hearing, but it was proving inadequate to the task.

A sudden gust of cold air and fog swirled around, obscuring the trees, giving them an unearthly quality, as though they grew from clouds rather than the earth. Mark stopped and stood silently. All around him, small amphibians and rodents made minute scuttling noises in the leaves, sounds that only someone with Mark's extraordinary hearing could detect. The Guan called again. *Damn! It's right above me somewhere.* The flashlight, one of Geoff's toys, proved useless, providing only a blinding reflection from the water droplets. *Maybe Geoff's night vision goggles would work better.* The device showed the forest as a gauzy tableau of dense shrubbery beneath towering trees, all rendered in electronic green hues.

Mark resumed his quest, scanning with the goggles, searching for the Guan. His keen ears caught the sound of a stick breaking. *What's that? Something large!* A ghostly image formed on the screen of the goggles. *A man!* Mark suppressed a momentary feeling of panic. *Who's out here besides me?*

Mark shivered, struggling to see through the mists, but could make out only a vague shadow. He tried using the flashlight, but saw only fog. Forgetting his original purpose, Mark called out, "*¡Hola! ¿Quién esta? Who's there?*" The shadow stopped suddenly. It leaned closer, as though trying to see Mark, then turned abruptly and disappeared.

"Geoff?" Mark called. Only Geoff would think it funny to follow Mark into the forest, planning an ambush.

The wind swirled the fog again.

A sound! Someone whispering? Straining his hearing to the utmost, Mark struggled to discern the message. He couldn't recognize the language.

He glimpsed the shadow again. Now, two of them stood before him. He called, "Wait!" There was no response. *What is Spanish for wait? "¡Alto!" That's close enough.*

The shadows didn't stop; they disappeared.

Mark recalled Preston's final words of instruction, delivered first as an old Polish proverb, then translated as, "The woods can play tricks on you in the fog and poor light."

3. Resplendent Mourning

Preston could tell from Mark's demeanor that the quest had been fruitless, but he asked anyway, raising his bushy eyebrows. "Any luck?"

"Heard several. Couldn't see a damn thing."

Preston saw Mark sneak a look at Geoff and wondered what that was all about. All he needed was for the two of them to start feuding. Last night, things seemed to be going fairly well. After dinner, Mark and Geoff had taken turns showing off toys. Geoff came equipped with enough to start a small store and proudly demonstrated everything. However, Mark's new satellite telephone turned out to be the big hit. Geoff was mortified to learn that *his* telephone was out of date.

"Wow!" Geoff had gushed. "It's so small."

"It's a prototype," Mark replied. "I'm testing it." Mark then proceeded to show Geoff the new features, including a nifty way to send text messages. His message to Geoff, "Hi, Geoff," cost about \$5, but Preston realized that Mark probably would bill that back to the client, whoever that was.

Returning to the subject of birding, Preston said, "Too bad. Well, it was a long shot. Let's be off." With that, the group departed for the pre-breakfast hike to *Piedron de Los Angeles*, Angel Rock. Geoff led by the light of the halogen flashlight reclaimed from Mark, navigating the forest trails using his GPS system. Juan Carlos, the native guide for the trip, could have walked to the place blindfolded, but Preston let Geoff enjoy an unaccustomed role as leader.

"Another 25 meters," Geoff called out when everyone else could see the hulking rock straight ahead. *Dumb as a bag of hammers*. Preston suppressed a scowl. Millie had selected Geoff as her third husband because he accepted her passion for bird listing, and because he was too stupid to steal anything from her.

The Waylands dressed, as they always did, in matching outfits gleaned from the best catalogs. Today, they sported khaki shirts and pants made of some miracle fabric that dried in seconds, genuine Wellington boots ordered from London, Tilley hats that kept the sun away, shading their faces so the features were hard to detect ? a definite improvement in Millicent's case ? and vests for carrying everything. At the airport, Geoff had insisted on demonstrating all thirty-nine pockets in the vest, including five supposedly secret ones.

Geoff, in addition to the new, expensive binoculars both Waylands wore, carried a 35-mm camera with a huge lens, a video camera, a palmtop computer for keeping bird records, a small recorder for other notes and an antique compass, just in case the GPS system failed.

Mark, as usual, refused to wear anything special. He was attired in plain old jeans, a T-shirt, windbreaker and his lucky hat, which Preston recalled seeing for the first time in 1975.

Millie, a dedicated lister, traveled all over the world adding species to her life list. Her conversational accomplishments consisted entirely of naming all the places she'd visited in her search and all the birds she'd failed to see while there. The list of unseen birds was shorter than

the list of ones she had seen, but her recitals always gave the impression of profound disappointment.

Geoff, Millie's latest and least interesting husband, had originally just tagged along, but later became a lister himself. His list could not compare to Millie's 6000-odd species, but had reached a very respectable 3500 or so. Geoff had insisted that Preston tell Millie the trip to *Sierra de las Minas* was a birthday present. Preston complied happily, and deposited Millie's check. Millicent had failed to see the Horned Guan — “dipped on it” in birder slang — despite several previous attempts. Preston had planned to cancel the trip to Sierra de las Minas due to lack of interest, but when Geoff offered to pay extra, Preston happily obliged, calling on Mark at the last minute for support.

The Horned Guan had lived up to its reputation, eluding the party at several places they'd checked earlier. They'd been forced to make do with “collateral species,” to use Geoff's term, such as the Resplendent Quetzal they hoped to see this morning. A chance to use his new GPS gizmo to find his way back to Angel Rock in the dark helped assuage Geoff's disappointment somewhat. Millie had no anodyne such as Geoff's toys to relieve the sting of missing the bird yet again. She trudged dejectedly a few feet behind Geoff.

The birders reached the monolith just before dawn, in time to watch the sun rise over the mountains to the east. As the sky brightened, the group turned around to watch the rays strike the tops of the tallest trees. As the air warmed, some birds, mostly Violet-green Swallows, left the shelter of the trees to feed. Preston noticed a flock of Band-tailed Pigeons in the distance — nothing to get excited about. The party settled down for a wait, the Waylands flanking Mark on a small ledge, Preston and Juan Carlos standing, keeping lookout for the Quetzal. Geoff produced a silver cheese slicer from one of his vest pockets and inquired, “*Fromage* anyone?” Without waiting for a response, he carved thin slivers from the large hunk of *queso blanco* they'd brought for breakfast, passing the pieces to Mark and Millie.

Preston looked out at the forest that stretched before them in all directions, an endless green sea of leaves, with granite islands poking through the treetops. Directly below, he could just make out the *angel* part of Angel Rock where it had fallen about fifty years ago, its features already softened by prolific jungle vines. The view induced a mild feeling of vertigo, so he looked out at the horizon again. *Wouldn't do to fall, Preston old boy. Pretty hard to get help here. Now concentrate. Find that bird!* The wind created ripples in the verdant surface, which crashed like waves against a stony shore. Preston imagined he could hear the sound they made far below him. In spite of the long climb to reach the spot, and a time he'd spent coaxing Mark to overcome his dislike of high places, he was glad he'd come. *This is the kind of place that makes all the travel and frustrations worthwhile.*

He felt, rather than saw, Mark moving around, and suppressed a brief irritation. *Is he already getting bored?*

Turning his head slightly, Preston saw Mark rising from his position on the rock, wincing at a twinge in his hip. *He's only 46. Wonder what shape he'll be in when he's my age.* Moving carefully in his cumbersome rubber boots, Mark teetered along the ridge and climbed up to where Preston stood on the summit. Preston pretended not to notice, letting Mark wait, tall and angular in a wide brim hat and big glasses, casting a long shadow in the early morning sunlight, until Preston finished scanning the horizon. When Preston lowered his binoculars, Mark said, “I've got?”

He stopped suddenly and tilted his head slightly, listening, then with a broad smile pointed toward a spot in the forest.

Cupping his hands around his ears, Mark turned to face the direction of the sound. “There he is again. 500 meters.”

“Give me a mark to aim at.” Preston demanded. “How can you estimate distances against the backdrop of trees anyway?”

“Above the tall tree over there, the one with all the bromeliads on the empty branches.” Mark pointed again.

Preston heard movement behind him and glanced over his shoulder.

“Got something?” Geoff asked, too loud as usual. Millie shushed him quickly with a wave of her hand.

“There! I heard him again,” Mark said. “Definitely closer. Want to try the tape?”

Without a word, Preston fiddled with the knobs of a tape recorder. The sound of the challenge call of a Resplendent Quetzal filled the air around them. He turned off the tape and everyone listened again. The other bird answered with a call that meant he was preparing to make a display flight.

“He’s right below us, no more than 100 meters. Let’s record his call,” Mark suggested

“Good work Owl,” Preston whispered. “Even I can hear him now.” He pulled the expensive microphone from its holster and aimed it at the location of the call. “Recording,” he warned. The group listened silently, watching for any sign of the bird.

Mark apparently picked up the low introductory notes of the song and raised his hand as a signal. The bird, as if in answer, called again. Preston quickly rewound the tape and played back the bird’s own call.

The Quetzal rose defiantly from his hidden perch in the trees, prepared to drive off the intruder. *Who is this interloper in my domain? Why does he sound so familiar?*

Millie saw the bird first and hissed, “There he is, Geoff. Get him.” Geoff raised his camera and shot about 10 frames. The Quetzal flew closer, his long tail feathers trailing behind, iridescent blue-green ribbons contrasting with the duller color of the leaves. Lifting himself upright in the air, puffing out his brilliant red breast, the angry male shrieked a challenge, daring his rival to appear. He repeated the call three times before sinking back exhausted, disappearing beneath the surface of the leafy sea.

“Good work, Owl,” Preston said. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Yes, nicely done, Mark,” Millie agreed.

“The National Bird of Guatemala,” Geoff said aloud as he pecked on the palmtop computer. Pointing the GPS unit at the sky, he recorded the exact location of the sighting.

Only after all the activity subsided did Mark return to his original errand. “Bad news, Preston. I need to head back to Houston.”

“What!” Geoff objected. “We don’t have either Guan yet and there’s tons left on the secondary list.”

Ignoring him, Mark showed Preston the message on the screen of the phone. “Mark, Sorry to inform you that your father died from heart attack last night. Please call home. Return ASAP. Mary Lynn.”

After several seconds, Preston looked up at the forest again. A strange thought occurred to him: Would Simon have liked the spot? Probably. Now, he’d never know. Preston felt a sense of loss, for Mark’s father had been a friend and partner. He found himself strangely irritated that bad news had found him in such a magic place. His mind immediately started calculating everything that had to be done. Realizing that he had not offered condolences, he said, “My God, Owl. You should have said something. This is awful. I saw him not two weeks ago.”

“I didn’t think a few minutes would make any difference.”

“No. Good point. It’ll take us hours just to get to San Augustine, not to mention Guatemala City.” Preston turned to Millicent. At times like this, Geoff didn’t count. “You knew Simon Talbot, didn’t you Millie? It seems he has died.”

“Oh, Mark, I’m so sorry. He was a nice man, not at all like they said about him.” That was Millie, Preston thought, tactful as always. Mark mumbled some thanks, while Preston engaged Juan Carlos in an extended discussion in Spanish, before turning back to Mark. “Juan Carlos can take you back. Some emolument would be in order.”

Mark spoke softly to Preston. “Uh, Preston, not that I doubt Juan Carlos, but I’d feel a lot more comfortable if...well, if I had someone with whom I could communicate better.”

Preston pursed his lips briefly, then resumed negotiations with Juan Carlos. After some lengthy discussion, he turned back to the group. Mark moved closer to Juan Carlos and pressed a few bills into his palm.

Preston explained to the Waylands, “I asked Juan Carlos to take over here while Mark and I return to town and find Mark a ride to the airport. Mark doesn’t speak the language well enough to handle it by himself. Juan Carlos knows this area even better than I do. He can probably find the Guans for you. OK?”

“Sure, Preston. We understand. No problem,” Millie said.

Juan Carlos strode forward, eager to take over leadership of the group. “I find you Guan, you bet.”

“I may not be able to make it back before dark,” Preston warned.

“Wait!” Geoff said, extracting his treasured phone from one of the inner pockets of his vest. “We can try out the new satellite phone. You should be able to call down to San Augustine and have the truck leave for the lodge immediately.” He gave the phone to Preston and launched into a training session. Preston translated for Juan Carlos, who nodded enthusiastically and took the phone from Preston. “*Si, Señor.*”

Preston translated, “He says that with the *telefono milagro*, the miracle telephone, he can make all the arrangements. He’s calling down to the village and arranging for the transportation.” *Amazing. Geoff actually had a good idea.*

Mark meanwhile spoke briefly into his own *telefono milagro*. He clicked the cover shut and explained to Preston. “I tried calling home. Got transferred to the voice mail. I told them I was starting back and didn’t know how long it would take.”

“Those gizmos come in handy at a time like this,” Preston noted. “Maybe I should get one myself.”

“They still have a few bugs,” Mark noted. “Dad thinks...thought it’d be years before they got the system to work right. He predicted they’ll go bankrupt trying.”

“Interesting. I’ve an idea how we can make the trip a bit faster.” He turned and conversed with Juan Carlos in Spanish. Juan Carlos nodded, “*Por supuesto*,” meaning “of course,” before resuming his conversation with someone in San Augustine.

Preston explained, “We’ll take the *moto*. That’ll get us there sooner. Ready, Owl?”

4. Berried Alive

Mark climbed into the back of the *moto*, while Preston drove. Juan Carlos had used the vehicle the previous day to ferry the tents, food and sleeping bags to the clearing. The machine, a cross between a motorcycle and a small truck, served its intended purpose admirably. Mark found it decidedly less satisfactory for conveying people. As he was over six feet tall and Preston topped out just over five three, it occurred to Mark that he should be driving, with Preston crammed into the box. As he leaned forward to suggest a change, Preston popped the clutch and the journey down the mountain began. The *moto* jolted over the ruts in the so-called road they had walked up the day before.

“You sure this is a good idea?” Mark asked, shouting to make himself heard. “We could probably walk down in three hours.”

“It would take a lot longer than that. It’s harder going downhill than up. Hurts the knees. Just hang on.” Preston swerved to miss a particularly deep rut. Mark gripped the sides of the cargo container tightly.

They had been traveling for about forty-five minutes when Preston suddenly pulled to the side of the trail, turned off the engine, and leaped from the seat before the *moto* had quit rolling. Mark wondered what was going on, but prepared to follow Preston’s lead. *There must be some spectacular bird!*

Preston charged up an embankment into the brush before Mark could extricate himself. Preston moved with considerable agility for a man his age. Mark lunged after his friend, hoping that he wasn’t making too much noise. The forest had thinned out at this elevation, since the clouds that provided all the moisture for the trees usually appeared only higher up. The two men stood on the top of a ridge, looking down into a dry gully. Brambles with berries on them covered the hillside down into the gully.

Preston slid partway down the hill and kneeled on the ground to pick berries from the vines. Gazing up at Mark, his mustache colored deep red from the berry juice, the self-proclaimed guru of dining *al fresco* explained, “Saw these on the way up. They’re ripe now. Try them, they’re delicious.” He held out a handful to Mark, who took one of them speculatively and popped it into his mouth. Crushing the berry against the roof of his mouth, Mark tasted a tart and exotic flavor, something between a lemon and a blackberry.

“Spit out the seeds,” Preston suggested. “They’re slightly bitter.”

“Thanks.” Mark spat some seed fragments into the bushes. “How long are we going to stay here?”

“As you pointed out, Owl, we have lots of time.”

“Yeah, sure.” Mark ate some more berries, savoring their flavor, but without much enthusiasm. After a couple more handfuls, he asked, “We gonna leave some berries for whoever comes along later?”

“OK Owl, I guess that’s enough. I thought you might want a break from the ride. This seemed like a good excuse.”

“Thanks.” Mark stiffened suddenly. “What was that?”

“What?”

“Shhh! There it is again. A low *woom*. It’s the damned Horned Guan.”

“You sure?”

“Well, based on the description in the guide book, I’d say it’s a good bet. It must be back that way, uphill.”

Preston looked at his watch quickly and did some mental arithmetic. It would take them another forty minutes or so to reach the *Hacienda*. Assuming that Juan Carlos’s friend left San Augustine when they left the Rock, a big assumption, they would still have to wait for the truck. “We still have over an hour. Might as well spend it birding. Let’s find him.”

The pair crept up the slope, searching for the Guan’s likely spot. “Looking for a fruiting tree,” Preston said. “The Guan likes *aguacacita* fruit. Maybe it was *aguacatita*, meaning *little avocado*. There!”

Preston pointed to a tree in the middle distance. They swept the area with binocs. The leaves of the tree moved in an undulating rhythm. A comical bird, the size of a small turkey, mostly black with a white belly, bubble gum pink legs and a silly looking red horn on its head lumbered into view. The Guan stepped carefully on a branch that didn’t seem large enough to hold him. The branch bowed under the weight. The Guan stretched its neck out to pluck a small green fruit, one that did resemble a tiny avocado, from the branch. As they watched, the fruit moved down the bird’s neck to disappear into its gizzard.

The slow motion arboreal ballet continued. The Guan seemed to choose the fruits after careful consideration, as though testing them for ripeness. After about ten minutes, Preston roused himself. “We need to tell Millie and Geoff. The Guan may be here for an hour yet. Suppose you can raise them on that phone?”

“Worth a try.” Mark pulled the phone from his pocket and pressed a few buttons. “The number’s still in the memory.” He heard Geoff’s tentative “Hello,” and launched into an explanation. “Geoff, we’ve ? What the hell was that?”

He pulled the phone away from his ear to check it out, hearing a *click* followed by silence.

“What was it?” Preston demanded.

“It sounded like gunfire.”

“What!”

“Nothing else sounds like that.”

“Let me listen.” Preston snatched the phone from Mark. “I don’t hear anything.”

“The call disconnected immediately.” Mark tried calling again. “You have reached the voice mail for—” He pushed the *Off* button angrily and repeated the sequence, getting the same result. This time, he left a message. “Geoff or Millie, are you all right? Please call as soon as you get this message.” He rattled off his number, thinking it unlikely that Geoff could manage the automatic return call feature of the phone.

“Can you hear anything?” Preston asked.

Mark concentrated, but shook his head after several seconds. “Nothing that shouldn’t be here.”

“Look!” Preston pointed. A flock of Band-tailed Pigeons flew overhead. “Something may have spooked them.”

“Maybe. I saw a flock earlier, though, before we saw the Quetzal. They could be just flying around.”

“I wish I could hear the way I used to,” Preston said. He fiddled with his hearing aid and listened again. “This is bad. Millie and Geoff are still up there... And Juan Carlos, of course. You’re absolutely sure you really heard gunfire?”

“Positive,” Mark replied, then added, “I thought the civil war was over.”

“It is. Maybe it’s bandits, or *drugistas*.”

“Preston, I’m scared. I don’t mind admitting it. We should get down to the *Hacienda* as quickly as possible. We can call the authorities.”

Preston creased his brow in concentration. “It’ll take them hours to get here. What good will it do? I think we should go back and see if we can help. I’m responsible for Millie and Geoff.”

Mark spoke adamantly. “The military has some fast helicopters to use against the drug traffickers, courtesy of the USA. Let them handle it. We could be killed here. We need to get moving.”

“I don’t know. Millie...”

“Millie signed one of the same consent forms I did, agreeing to take responsibility for her own safety.”

“Yes, but...”

“Preston ? this road just goes into the mountains and disappears. If gunmen have hidden up there, they have to come down this way, or hike through the jungle. I’d prefer to be somewhere else if they decide to come down this road. If we go down to the *Hacienda*, we may be able to get some help. Then we can go back.”

“OK. OK. Let’s get moving. First, though, the *Hacienda*.” Preston took Mark’s phone, but simply stood there.

“Who do you want to call? What’s the number?” Mark took the phone back.

“Damn. I don’t know. I’m trying to remember. Was there a phone at the *Hacienda*?”

“You’re asking me? You’re the one who’s supposed to know the locals here.”

Preston stood transfixed, unable to make a decision. Mark made it for them, returning the phone to his pocket. “Come on, Preston, let’s go!”

Reluctantly, Preston turned and prepared to leave.

As soon as Mark was back into the box on the *moto*, Preston took off, going considerably faster than before. They reached *Hacienda de las Minas* after twenty hair-raising minutes, only

to learn that someone had already alerted the locals. Juan Carlos must have used the *telefono milagro* to call ahead. As Mark and Preston dismounted from the *moto*, they saw a party of excited men brandishing clubs, rakes and pitchforks, led by an angry man carrying an old, but still functional, shotgun.

The gun-wielder had obviously fortified himself with more than one glass of tequila, or the local equivalent; he moved unsteadily, weaving toward the *moto* while shouting to others to join him. Mark couldn't understand everything, but he grasped the essentials. When the self-appointed leader of the local militia stood about a hundred feet from Mark and Preston, he leveled his weapon and fired a blast in their direction, shouting something about *gringos pendejos* as he did so. Fortunately for the *gringos*, the range of the antique was limited. They heard the sound of shot falling into the bushes around them.

Mark threw up his hands. Preston did the same and began talking excitedly in Spanish. Mark tried to follow the exchange, but gave up quickly. He studied the faces of the men encircling them. The faces showed concern, maybe some anger, definitely fear. The main question seemed to be whether hostilities had started again. In any case, the men suspected that the *Americanos* were up to no good, and nothing Preston said changed their minds. The group's leader reloaded the shotgun and pointed it at the two birders, now well within range. The men behind Mark and Preston moved quickly to get out of the line of fire. Mark had managed to catch enough of the conversation to know that the leader preferred to be known as *El Fuerte*, meaning roughly "Tough Guy." Now, he watched Preston warily, trying to hold the gun level, waiting for the *norteño* to make a hostile move.

Abruptly, a small round-faced woman Mark recognized as the cook burst out of the kitchen shouting in Spanish, or maybe a local Indian language. He couldn't understand her either way. She strode up to *El Fuerte* grabbed the firearm and hit the poor man several times on the head all the while pouring forth a stream of invective. Mark caught the words *estupido* and *borracho*, stupid and drunk, but didn't need to understand anything else to figure out what was going on. *El Fuerte* retreated before the onslaught and accompanying laughter of the assembled crowd.

"Maria," Preston began, hoping to explain, only to stop short when Maria turned to point the barrel of the gun in his direction. All sound ceased abruptly. In a quiet voice, Maria explained to Preston what he was going to do. He and *el flaco*, the skinny one, were going to march directly to the *Hacienda*, without any trouble.

Preston tried again, "*Por supuesto, Maria, pero ?* "

"*Pero nada!*" Maria stopped him, motioning again toward the squat, gray building with the fancy name. Maria had her orders, and nothing was going to change her mind about anything. Mark heard the men whispering and caught the word for "Colonel" and the name "Don Pablo," spoken with reverence and fear. Maria spun around to face the group. As quickly as the discussion had begun, it ended.

Maria turned back to Preston and Mark. "March!" she commanded, switching to English for emphasis.

Preston shrugged and signaled Mark to follow. Accompanied by their escort, they marched to the lounge in the *Hacienda de las Minas* to await the arrival of *El Coronel Don Pablo*.

5. Kitchen Policing

Mark stood up, stretched and walked around the small windowless room for about the fortieth time. Officially designated the TV lounge, the space served admirably as a makeshift cell, with *El Fuerte* standing guard outside the only door. Preston buried himself a Spanish-language magazine, trying to ignore Mark. Mark seemed to be counting the paces, measuring the room: Three paces for the long side of the room, two for the short side. *How many times is he going to do that?*

“How long you think they’re gonna keep us here?” Mark asked. “I’m getting the whims. What are they planning? Why hasn’t someone come?”

“How long has it been?” Preston asked. “You know that things can take a long time down here.” Preston displayed an air of confidence, masking his worry about the rest of his party.

Mark checked his watch. “Five hours, thirty-eight minutes. Maybe we should be planning our escape.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Where would we go, even if we could get out of this room, which we can’t?” Preston strode over to the door and demonstrated that it was securely locked. “We’re in the third world. We have to operate on their timetable. If the helicopter takes an hour to get here...They spend another hour or so scouring the area, then hike down here...Think they could land a copter here at the *Hacienda?*”

“Maybe... Yeah, I think so.”

“They’re probably spending more time searching. Or, maybe...Yes, that must be it. They’re waiting for *Don Pablo*. That would require another copter from...Guatemala City, I guess. Maybe the Colonel didn’t want to leave right away. What time’s it now?”

“16:23.”

“Listen for the sound of a copter.” Preston knew Mark would hear the copter long before he would.

“Yeah. Right.” “Maybe we should think about disappearing before they arrive.”

“I don’t like the sound of *disappearing*,” Preston said. “That has another meaning sometimes.”

“How about *hiding*, then?”

“Where do you suggest?”

Mark looked around the room. “Unless we find some magic invisibility potion, hiding doesn’t seem to be very practical. I think we’re in trouble.”

“Try to relax,” Preston advised. “Things move slowly sometimes. It’s often best not to rush them. Besides, I’d rather deal with *Don Pablo* than that idiot who calls himself *El Fuerte*. I’ve heard of the Colonel. Once he gets here everything will be fine. I promise. Relax.”

Mark returned to his seat on the ancient sofa, in front of the prized TV set. A small table held an assortment of old magazines in Spanish and English. Mark had read all of the English

ones, learning from the most recent *Time* that Michael Jordan was going to be in a movie with Bugs Bunny called *Space Jam*. Preston was working his way through the Spanish-language editions, occasionally chuckling to himself.

“I’ve been wondering, Owl.”

“Do you realize that you’ve called me *Owl* for almost 30 years?”

“Has it been that long?”

“1968.”

“The name fits you, though they have surgery now that would let you get rid of the *Spectacled* part of your name.”

“I’ve considered it.”

“I’ll have to think up something new, then.” Preston idly turned the pages of a Spanish magazine on sports from 1995. “I wish the *Hacienda* had a satellite TV connection. Then we might be able to get some news about your dad’s death.”

“Think so?”

“Guaranteed, VIP treatment, eulogies from everyone. I’m going to miss him. He still owns 25% of EcoTours, you know, though he promised to bequeath that to me.”

“I didn’t know that. I mean, I knew that he had something to do with starting the company, but...”

Preston chuckled. “He even picked out the name. Did you know that? He coined the term *ecotourism*, at least so far as I know. He didn’t like my idea for a name.”

“What was that?”

“I thought of Preston Salomon Nature Tours.”

“Sounds OK to me.”

“He said it would be abbreviated to PSNT and pronounced *piss-ant*.” Preston laughed aloud. “You remember how he’d stare at the ceiling, then look at you with those Cocker spaniel eyes and say something.”

“Sure. I always wondered if he was really thinking when he did that, or just setting up the punch line.”

“This time, he said, ‘I think we need something else, Preston.’ Then he suggested EcoTours. Pretty good name.” Having exhausted that topic, Preston fell silent. Mark became lost in thought, so they just sat quietly for a while.

“Why’d your father name his company *Magus*?” Preston asked. “He never would tell me.”

“I was only about four at the time. I’ve heard the story often, though. It was after his first big deal, that gas plant in south Texas.”

“Let’s see. As I remember it was left over from the war or something like that.”

“Sort of. It had fallen into disrepair after the war. The oil company that owned it just shut it down. Some of the engineers thought they could make money out of it. Dad figured out a way to buy it. According to Mother, he used her family connections. Anyway, Dad raised enough cash for a down payment and borrowed the rest using the plant as collateral. He was ahead of his time as usual. Today, they call it a leveraged buyout. Back then, it was just a clever deal.”

“Now I remember. They fixed up the plant and sold it back to the same oil company they bought it from.” Preston clapped his hands together in delight at the thought. He didn’t care much for oil companies.

“That’s right. Then everyone started talking about what a *magic* deal it was. Some reporter wanted to call Dad an alchemist. He thought *Simon Magus* was an alchemist, so he called Dad that.”

“Not a very good reporter, at least when it came to checking sources, was he? Simon Magus was a fraud, wasn’t he? It’s in the Bible.”

“That’s right! It’s in Acts, chapter 8, though he’s called simply ‘Simon’ there. I don’t remember much about the incident with the reporter myself? I was too young? but I heard it really upset Dad. The *P* in Simon P. Talbot stands for *Peter*. Dad always said, ‘Fortunately, my mother wasn’t alive to hear it.’ Gram was religious. I guess Dad liked the name after all, though.”

“Must have.”

“He even got a trademark for Magus.”

“Really.”

“Yeah.” Mark didn’t say more.

Preston didn’t like the way the conversation kept dying out. “So, how about the rest of the family? How’s your brother, my old roomie, doing? How long’s it been since...”

“Ten years.”

“Amazing.”

“Right after the crash of 1987. The junk bond market started coming unraveled. Matthew copped a plea, ratted out some of the others in the SEC probe. He couldn’t get a job in New York after that. Clarissa, his second wife, you know, left him shortly after that. He was totally bummed out.”

“So that’s why he went to work at Magus. I always wondered. He never said anything good about it.”

“Didn’t have any other options. I hear Matthew’s got some new girl friend Mother doesn’t approve of.”

“That’s a surprise! I thought she approved of anything Matthew did.”

“Apparently, he’s gone overboard this time.”

“You’re not talking about Joan, are you? Simon mentioned her. He was more enthusiastic about her than anyone I can remember. Said he’d set things up for her to take over the business.”

“Apparently he gave up on either Matthew or me taking over. Joan...well, let’s say that she has many assets, not all of them business related. My info’s from Mother by way of Mary Lynn, who’s not too keen on the idea of Joan running anything. When did you hear about her?”

“Simon called me up, you know, to take him out birding.”

“Dad? Birding?”

“Well, not like you and me. I think he wanted to talk. He just liked to meet me and disappear out into the boondocks for a few hours to get away from business. I took him to High Island. Showed him the rookery. He really liked that. Told me he liked large, beautiful, easy-to-see birds. We’d taken day trips like that for years, always to some place near Houston. He’d pretend it was a business trip. Called it the EcoTours board meeting.”

Mark didn’t say anything, and seemed to be off in a different universe. Preston didn’t interrupt as they both reflected on the man they had known and loved.

“We talked about you.”

“Who?” Mark asked. “Dad?”

“Yes. It’s strange. We talked about his death as though it were just another business event to take care of. He told me he’d set things up so the transition would be smooth when he ‘shuffled off this mortal coil.’ That’s when he mentioned leaving me his share of EcoTours.”

“No kidding.”

“He really admired you.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No, really. He told me about the work you’d done lately. Called it *amazing*. Told me to ask you about it. Maybe this isn’t the best time, though.”

“Maybe not.”

“He said he liked the practice of some Native Americans, leaving the body for the scavengers, letting elements of the body return to nature. I said I thought that was illegal. Probably is.”

“I guess so, unless you’re Native American maybe.”

“I suggested cremation, with the ashes scattered, as a reasonable compromise.”

“What’d he say to that?”

“Nothing. Just seemed to think about it. Could he have had a premonition or something?”

“Well, he’d had heart trouble. Maybe he’d just come from the doctor.”

“Yeah. Must be something like that.”

Mark tried using his phone again to raise the family in Houston, without success. “It just won’t work inside the building. Do you suppose…” He struggled to his feet. “I think we’re about to have some company anyway.” He and Preston straightened up as best they could and stood expectantly at the door, ready to meet their visitor.

“Let me handle things, Mark. You stick to small talk. Your job is to call home as soon as we get outside. Grace is bound to know someone, and I think we’ll need the help.”

The sound of voices speaking Spanish reached them from outside. Preston said, “*Don Pablo*, the Colonel has arrived.” The door opened, revealing a handsome man decked out in his best uniform. He must have spent the hours primping for the *Americanos*. Between Preston and Mark in height, about 5’10”, with jet black hair, and dark eyes set in a decidedly European face, *El Coronel* spoke slowly and distinctly, in English, with the slightly clipped accent of an upper-class, US-educated Latino.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. I understand you are the two desperados who endangered the son of my sister. What have you to say for yourselves?” Mark was chagrined to hear that. After Maria and *El Fuerte* he was ready for the good cop.

“Colonel,” Preston began, speaking slowly in English, “Your reputation for a good sense of humor is well-deserved. We don’t know exactly what happened. Juan Carlos is a friend of mine. I helped him with his application to Cornell University. I would never have done anything to harm him. Surely, you don’t believe that I would do anything to harm him or my valued clients, the Waylands?”

“Juan Carlos is my favorite nephew. I do not like people to shoot at my relatives. It looks bad. People will not respect me if that kind of thing goes on. I am responsible for this part of Guatemala.”

“You think we had something to do with this?” Mark asked incredulously, ignoring Preston’s orders. He started to reiterate Preston’s denial, but Don Pablo held up his hand and laughed. “Pedro, does.”

“Pedro?” Preston asked.

“The one who calls himself *El Fuerte*.” Don Pablo chuckled and gestured toward the door. He put his hand on Preston’s shoulder in a casual, friendly gesture. “Pedro lost two sons in the insurrection. I fear it has deranged him somewhat. If he were not married to Maria… I must get to the bottom of this. What were the gunmen doing in the mountains? No one would dare to smuggle drugs or go hunting here without my permission. I considered the possibility that they are…malcontents, who were trying to revive the recent unpleasant hostilities, but Juan Carlos says they were speaking a language other than Spanish.”

“Juan Carlos?” Preston asked.

“Yes, he called me using a telephone he took from the man who was killed.”

“Killed! Geoffrey?”

“If that is his name. The stupid man decided to talk to the gunmen in the clearing, even after Juan Carlos warned him. As he was walking out to meet them his phone rang, and…well, the two men shot him. The woman was more fortunate. She took my nephew’s advice and hid

in the brush.” The Colonel took a deep breath. “No, I think this was a kidnapping attempt. I understand that the woman is quite wealthy, no?”

“That’s correct,” Preston agreed. “However, if they wanted to kidnap Millicent, why would they shoot Geoffrey? Why not take two hostages, or three for that matter?”

“I do not know. We shall find out, however, and soon, be assured of that. I understand,” he turned to address Mark, “that you as well have one of these so-called miracle telephones. Please give it to me.”

Mark cursed silently and handed over the phone. The Colonel turned it over in his hand, examining it carefully. “I have been told that with this phone one can call anywhere in the world.”

“That is correct, *Señor Coronel*,” Mark agreed. “From anywhere in the world to anywhere in the world.” *As long as you’re not inside a building*, Preston thought to himself.

“Indeed. That would be the perfect instrument for a terrorist, wouldn’t you agree?”

Preston spoke up. “Colonel, please. Tell me that you don’t suspect us. Why would we want to kidnap part of our own group?”

“Ah, but you were not there when the kidnapping took place, were you? Very convenient.” Mark looked as if he were going to be sick. Preston smiled reassuringly.

A loud knock on the door interrupted the conversation. “*Entrar!*” Don Pablo called out. *El Fuerte*, having reclaimed his shotgun, burst in. He unleashed a stream of insults in Spanish at Preston, waving the shotgun around menacingly. Preston tried to calm him down, but that seemed to enrage him even more. Only Don Pablo’s quiet voice had an impact. The vigilante lowered his weapon and mumbled something to Don Pablo. The Colonel snapped his fingers and a young, very professional soldier appeared, received some orders and hurried out, dragging *Pedro el Fuerte* with him.

Preston, who’d followed the exchange, said, “Thank you Colonel. I confess that I was worried about him.”

“He won’t bother us any more,” Don Pablo said. “These people think the rebellion is starting again. They are very excitable. I must have your cooperation to get to the bottom of this.”

“Speaking of cooperation Señor, we’ve been locked in here since this morning. Do you think we could...”

The Colonel looked around the room apparently noticing it for the first time. “You have been locked in here all day? I must apologize profusely for this inhumane treatment. I instructed this rabble that calls itself a militia to ensure that you remained until I was able to arrive. These *campesinos*,” he spit out that word, “know only one way to handle things. I hope you were not too uncomfortable.”

“Please,” Preston said, “we understand. No need for an apology. It was a simple misunderstanding.”

“You must be hungry. The kitchen here is well known for its *caldo de res*. Will you join me for dinner?”

“We’d be delighted,” Preston said, always ready for a good meal. Mark still looked a bit green around the gills, but Preston was sure he must be hungry. They hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

“*Caldo de res?* Beef soup?” Mark asked.

“Excellent, Owl. You’ll learn the language yet. Each cook has his own way of preparing the dish. I can hardly wait to sample it. Please, Colonel, lead the way. What should we call you, if I may ask?” Preston already knew the answer, but liked to make sure of things.

“In these parts, I am known as Don Pablo.” He emphasized the *Don* slightly.

Preston gave Mark a significant look. The honorific was not bestowed lightly.

“Your description of *Caldo de Res* is accurate, Mr. Salomon. Maria has her own recipe, she uses some beef, potatoes, *chayote* squash, and whatever other vegetables she has handy. The dish is an old family favorite. You’ll enjoy it. This way.” The Colonel passed by the dining area and went instead to a patio nearby. Some of the locals were already setting up a table and chairs in the open air, under the watchful eyes of Don Pablo’s soldiers.

“A beautiful view, is it not? I thought it would be more pleasant to eat out here. Do you agree?”

“Of course,” Preston replied. “Perhaps we can even see a rare bird from here.” He hefted his binoculars in his hand for emphasis.

“Very fine binoculars,” observed the Colonel.

Preston confided in a conspiratorial tone, “I have a promotional contract with the manufacturer. Perhaps you noticed the name on the cap I wear.”

“I see. That is interesting.”

They walked to the patio. Mark tried to follow Preston’s lead by engaging the Colonel in conversation, though Preston could see that his heart was not in it. “My mother would love this table,” Mark noted.

“Why would your mother like the table?” the Colonel asked, looking it over carefully as though he’d missed something, such as some gold plating. “It’s just something the peasants made.”

“Oh, but look at the construction. This is completely handmade, with wooden pegs, not nails, and finished to a remarkably smooth surface. Someone spent a lot of time working on this. It’s simple, but well made, with a certain elegance.”

“Perhaps,” the Colonel conceded.

“Besides, they must have guarded it carefully for it to have survived long. I mean...”

“No, I understand what you mean. It is indeed a treasure for these people. It is quite an honor for us to be allowed to use it.” As he spoke, the servants covered the table with a tablecloth, setting out plates and glasses.

“I’m sure it is your presence, Don Pablo,” Preston pointed out.

Don Pablo smiled and said nothing. He relished being the important guest.

Two soldiers armed with automatic weapons stood menacingly nearby, in case one of the *gringos* got out of line.

“This is certainly a beautiful area,” Preston said, sweeping his arm to include the entire valley. From where they stood, they saw the tortuous road leading back to San Augustine. It looked even worse from a distance than it had when they drove up. In addition to farms and orchards laid out in neat rectangles, the road snaked through a succession of hamlets, each dominated by a church made of cinder blocks. Small huts made of adobe with roofs of metal or sometimes thatch surrounded the churches. On the opposite side of the valley, the uneven line of encroaching forest, normally kept at bay by constant cutting, showed where a farm had fallen victim to the recent civil war.

Preston continued, “As you know, Don Pablo, I am in the business of bringing a few very careful, and *rich*, clients to places like this. This would be a great destination if it were only a bit easier to get to. If, for instance, we could find funds to repair the road, it would change things overnight.”

“Perhaps things don’t need changing overnight.”

“Oh, but Colonel, how is this country going to support the population and preserve the forests at the same time? Unless we do something to help, the people will eventually cut down the forests for firewood. We need to provide them with an alternative way to make a living. We—”

“Enough, my friend. We can discuss these matters later. Now, we must eat.”

They sat at long wooden benches. The table held a plate of small rolls, pineapple slices, several pieces of melon, and a dish of tiny peppers. The cook brought out the soup in a large tureen, another treasure. “These are *chiles pequins*,” the Colonel explained, taking one of the peppers in his hand. “Take one and crush it between your teeth. Then take a spoonful of the soup. Let them mix in your mouth before swallowing. It is quite an experience, I assure you.”

Preston and Mark did as instructed. The peppers were fiery, not for the timid. Both Mark and Preston ate with gusto. The soup was as good as advertised, hearty and filling, with an exotic taste from the *chayote* squash.

As they ate, Don Pablo returned to his role of good cop. “Señor Salomon,” he began, “I failed to express my appreciation for your efforts on behalf of Juan Carlos. Your letter of recommendation was most helpful. He will be attending Cornell next fall.”

“So he told me. I am delighted. I am sure he will make an excellent scholar.”

Preston reflected on the Colonel’s use of the future tense and found that encouraging. Juan Carlos must be all right.

Don Pablo took up the discussion. “One can hope. I am inclined to take you at your word that you had nothing to do with this ... this unfortunate incident. Nevertheless, I must report to the judiciary tomorrow. They will decide what action to take. These are new times, you understand... My authority extends only to acts of terrorism and such things.”

“I understand,” Preston said. “I can contribute little. We came here to observe the Horned Guan, and perhaps some other specialties of the area. Mark’s father died last night. That is why we cut our visit short.”

The Colonel looked at Mark and nodded his head slightly, acknowledging the death. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Mark nodded back and mumbled “*gracias.*”

“How did you learn of the death?”

“Mark received a message on his phone.”

Don Pablo started to ask a question, when Mark asked, “What’s that noise? Someone is coming.” All three rose from the table and turned toward the sound, which proved to be the returning soldiers, together with Juan Carlos and Millicent.

“Juan Carlos!” the Colonel shouted.

“Millie!” Preston shouted. He took a step toward her, but stopped when he saw one of the Colonel’s guards turn his gun on them.

The sight of soldiers carrying a stretcher with a blanket-draped body tempered their relief at the reunion. Millie had been crying. Scratches and insect bites covered her face and arms. She looked exhausted. The Colonel began issuing orders in rapid Spanish. Millie sank onto the bench and looked at Preston with bloodshot eyes. “Preston, I... Thank heavens for Juan Carlos. Without him I’d be dead too. Poor Geoff. They shot him in cold blood, Preston. No reason at all. Poor dear. He was ... was real sweet. I’ll never be able to find another husband like him.” Mark recalled that Millie had never had a problem attracting husbands before and doubted she would again. He kept quiet for once.

“Millie. It must have been horrible.” Preston hugged her. “Don’t try to talk about it yet. I’ll take care of everything. Can you eat? There’s some soup left.” He served up a bowl of soup. Millie showed no interest in eating.

Don Pablo returned. “I have asked the men to prepare a room for *la Señora* Wayland. I’m having a doctor flown up here from the airbase. We may have to take her to the hospital in Guatemala City.”

Millie objected. “I ... I just want to go home. There are things I have to do...”

Preston took up the case with the Colonel. “We were hoping to be able to travel to Houston. Mark’s father’s funeral...”

“I will have to see. There are many things to investigate. There will be some fees for export licenses and the like. I may be able to assist you with that. In the meantime, I must insist that you remain here.” As he spoke, Don Pablo fiddled with Geoff’s phone, which he had taken from Juan Carlos. He pressed several buttons to no effect. Preston noticed and motioned to Mark.

“Excuse me, Don Pablo,” Mark said holding out his hand for the phone, “*Con permiso*, I believe I may be able to get the phone to work.” Using a small screwdriver on his Swiss army knife, he opened the case and tweaked something inside. Closing the case, he pushed the *on* button. The dial lit up, ready for action.

“This model is known to have some problems,” Mark explained, handing the instrument back to Don Pablo.

“You have some interesting talents,” Don Pablo observed, his brows narrowing in suspicion.

“It’s my job,” Mark said. “I’m an expert in computer security, including things like this phone. I helped design part of it,” he added proudly. “Did you need to make a call?”

“No. However, I will have to keep the device as evidence, you understand, along with the other one. Obviously, there is a conspiracy here. I wished to know how the phone functioned. That is an interesting knife, by the way,” he added. Putting the phone in a pocket of his uniform and taking up the knife, Don Pablo resumed the interrupted interrogation. “Tell me. How did your father die, if I may be permitted to inquire?”

“The message said a heart attack.”

“I understand. Had your father been ill?”

“He had a heart condition, high blood pressure, pacemaker. He had a bypass several years ago. He was in good health, but...”

“I am certainly understanding regarding your need to return for the funeral of someone so close. I will do everything I can to assist you. You understand that there are certain formalities to deal with. Perhaps I can use my influence to expedite your return.”

Preston looked at Mark and flicked his eyes briefly. Mark rose. “If you permit, I need to visit the *sanitario*.”

“Of course.” The Colonel waved to a private, who followed to make sure Mark didn’t try to escape into the jungle or do something equally foolish.

“Now, Colonel. May we speak frankly?”

Don Pablo smiled and nodded slightly.

Several minutes of extended negotiation followed, so that when Mark returned several minutes later, Millie was gone and Don Pablo was looking through Preston’s binoculars. Preston took Mark aside and conferred in whispers, “We reached an accommodation. Don Pablo has graciously agreed to allow us to use the *telefono milagro* to call home. Get Grace working on things from her end. And unless you have more money than usual, see if she can send us some. We could be here for days otherwise.”

Mark’s phone was sitting on the table. He picked it up and dialed the number for the Talbot’s Houston residence. Preston moved close to Mark so they could both listen to the conversation. Idelle answered on the third ring, using what Mark called her *Barbara Jordan* voice. “You have reached the Talbot residence. May I ask who is calling, please?”

“Idelle. It’s Mark.”

Idelle reverted to the tone she used for the family. “Oh, Mark, praise God. Your Mama’s been fit to be tied.” Soon Mark heard his mother’s cultured tones.

“Dear, are you all right? Where are you? Are you all right? I’ve been worried. We got a message saying—”

“I’m OK, Mother, considering. How are you doing? Preston and Millicent said to tell you how sorry they were to hear the news about Dad. Listen. I don’t know how much time I

have. There's been an...accident here. Geoff's been killed. I think we'll need you to use your influence to help us get out. They're asking all sorts of questions."

"Oh, how terrible. Poor Millicent. Of course, I know just how she feels. Don't worry, dear. I'm sure I can find someone. Are you hurt? I couldn't bear it if you and Simon both..." She broke off for a moment. When she returned, she was all business. "Do you need anything else? I need you here with me in Houston. I'll make sure things go smoothly down there. Don't worry."

"We'll probably need some cash. My credit cards aren't much use, and for our purposes American hundreds would be best." Preston nodded enthusiastically. "We'll definitely have some extra expenses and all the banks are closed here for Holy Week. I'll get to Houston as fast as I possibly can. It may get a bit tricky. Try not to worry."

"I understand. Dear, I'm so glad to hear you're OK. This has been so stressful. I made a complete fool of myself Tuesday night, well Wednesday morning. I..."

"It'll be OK, Mother. Don't worry about anything."

"But...never mind. You're right. Do you know how much you'll need for expenses?"

Mark and Preston conferred quietly under the suspicious glare of Don Pablo's soldiers. They came up with an estimate, which Mark passed on to Grace. "I think I better go before they think I'm planning something sinister, Mother. See you soon. Give my love to everyone. And get us out of here."

Don Pablo appeared at Mark's side, collected his *evidence*, , waved to his men to follow, and strode off.

"You bribed him with the binoculars."

"Please, Owl. I gave him a gift out of appreciation for his efforts on our behalf. I bribed the greedy bastard with most of Millie's and my spare cash. We need to get to Houston as soon as possible. I wish we could leave tonight, after Don Pablo and his men are gone. But no one will drive this road in the dark. Besides that, everyone's scared shitless right now."

"They're not alone in that," Mark said.

"In any case, the Colonel's generosity didn't extend to offering to let us leave. With Grace running interference, we should be able to start the wheels of bureaucracy turning, even this close to Easter. I wonder who she knows down here." Grace's Rolladex was world-famous. Preston added as an afterthought, "Sorry about your phone."

Mark waved his hand, "Forget it. It's the knife that bugs me. I've had it since college. Neither phone is likely to work long, by the way. Geoff should have waited a bit longer before buying his. He had a pre-production model. Don't know how he got his hands on it. It tends to crash under extreme conditions."

"What are extreme conditions?"

"High humidity among other things," Mark said smiling. "My phone will go dead as soon as the battery runs down. I seriously doubt that our new friend will be able to find a replacement. The only recharger that'll work with it's in my backpack. He's got about an hour air time left, a day or so on standby."

“Let’s try to get some rest. We may be stuck here for days.”

April 13, 1998

Houston

Is there anything in the world to compare to the spectacle of spring migration along the Texas coast? Every year millions of song birds, shorebirds, hawks, and other migrants stream across the Gulf of Mexico as well as around it, and pass through Texas on their way north. At the same time, thousands of birders gather along the coast to view the avian extravaganza.

Many of the better-known birding spots along the coast can become annoyingly crowded, especially on a weekend in April. High Island, for example, resembles a carnival, with people greeting old friends, shopping at kiosks, and taking time to stroll through the woods on muddy trails.

If you're the kind of birder who would rather spend time birding, rather than talking and shopping, this is the book for you. We concentrate on great places that are not yet overrun, places with magical names such as Rockport, Riviera, Matagorda, and some with no name at all, such as "the marsh" located where Farm Road 1717 crosses Santa Gertrudis Creek near Kingsville.

In addition to directions to birding hot spots, we have included our recommendations for places to stay and eat during the journey. We hope you will enjoy your trip.

Houston

What an interesting place! Houston is a major seaport, but is located fifty miles from the nearest ocean. As with so many aspects of this fascinating city, the seaport is the work of man. The Houston Ship Channel is a massive canal leading from the Gulf of Mexico into the heart of Houston, where it serves the oil refineries and petrochemical plants.

Real estate speculators founded Houston during the early days of the Texas Republic, naming it after General Sam in the hope of luring people to the city, which was then a swampy, mosquito-infested backwater on the shores of Buffalo Bayou. Somehow, the town established itself as the capital of Texas until the legislators revolted and began a search for a better location, selecting the small town of Waterloo, renamed Austin.

Today, Houston is the undisputed energy capital of the world, where oil flows in the veins of the movers and shakers of society. It is also, thanks to NASA, a city on the edge of space, where billboards proudly proclaim, "The first word from the surface of the moon: Houston!" This represents a slight bit of poetic license. The first words from the moon were actually either "Contact light," or "Engine shutdown," depending on your definition of "surface of the moon."

From our point of view, Houston is a central location for beginning the exploration of the Texas coast. Most visitors will find their first experience of Texas to be the chilly confines of the Intercontinental Airport, where they learn first hand of the natives' peculiar habit of air conditioning everything to the point of discomfort. One step outside will demonstrate the logic behind this habit, when the Texas heat strikes you with enough force to fog contact lenses.

If you are in a hurry to get to the coast, exit the airport on IH-45 and drive south. However, if you have some time to spare and haven't yet seen the Red-cockaded Woodpecker...¹

¹ Preston Salomon, *Birding the Texas Coast*, p. 10. Copyright 1996, EcoTours Press, Houston, TX. Used by permission.

6. Funeral Games

Mark and Preston arrived at the Talbot residence in the fashionable River Oaks section of Houston on Saturday, late in the afternoon. As he paid the taxi driver, Mark felt a pair of strong arms around his middle and lips kissing the back of his neck.

“Miss me?” he asked.

“I thought I might never see you again! Grace told me not to worry, but CNN had news about the shooting. They mentioned Millicent Wayland a wealthy—”

“They didn’t mention EcoTours, did they?” Preston interrupted, concern creasing his brow.

“I don’t think so.” Delfina released her grip on Mark and turned to embrace Preston. “Hi, Preston.”

“And greetings to the beautiful Dolphin.” Preston took Delfina’s hand and kissed it enthusiastically. Delfina giggled.

“I’ll go give my condolences to Grace, Owl. I’ll find you later.” Preston left them alone.

“So you really worried about me?” Mark asked, as Delfina briefly buried her face in his chest before looking up, smiling, but with eyes glistening with tears. He kissed her gently.

“How close did you come to being killed?” Delfina demanded. “Why do you go to places where they shoot people?”

Mark remembered that Houston once claimed the distinction of “Murder Capital of the World,” but instead of mentioning it, he said, “Let’s talk about it later. Come on, may as well get this over with.” He started up the walk.

“Wait! I got some stuff to tell you! Your brother’s drunk, at least I think he’s drunk, his two ex-wives are closeted together comparing notes, his youngest kid has commandeered the TV in the rec room and his new girl friend has got everyone staring. Everyone is talking about the will. I haven’t been able to get the details. You’re executor. Does that mean you’re rich?”

“I’m already rich. I have you, don’t I?”

“You know what I mean, filthy rich. I was just wondering...I wondered if this meant...Never mind. Joan’s here. I thought you said she never came to the house? Everyone’s talking about her. She’s tough competition. Beautiful dress. Legs to die for. She’s supposed to be the new President of Magus. Why is Mary Lynn in such a snit?”

“Whoa! Slow down. Have you been skimping on your medication?”

“Don’t joke about that.”

“OK, OK. Now, slowly. Matthew really brought his new female companion?”

“Tall, red hair, silicone boobs, earrings the size of hubcaps. Wearing a red dress that Grace doesn’t approve of. Looks young enough to be his daughter.”

“Maybe she *is* his daughter, the surfer, Celeste.”

“No. I met her. She’s interesting. This girl is older. Younger than me, but maybe about thirty.”

“Well, from what you say the rumor about the girl may be true. I heard she had a...an interesting past. By the way, love, where’d you come up with your dress?”

As Delfina approached the big Four-Oh, she had become increasingly concerned about her appearance, staying in shape with regular visits to the gym and a dietary regimen Mark found a trifle compulsive. Blessed with what Grace termed *good bones*, Delfina favored tight jeans that showed off slim, muscular legs, and blousy tops that hid an imaginary deficit at the bust line and focused attention on her heart-shaped face. Her black hair and her olive complexion testified to Hispanic roots. Usually, Del wore her hair very long, flowing free, hanging down to her waist. Today, it was arranged in a style Mark hadn’t seen before, wavy on the sides, drawn back on top, with a long central tail, the result of professional styling. Her dress, though appropriately black, had a skirt too tight and too short for a funeral.

“Like it?” Delfina replied, pirouetting to display the dress. “It’s Grace’s. She even picked it out. Said the top would flatter me, meaning it would disguise the fact that the Dolphin got cheated in the tits department.”

“My mother lent you *that* dress? That’s not like her.”

“We’re good buddies, Grace and me. We’re sorority sisters, remember. Of course, she was at UT, not SMU, but...” Del pronounced SMU like the bird, *Smew*.

“She must have said something about it being too short.”

“Maybe.” Delfina giggled. “Maybe I took up the hem some.”

“You!”

“Well, Idelle helped me.”

“What’s Idelle doing now?”

“Grace has her screening calls. The Governor was here earlier.”

“Governor? Which state?”

“Texas, silly.”

“I guess I have to go see everyone. Who’s here from the office besides Mary Lynn?”

“Well, Joan, and...Oh, just about everyone. The network hotshot, Adrian Something’s, not here. He’s working on some crash project.”

She took his arm and they strolled up the pine-shaded walk to the front door. Mark said. “I really don’t look presentable. Maybe I should slip in the back and change first. We had hell getting out of Guatemala. All the red tape, and a greedy bastard of a military guy running the show. Besides, half the country is on vacation for the whole week. They take Easter too damn seriously. We spent last night in the airport to make sure we were on the plane this morning.”

“Later. You look fine. Nobody will care whether you’re wearing a suit or not.” Delfina dragged him toward the front door.

“Did my mother say anything about why they went ahead with the funeral before I got home?”

“No. She was worried sick about you. Didn’t want to lose Simon and you both. *I* was worried. I’ve been here since Wednesday night, as soon as I got the word about Simon. CNN made it sound bad. They said someone tried to kidnap you.”

“Kidnapping’s the official line in Guatemala. It may even be true, but it’s a strange place for an abduction.”

Mark dropped his duffel in the hall. One of the caterer’s minions appeared instantly from nowhere and whisked it away. The presence of such utilitarian paraphernalia spoiled the atmosphere of refined elegance.

Intended simply as a place to take off coats before proceeding to the living room, the hall held a crowd a people, all wearing somber clothes and matching expressions. Mark stood out in his jeans and T-shirt, with a four-day beard, unkempt hair and a generally haggard appearance. He attracted immediate attention. People he barely knew surrounded him, shaking hands, patting him on the back and mumbling condolences. He whispered to Delfina, “I think I need to handle some things by myself. Why don’t you come find me later?” Del kissed him on the cheek and whispered back, “OK, if you’re think that’s best. I am starving. Been too nervous to eat.” She moved off in the direction of the buffet table.

Mark pushed his way into the living room, searching for his mother and brother. He spotted them standing by the fireplace. Matthew, stocky, medium height, with curly brown hair looked like “the spitting image of his dad,” as he’d surely heard many times today. Mark’s mother, elegant and tall ? Grace could look Simon straight in the eye and was only slightly shorter than Mark ? possessed a metabolism that kept her thin regardless of what she ate. Today, she wore a designer dress in several shades of black, with the high neck she favored to accentuate her aristocratic lines. She had maintained for years that hair color was something a woman chose for herself. Today, it shone, a dusky blond, with lighter highlights, making her look more like Mark’s contemporary than his mother.

Grace and Matthew argued heatedly together. Mark got close enough to hear part of the conversation. Grace said, “I don’t care what Simon thought, that bitch is not going to run the company if I have anything to say about it.”

“Don’t worry,” Matthew cautioned. “I got the fucking lawyers working on it. Anyway—”

“Matthew! Watch your language.” Grace spotted Mark. “Damn!” She whispered to Matthew, “There’s your brother.” She smoothed an imaginary wrinkle in her skirt, stood up straighter, and waved with just the right touch of style and relief. “Mark, darling, thank God you’re home!”

The crowd parted like the Red Sea to let Mark through. “Hello, Mother. Matthew.”

Grace started crying as Mark hugged her. “I’ve been frantic. I’m so glad you’re finally here.” Mark shook hands with his brother, still holding Grace.

“Thanks for calling around. I was sure you’d know the US Ambassador, but knowing the Argentinean as well, that was enough to crack the bureaucracy open. *Señor* Torres was a great help. The FBI got there this morning. They took charge of the body to perform—”

“We get the point, Mark,” Matthew said. “Jeez.”

“It took a day to get down the mountain with Geoff’s body. We had to drive extra slowly, and everyone feared another attack. Had to pay through the nose...On the subject of bodies and such, couldn’t you hold off on the funeral till I got here?” Mark asked, directing the question at Matthew.

Grace stiffened in his arms and stepped back. “Please don’t quarrel.” Mark saw she had been weeping a lot. Her eyes were rimmed in red, and she wore glasses instead of the contacts she preferred.

Matthew answered Mark, “Hey! We tried, you know, but with Easter coming up, we wanted to get everything out of the way and...” He swayed slightly and his speech was slurred.

“You know I don’t give a damn about the service. What I want to know is why you had the body cremated—”

“It was all in that damn letter Dad wrote, the one making you executor of the estate. Apparently, over the years you and Preston converted Dad into an *environmentalist*.” His face distorted into an angry grimace before he continued. “Dad wanted to ‘return his elements to the earth,’ for crissake.”

Idelle, the black woman responsible for preventing the Talbot household from sinking into chaos, appeared and whispered something to Grace, who nodded. “I’ll talk to you later, dear,” she said to Mark, patting him on the arm. Idelle said to Mark. “Praise the Lord, you’re here safely. We were all worried about you.”

“It’s good to be home, Idelle.”

“I got to see to some things. Y’all excuse me.”

Mark had Matthew to himself. “So,” Mark said, “fill me in. What’s this about a new will?”

“Wha’ the fuck I know? Mary Lynn, when she’s able to talk, claims that Dad was working on a new will. Says she *knows* he was going to leave something to Joan. He *did* appoint her as interim President. You gotta handle that.”

“Me? Why me?”

“You’re the fucking executor of the fucking estate, that’s why.”

“What the hell’s that about? I thought Dad had someone at Pierce & Pierce lined up to deal with the estate.”

“Oh the lawyers’ll help. Me too.” He tried to smile, but it came out as a smirk. “Good old Dad changed his will last week to make you executor. Found a way to screw me one more time. Turn the company into a goddamned *eleemosynary* institution.” Matthew had considerable trouble getting his tongue around *eleemosynary*. Mark wondered how drunk his brother was. More than usual, that was for sure.

“That’s harsh, Matt.”

Matthew said nothing, so Mark took up another thread. “I hear you have some good deals going these days.”

“Where’d you hear that?” Matthew asked angrily.

“Mother said you were flush. Actually, she said that Glenda and Clarissa weren’t bugging you for child support, so...”

“Those leeches. Both of ‘em here, you know. Scheming together. If I get any money, they want it. Why do I need to be paying anything to Glenda, anyway? Celeste’s grown, even if she’s wasting—”

“OK, OK,” Mark said. “How’s ...”

“Mimi? She’s great,” Matthew leered. “Only good thing to happen to me in ages. I need another drink. Where’s Idelle?”

“I don’t see her around.”

“Good.” Matthew lurched off toward the bar.

“I see you made it safely.” Mark looked to his left at a woman in her middle forties, her mousy hair done up in a tight bun, her face creased with a permanent frown, wearing a rumpled black dress that didn’t quite fit. *Time for Mary Lynn to attempt another diet.* Under Grace’s tutelage, Mary Lynn had developed a rudimentary sense of style since she began to work at Magus. While she would never be beautiful and sophisticated, Mary Lynn had done a lot to rise above her humble beginnings in an East Texas trailer park. Today, that all seemed forgotten, as though the occasion demanded not only grief, but also actual sackcloth. Mark examined her closely and saw bloodshot eyes brimming with tears. Her shoulders slumped and she seemed on the edge of collapsing completely.

“Hi, Mary Lynn. Yes, we made it finally. Thanks for handling the travel arrangements.”

“No problem.” She hiccupped slightly as she said it.

Mark reached out his arms. Mary Lynn melted into his chest, weeping. He stroked her back. “How long did you work for him? Twenty years?”

Mary Lynn stepped back, opening her purse as she did so, a large bag jammed with notepads, pens, several lipsticks, and who knows what else. After rummaging around at length, she drew out a box of Kleenex, the kind sold in convenience stores to go in cars. She dabbed her eyes, then cleared her nose with a stentorian blast. The carefully wadded up the Kleenex disappeared into a nearby wastebasket. “Twenty-*three* years.”

Mark had lost the context and had to think a bit to realize that she was answering his question. “Long time.”

“Practically my whole adult life. I don’t know what I’m going to do now. That...that...*witch* is in charge now. I can’t work for her. You’ve got to do something about it.”

“Well, I don’t know what I can do, Mary Lynn.”

“Well, as executor of the estate, you can vote the shares.”

“I just heard about being executor.”

“Oh. Simon didn’t tell you? He told me Tuesday he was going to send you an e-mail. You didn’t get it? I guess that’s what he was working on when —” Mark waited impatiently through another performance with the Kleenex.

“How do you know I’m the executor?”

“I typed up the document. I watched him sign it, notarized it with the signatures of two of the women from Accounting. He wanted to make sure it was done right away. I tried finding out what he had in mind. He said he would tell me after...”

Mark realized that this was not going to be a normal conversation.

Was that what Delfina meant when she mentioned the will? “Delfina said something about a new will.”

“He was working on a new will. He wouldn’t let me see it.” Mary Lynn struggled to avoid crying again. “It had something to do with *her*, I know it did.”

“Joan?”

“He was completely besotted. I tried to talk to him about it, but...” Mary Lynn gave up, walking off quickly in the direction of the restroom.

Mark worked his way toward the bar, looking out for Idelle on the way. “Hi, Lunyon. What time do you have?”

“Hi, Mistah Mark. We been worried about you.” Lunyon replied. He continued without looking at his watch, “I got a bit after five o’clock,” as he poured a Shiner Bock into a large, opaque glass. Glancing around quickly, he handed the glass to Mark. “She’s too busy. I don’t think you need a special.”

“What’s so special about Shiner Bock?” Mark recognized the voice, turned around ready to explain, and found himself staring into Joan’s arresting eyes. Neither blue nor brown, the irises showed a blue that reminded Mark of a Cerulean Warbler blending gradually into a circle of pure gold. Sitting in the middle of a perfect oval face with a smile displaying the work of a good orthodontist, the eyes were slightly puffy, and the smile a bit strained.

Taller than Delfina, with blond hair cut boyishly short and skin coloring to match, Joan possessed a figure every bit as spectacular as Mimi’s ? probably without the need for silicone ? and, from what Mark could see beneath the hem of her stylish dress, legs that might indeed merit dying for. In contrast to Delfina, Joan’s dress reflected perfect taste. Black and loose, long enough to make a statement about what she chose to display at a funeral, the dress fit the occasion and the wearer equally. No dress, however, could conceal the woman beneath, despite the effort she’d made today.

She tilted her head back slightly to look Mark in the eye.

“Hi, Joan.” Mark stopped himself from kissing her on the cheek, remembering that she wasn’t family, despite what everyone thought.

“Hi. So what’s this about a special?”

“Shh! Idelle’s rule. She doesn’t allow anyone in the Talbot family to drink alcohol before sundown. Lunyon and I worked out a scam years ago. He fixes a Shiner and makes it look like iced tea, with a lemon on the rim. We even have some fake ice cubes, right Lunyon?”

Lunyon smiled.

“Clever,” Joan said in a way that meant she thought it anything but. “Doesn’t Idelle work for you? Why not just tell her who’s in charge.”

Lunyon laughed out loud.

“We tried that once,” Mark explained. “It wasn’t a good idea.” He smiled at Lunyon.

“You going upstairs?” Joan asked.

“Hadn’t really thought about it. I guess that’s where Mother went? She left to answer a phone call. Probably time for me to head up there.”

“Can...May I come with you? I’d need to speak to her, but I may need some backup. I’ve been procrastinating,” she admitted.

Smart, young and beautiful. What a combination! Mark offered her his arm. They walked up to Grace’s bedroom, where Mark knocked tentatively on the door. “Not now. I’m on the phone.”

“Mother. It’s me.”

“Oh. Come in, dear.” Mark pushed the door open and peered into the sepulchral bedroom. With all the curtains drawn, the only light came from a small night light that turned on automatically with the dark. Grace set the stage appropriately, even though no one could see her. She spoke into the phone. “Thank you, sir. We appreciate your taking the time to call...What’s that? MagusPAC?” Grace laughed. “Well, we’ll have to see. Are you changing parties? ... A private meeting? Exactly what did you have in mind?” Grace laughed. “Thank you again, sir.”

Mark whispered to Joan, “There’s only one person in the world Mother would call *sir*.”

Grace offered a final “goodbye” and replaced the phone. “A private meeting. As if!” She looked up, a smile on her face. The smile vanished, replaced by a tight line, when she noticed Joan. Mark crossed the floor quickly and kissed his mother on the cheek. “I thought I’d take this chance to see you alone. It’s so hectic downstairs. Sorry it took me so long to get home. Wish you’d held things up till I got here.”

Grace smiled again, completely ignoring his complaint. “You’re forgiven for being late, dear. How was your trip? Did you *get* the Crowned whatever it was?” She knew by now that birders didn’t *see* a bird, they *got* it.

“*Horned Guan*. We had a terrific look at one feeding in an *aguacacita* tree, that’s related to avocados. Preston told me that Guans —”

“Preston’s such a nice man. He said some kind things about your father, especially how Simon stuck with him through the lean years. It was very nice of him.” She rearranged herself on the chaise, making room for Mark to sit down, ignoring Joan. “How are things going downstairs? Disorganized?”

“Just fine, Mother. Idelle has everything under control.”

“I hope so. I should be down there supervising personally. They don’t ever work as well when I’m not around. But...”

“You had to take that call, Mother.” He gave her a small hug.

Joan took advantage of the lull to cross the floor, extending her hand to Grace. “Mrs. Talbot, please accept my condolences. I really liked and admired ...your husband. I hope I can live up to his expectations, to his confidence in me.”

Grace regarded her carefully, looking to see if she could detect any sign of irony. In the dim light, she could barely make out Joan's face. "Mark, it's too dark in here. Turn up the lights, will you?"

Mark rose to comply. Grace inspected Joan as she might a side of beef. "You remind me of someone, but I'm not sure who exactly. You are quite lovely. I suppose you know that." Grace was being uncharacteristically blunt, forsaking her reputation for always saying the right thing to everyone.

"Thank you," Joan said. Mark got the idea that she was used to being complimented.

"Staying beautiful is such as struggle, isn't it? It's been part of my life's work."

"You look very *elegant*," Joan replied, leaping at the chance to return the compliment.

Grace rewarded her with a thin smile. "A good choice of words, my dear. *My husband* would have approved."

Mark, with far more than his usual sensitivity to the atmosphere in the room, realized that he needed to intervene before the sparring became deadly. "Mother, why did you hurry the cremation? And what about an autopsy?"

"Not now, dear." Grace reached over to the side table and picked up the phone. "Thank you for coming, Joan. Now, I need to return some more phone calls." She consulted a list by the phone and began dialing.

Joan mumbled goodbye. She and Mark left, dimming the lights as they did so.

"I didn't realize that you and my mother were such strangers," Mark said once they were outside the room.

"We've met, but only at the office. Simon...your father...thought it best if I... avoided social situations, at least until the time was right. I hadn't been inside the house until today. By the way, you and I need to talk, about Magus."

"Can't that wait?"

"Oh, of course. What am I thinking...while we're up here, will you show me your father's trophy wall?"

"Curious to see if you're on it?" Mark regretted the remark immediately. He could feel the air turn cold beside him. "I'm sorry. That was thoughtless."

"Yes," Joan said simply, "it was. I was not your father's trophy, no matter what anyone says. I worked for him. That's all. Well, that's not really all. I liked him a lot. We..."

"I said I was sorry."

"You're forgiven."

"It seems to be my day to be forgiven." They walked down the hall. The wall contained pictures, mostly newspaper photos and magazine covers.

"He started me out doing research. I checked out firms he was interested in. As I learned more about how Magus worked, he gave greater responsibilities. He and I worked well together. He...he said I had good business instincts."

“Research?” Mark probed. Joan didn’t seem to want to say more. They stopped in front of the earliest pictures. “This shows Dad outside the gas plant in south Texas. That was his first big coup. You must have heard of that.” Joan nodded. Mark continued, “Here he is with Eisenhower.”

“Did he really correct Eisenhower’s grammar?”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“It was on *A&E Biography*. Matthew’s son recorded it. What about it? Is the story true? I heard your mother was mortified.”

Mark replied, “That’s what she says...every time she tells the story...which she does often.”

Joan chuckled politely.

“Actually, Simon corrected *everyone’s* grammar. You must know that. Well, everyone except Idelle.”

Joan agreed. “He certainly corrected mine until I learned to be careful.”

“Well, you’re in good company. Besides Eisenhower there was, let’s see...Dan Rather ? that was before Dan was famous ? Nelson Mandela...lots of people.” They moved on to some more pictures.

“This *Forbes* cover must have been when your father made the 400 list for the first time. 1987...Is that Lady Bird Johnson with your Mother?”

“Yes, they go back a long way.”

“Who’s this? It that you?”

“That’s me.”

“I’ve seen this photo before. It happened in the sixties, didn’t it?” The picture showed a thin boy crouched on the ground, his left arm raised in a defensive posture. A cop stood over him, back to the camera. The boy had his free arm around someone, a girl with long, black hair, holding her to his chest. The boy’s glasses shone with unnatural brilliance in the glare of the flash.

“April 30, 1968. I was sixteen. I don’t know what came over me. The cop was beating up a girl, one of the protesters at Columbia University. I rushed in, grabbed her, and held her to me, thinking somehow that would stop the attack. The cop had hit her really hard with his nightstick. Knocked her unconscious. Son of a bitch wanted more and decided to hit me as well. When I raised my arm to ward off the blow, the photographer got the picture of a lifetime. The cop stopped in mid-blow, then turned and chased the photographer. I was on the front page of the *New York Times*. Bastards didn’t even get my name.”

“Unidentified Columbia University Student Protects Fallen Comrade,” Joan read. “Did you know the girl?”

“Becky Bell,” Mark replied, lost in thought. “This other photo shows her *cell*. It was the day before the Democratic convention. We were in some town in Iowa of all places. I’m the one in back. This is Preston.”

Joan noticed his tone and regarded him carefully. "I've heard of Becky Bell."

"She was famous once upon a time. I couldn't...I didn't last as a radical."

"There must be a story. What happened after the photo?"

"After the cop ran off, I dragged the girl over to Broadway, through all the rioting, caught a cab out of there. We had gone several blocks before I heard the cabby asking me where to go. I gave him the address of Matthew's apartment in the Village, where he and Preston roomed together. They were both going to Columbia business school. My parents would never have let me go to Columbia otherwise. They thought Matthew could protect me if necessary. What a laugh. He spent most of the time catting around in the Village."

"The Village is a long way from Columbia."

"Yeah." Mark looked at the picture again and added, "That's how I got to know Preston."

"I'd like to meet Preston. Simon...your father...told me about him."

"It's OK to call him Simon. You don't need to be formal, certainly not with me. Why don't we go back downstairs? Preston'll be somewhere near the food. I'll tell you the rest of the story about Becky Bell sometime."

They found Preston in the rec room, watching the *A&E Biography* presentation of Simon's life. As usual, the program emphasized his years as a "greenmailer" during the 80s.

A young teenaged boy lounged on the sofa, his sock-clad feet up on the coffee table. It was the only table in the house allowed such treatment. Grace had bought it at the River Oaks Garden Club Pink Elephant Sale specifically for that purpose. The teenager bore a definite resemblance to Matthew, but where the father kept in shape with several rounds of golf each week, the son preferred more sedentary pursuits. He was still waiting for his growth spurt to arrive, standing a bit over five feet, with a noticeable paunch. His pale skin was a further testament to his indoor activities. He wore a white shirt and dark slacks. The rest of his "go to church" outfit lay discarded on the couch.

The TV switched to a commercial. The boy started fast-forwarding. "Wait, Trevor. Back up, please. There." The commercial advertised a show on *The Animal Planet*.

"That's Rae Ellen Vacek, the Red-eyed Vireo," Mark whispered to Joan, "The love of Preston's life."

Joan whispered back. "She does animal documentaries, right?"

"Right. Looks like she's in Madagascar now. That's a Ring-tailed Lemur she's holding. Let's wait for Preston in the library."

Mark indicated another door. The teenager noticed Mark and jumped up. "Uncle Mark!"

"Hey, Trev. How's it going?"

"OK, I guess. I mean...Uh, Uncle Mark, have you worked on *IPO III* yet, you know, *The Programmers Get Down and Dirty*?" Trevor followed them into the library. As they left, Mark saw Preston reaching for the remote control.

They stood in a room covered floor to ceiling in books. “This is my favorite room in the house,” Mark explained to Joan. “I used to spend hours here as a kid. I wasn’t much good at sports, so I became a bookworm. Matthew was the family athlete.”

“It’s nice.”

“Uncle Mark,” Trevor tried again to get Mark’s attention. “Who’s the old crone Presto keeps looking at on the TV?”

Mark turned back to him. “Joan, this is my nephew, Trevor. Trevor, this is Joan—”

“Joan Santoro. Nice to meet you Trevor.” Trevor shook hands, took a look at the person whose hand he was shaking, held the hand a bit too long, stared at Joan’s breasts, managed to mumble something, then tore himself away and turned back to Mark.

Mark told him, “That *old crone* is Preston’s lost love, Rae Ellen Vacek, Trev, and I advise you not to refer to her that way with Preston around.”

“OK, OK. *IPO III*,” he returned to his original subject. “The Venture Capitalists keep taking all the money, and the lawyers? ”

“Sure you want me to tell you?” Mark asked

“Gimme a hint?”

“Well...Have you seen what happens to Venture Capitalists when they get caught in the rain?”

“Rain?”

Mark smiled and didn’t say anything more.

“You seem to know more than I would have expected about chil...computer games,” Joan said.

“Goes with the territory,” Mark said. “Most good hackers are inveterate games players. Besides, some friends of mine in Austin created the game.”

“Wait! Stop!” Trevor shouted at Joan. “You’re not allowed to step on that rug with shoes on. It’s an *Isfahan*.”

“Is that supposed to mean something?” Joan asked.

Mark filled her in. “It’s the ultimate in Persian rugs. This one is the largest outside of a museum. A dealer who tried to buy it once castigated my mother for putting it on the floor. He told her to hang it on the wall.”

“Why didn’t she?”

“Even this house,” Trevor sniffed, imitating his grandmother, “hasn’t a wall of sufficient size.”

Joan and Mark laughed. Joan took off her shoes and stepped onto the rug. “Feels like an ordinary rug.” Mark thought she had nice looking feet.

Music started playing.

“Is that Ambianca?” Joan asked. “I didn’t think it was allowed in this house.”

“Of course it’s *Ambianca*,” Trevor said with the air of a teenager who knows everything. Mark explained again, “This is the only room in the house wired to accommodate her.”

“Simon discouraged installation at Magus. Thought it was too disruptive. I suppose you heard how that turned out. Everyone loves the program. You created it ... her?”

“I built her. Delfina claims credit for thinking her up.”

“Who’s Delfina?”

“My girlfriend. She thought up the name *Ambianca*.”

Trevor snickered at Mark’s characterization of Delfina as a mere girlfriend.

“Delfina’s the one with the long hair? Nice legs? Good dress?”

Mark laughed. “You should hear her description of you.”

“And *Ambianca* is...artificial intelligence of some kind?”

“Sort of. Delfina wanted something like *HAL* in *2001*. I told her to get real. *Ambianca* is our compromise. It’s still a pretty good program, if say so myself. She detects sounds and light from this room ? there are cameras and microphones hidden all over the place ? and selects appropriate music using artificial intelligence. Delfina wired up BFE, the place where she works, on all the workstations. I don’t know what this music is, though.”

“Mozart’s *Requiem*, isn’t it?” Joan asked. “It must be for me; I’m the only one in the company that likes classical music.”

“Mozart, huh? The program has a fascinating structure —”

“This music sucks, whatever it is,” Trevor offered.

“*Ambianca!*” Mark said, “Let’s have something more upbeat for Trevor.”

The music switched to something Mark didn’t recognize.

“Hey, cool,” Trevor said. “Nine Inch Nails...Uh, Uncle Mark. When does it rain?”

Mark stared at him, until he finally realized that Trevor still wanted a hint on *IPO III*. “Only after you turn on the rain-making equipment,” Mark answered. “You didn’t throw away any old junk lying around in the storeroom, did you?”

“Oh...I get it. Thanks, Uncle Mark. Nice to meet you Ms. Santoro.” Trevor headed for the stairs at full gallop.

“Ah, youth,” Joan remarked. The music changed as soon as Trevor left the room. “I should know this one.”

“It’s the Eagles. *Your Lying Eyes*. Now she’s playing one of my favorites.”

Joan looked thoughtful. “That woman, Vacek. You called her...what was it?”

“Her name is Rae Ellen Vacek. Her bird name is the Red-eyed Vireo, which doesn’t do her justice.”

“Bird name?”

“Some really good birders receive bird names. Preston is the Barbet.”

“The what?”

“Barbet, specifically the Red-headed Barbet. That’s a tropical bird found from Central America. Once upon a time, Preston had red hair, and you may have noticed that he has a rather prominent beak. Rae Ellen thought that Preston’s idea of selecting names based on initials was silly. She simply picked a name that represented the person to her. Eventually, Preston agreed, but by then Rae Ellen was known as the Red-eyed Vireo because REV matched Rae Ellen Vacek.”

“I see. Do you have a bird name?”

“I’m the Spectacled Owl.” He lifted his glasses to show where the name came from.

“Interesting. What about Preston and the... what did you call her?”

“The Red-eyed Vireo, Vireo for short. They were an item once, before I met Preston. They lived in Brazil for several years. She was working on her Ph.D. They broke up, had some big falling out. He pines for her. He probably made Trevor play the commercial several times. If I —”

“There you are! I’ve been looking for you,” Preston said from the doorway. “I thought I’d find you here.”

“We saw you in the TV room. We didn’t want to interrupt your communing with the *Animal Planet* commercial.”

“You saw that, did you? She still looks great. She’s a couple of years older than I am, you know.” Preston said, subtracting several months from his age. “I often wonder how I let her get away. At the time...But who is this paragon of female pulchritude, Owl? You’ve been holding out on me.” He kicked off his shoes and walked over to them, reaching out for Joan’s hand.

“Preston Salomon, meet Joan Santoro.” Preston started to kiss Joan’s hand, but stopped with it halfway to his lips. Mark looked at what Preston saw, a missing joint on the pinkie of her right hand.

“Joan Santoro,” Joan said, repeating the introduction. Preston looked up at her with a curious expression on his face. Then without taking his eyes from hers, he lifted her hand to his lips, choosing the missing joint as his target. Joan blushed deeply, her cheeks turning bright crimson.

“An old accident,” she said. “I don’t even remember it.”

“Do you know about this rug?” Preston said, apparently changing the subject.

“Mark has been telling me about it.”

“Every Persian rug contains a deliberate flaw, just so it won’t be perfect. To be perfect would be an affront to Allah. Only Allah is perfect.”

“I see.”

“This tiny flaw,” Preston stroked her hand, “serves the same purpose.” He kissed her hand again.

Preston and Joan studied each other.

The music changed abruptly, switching to *Do Ya*, a song by K.T. Oslen, Delfina's favorite singer. Mark turned, expecting to find Delfina, and did. "Is this a private conversation? Or can I barge in?" She didn't wait for an answer, but walked straight to Mark, slipping off her shoes as she came. She wrapped her left arm around his waist, pressing herself next to him, and extended her right to Joan. "The beautiful and mysterious Joan Santoro. I've heard a lot about you. Glad to meet you finally."

"Nice to meet you, Delfina."

Delfina turned to Mark. "Y'all eaten? Good food in the dining room. Going fast. Getting tired? It's been a long day for you, hasn't it?"

Mark glanced at his watch. It said 18:15. He smiled. "Long day all right. Guess we should think about turning in. Preston, did someone show you your bedroom?"

"Yes, Owl. No problem. I'll see you tomorrow. We need to talk about what to do next. First thing Monday,..."

"Later, Preston. Later." Mark and Delfina were already almost out the door.

Preston offered his arm to Joan and led the way to the dining room. "Would you be interested in what my Aussie friends call *fair dinkum tucker*, my lovely. I know I would. Grace always sets a wonderful table. There's an old proverb about eating. The Swahili goes something like this..."

7. Official Proceedings

The view from the windows near the elevator on the twenty-sixth floor of Two Shell Plaza showed only clouds. Preston muttered as he and Mark got off the elevator, “This is going to be a fabulous birding day. Wish we could go to the coast.”

“Let’s go.” Mark replied.

“Don’t be irresponsible. We have to get to the bottom of this.”

“Bottom of what?”

“How Simon was killed, of course. Besides, I’d like to see the office. Simon always preferred to meet me somewhere else. I’ve never seen the new digs.”

“Preston,” Mark said, unable to hide his frustration, “when are you going to get over this fixation of yours. Dad died of a heart attack alone in his office with the door locked. It was what he would have wanted. He always claimed he wanted to die at his desk, working on one last deal.”

“It’s an interesting puzzle, you have to admit that.”

Mark moved toward the door, but Preston stopped grabbed him by the elbow. “Wait. I want to say this. I’ll just say it once. Simon was a good friend. More than that, he was my only help when I started my business. I owe him everything. Whoever killed him, and I’m certain that his death was not natural, will pay for it if it takes me the rest of my life.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’ll explain later. For now, just believe me when I say we need to find out what happened.”

Mark scowled, then strode to the huge double doors at the entrance and slid a plastic card into a slot. Preston grabbed the ornate handle and tugged the door open to wave Mark through ceremoniously.

“This way.” Mark led down a hall. “That’s Mary Lynn’s desk there, guarding the gates. Sounds like they’re working on the door to Dad’s office.” They rounded a corner and found Mary Lynn supervising repairs to the office door.

“Ah, Mary Lynn, the epitome of efficiency,” Preston greeted her with a flourish. Mary Lynn rewarded him with a rare smile.

“Hello, Preston. Mark. We should have this finished by lunchtime. The police finally agreed to let us go ahead with the repairs.”

“How did this happen exactly?” Preston asked.

“We had to break the door down with an ax to get in. It was dead-bolted from the inside. Si...Mr. Talbot had the only key. He was a stickler for secrecy you know. We all thought he’d gone home because the door was locked. He locked it whenever he went out.”

“So you found him?” Preston said. “That must have been horrible for you.”

“Oh, it was. But everyone was here, so I had company. Matthew finally suggested we break the door down. I tried finding a locksmith, they advertise 24x7 service, but when you call at 4:00 in the morning, well...We didn't want to wait.”

“How did that happen, I mean about everyone being here at 4:00?”

“Grace was in a state. Simon didn't come home, you see. Matthew and I left him here at about 10:00. We'd been working late going over some figures. We have an audit coming up soon and...”

“So, you left about 10:00. Simon was still working?”

“Oh, yes. He works...worked hard. He frequently stayed late. Rarely showed up early, though.” Mary Lynn produced another rare smile. “Grace said Simon called about dinner time ? that's about 7:30 ? and said he'd be late. Then, when he didn't show up she went to bed, thinking...” Mary Lynn groped around in her pocket and pulled out a tissue. She dabbed her eyes. “Sorry. I can't believe he's gone.”

Mark put an arm around her shoulder. “Mary Lynn, you know that if you need some time off, it's —”

“No! I don't want to go home. I need to be here. There's work...Someone has to oversee the repairs.”

One of the workmen looked up when he heard that and smiled. “We're almost finished, Ms. Patterson. Just a few more minutes. We'll come back later to finish the staining and all.”

“Why don't we go into Simon's office?” Preston suggested, leading the way.

Grace had furnished the office. A very large nineteenth century American oak desk dominated the space. Simon had insisted on a large desk, with room to spread things out. The floor appeared to be wood, though Mark happened to know that it was a clever tile made to look like wood. A Persian rug, a Heriz, covered most of the area. Mark liked it better than the rug in the library, although it wasn't nearly as rare. Three heavy, American chairs continued the nineteenth century look, forming a semicircle in front of the desk, each chair with a small table beside it.

More American pieces stood against the wall: two breakfronts containing memorabilia—Simon's souvenirs from past jobs: a valve from the gas plant in Raymondville, parts of old machines, electronic gizmos of unknown function, an ornate humidifier given to Simon from President Eisenhower engraved, “To Simon Talbot, A Good Man and a Royal Pain in the Butt.” Mark made a mental note to get rid of all the old junk. Another, smaller desk against the wall was reserved for visitors' use. A low cabinet served as a credenza behind Simon's desk. Drapes covered the wall behind the credenza, with bright sunlight showing beneath the bottom edge.

The desk contained a pile of business plans in binders, a desk calendar, a telephone with several lines, and a computer with a 19” monitor. One of the business plans was open. Mark walked over to desk and picked up the business plan. “Looks like Dad got his wish; he died at his desk working on one last deal...with XenoDyne, the big defense contractor.”

Mary Lynn looked thoughtful. “XenoDyne. That's odd...” She shrugged. “Oh, well. Not important. The deal was a classic one: XenoDyne wanted to spin off a software group. Magus provided the backing.”

Mark showed no interest in Magus's business deals, turning instead to the computer. When he wiggled the mouse, nothing happened. He pressed several keys. Still nothing happened.

"What's wrong with the computer?" Preston asked.

"Don't know yet," Mark replied. He used the old three-finger salute, trying to reboot the machine. When that didn't work, he reached under the desk and cycled power on the tower containing the guts of the machine. The machine beeped several times and quit. "Disk's been fried." Mark concluded.

"What's that mean?" Preston wanted to know.

"The computer can't read the hard drive. It can't boot. Mary Lynn, see if you can find an emergency boot disk for me. And see if we have a backup for the disk." Mary Lynn moved to the small desk by the wall, and picked up the phone.

"Can you tell when the problem started?" Preston asked.

"Maybe if I can read the information on the disk I may be able to come up with an approximate time. We'll have to wait and see."

"Mr. Harriman will be up with an emergency disk as soon as he can find one," Mary Lynn reported. "Adrian's not here yet. He's the only one who'd know about a backup."

Preston said, "I fear I interrupted your narrative about the events last Wednesday."

"Well, Grace told me she woke up about midnight. Simon wasn't there. She started calling around. She tried Ms. Santoro's condo—"

"Joan!" Mark interrupted. When he realized the implications, he blushed bright crimson.

"What?" Preston asked.

"Nothing," Mark replied. "It explains something Mama said to me."

Mary Lynn continued, "When Grace determined that Simon wasn't there, she called me. I told her that Matthew and I had left Simon working at the office. That's when she called Matthew."

"So what did they do from midnight till 4:00 in the morning?" Mark asked.

"Matthew called all the hospitals, the police, you know, trying to find out if anyone knew anything. I got over to the house about 1:00 and he was still calling. At about 2:00 or maybe later, I suggested we check the office. Of course, we'd called here, but got no answer. We all trooped down here. Well, not Ms. Santoro. She showed up early the next morning."

"Early? Was that unusual?" Mark asked.

"Not really. She and Simon often had meetings early. Simon would come in early to meet with *her*." Preston tried to hide a grin at Mary Lynn's jealousy.

"Anyway, we wasted about an hour trying to find a key. Security didn't have one. I tried calling a locksmith as I said, but in the end, Matthew broke the door down. It wasn't easy. It's solid oak."

"And Dad was..."

“Sitting right there at his desk. He’d been...been dead for quite a while. The Medical Examiner said he probably died between 10:00 and 11:00, something like that.”

“I suppose the key was in his pocket or...” Preston hinted.

“His briefcase, actually. That was on the floor by the desk.”

Preston reflected on the sequence of events and found one item puzzling. “What was Matthew doing here working late? That doesn’t sound like him.”

“Simon and Matthew were having one of their arguments.”

“Again?” Mark asked. “I thought that was over.”

“These arguments were common?” Preston asked.

“Unfortunately. They fought a lot. They were more heated lately.”

“What did they fight about? Do you know?”

“Money usually. Anyway, Matthew came storming out about 9:30. He was really mad. At least he looked mad. He was flushed, clearly agitated. He said something like, ‘He’s going to be the death of me.’ I didn’t say anything, tried to ignore him. But he stood there, like maybe he was waiting for me to agree with him. Well, I wasn’t about to say anything against Simon. Then Mr. Talbot called on the intercom and said that I could leave. He would finish the document tonight and have it ready for me Thursday morning.”

“Was he working on the will?” Mark asked before Preston could.

“I just don’t know.” Mary Lynn replied, clearly pained by having to admit that anything happened in the office without her knowing about it.

Mark asked, “About the new will...He really didn’t tell you anything? Was he planning to disinherit anyone, like me for instance?”

“No, he wouldn’t tell me anything. I’m sure he wasn’t planning to disinherit *you*.” She smiled, though the memory was clearly painful. “I tried thinking of a way to ask him about it. He told me once that he was planning to leave me something. Not that he *owed* me anything, you understand, but I was curious. I’m not even sure if he was working on the will. All I know is that he had an appointment with his personal attorney on Friday morning.”

“His personal attorney, at Pierce & Pierce, not the corporate?” Preston asked.

“His personal attorney.” Mary Lynn looked at Preston as though he were a school child.

“So, then after Simon said you could leave, what happened?”

“I left.”

“And Matthew...”

“He left at the same time. We walked out together. Well, I walked. Matthew stormed. He was still upset. Railed at Simon, saying, well...you know.”

“Leaving Simon alone in his office.” Preston seemed to be considering something.

“I presume so. Unless someone came after we left.”

Preston looked at Mark. “Could anyone have come in without the security system showing it?”

“No way. I set up the security system myself. Oh, I suppose it’s barely possible for someone to fiddle it, but it’s tight. You’d have to get in, then get to the computer hosting the security system before it has a chance to log the entrance.”

“How long are we talking about?”

“Never more than five minutes. The system’s in a room with a combination lock. Mary Lynn knows the combination, right?” He looked at Mary Lynn for confirmation.

Mary Lynn nodded, adding, “No one else goes in there except Adrian and me. We change the tapes every week.”

Mark explained. “The system writes the log onto a tape for backup. Then periodically, it dials up another computer and uploads the information.”

“It dials up? It’s not connected all the time?”

“No. It’s more secure that way. You’d have to tap the phone line to do anything about the log. Bottom line ? very difficult to finagle, but barely possible.”

“Could you have done it?”

“What? From Guatemala?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Preston replied, unable to hide his irritation. “Could someone with your abilities have done it?”

“Oh. No, not without inside help.”

“What about this window?” Preston asked, motioning to the curtains behind Simon’s desk. “If he was so worried about security…”

Mary Lynn and Mark smiled at each other. “It’s a fake,” Mark replied. He turned to the curtains and pulled them apart revealing a blank wall. The bright sunlight came from special lights. “He wanted complete security and read that you can eavesdrop by shining a laser on a window pane and reading the vibrations in the glass. Ergo, no glass. This office is an enclosed box.”

“Grace suggested the ersatz window,” Mary Lynn interjected. “She said that someone of Simon’s position should have an office with big windows. Mr. Talbot loved the effect when he showed it to someone.”

“I suggested Dad install one of those big TV screens like Bill Gates has,” Mark offered. “Mama said that would be *gauche*.”

A young man, certainly less than twenty, appeared at door the holding a disk. “I… I think this is what you asked for,” he quavered. He gave the disk to Mary Lynn and beat a hasty retreat from the rarified air of Simon P. Talbot’s office. Mark took the disk and settled down to what he loved most: solving a computer problem. He hummed cheerfully as he inserted the disk into the slot in the chassis and cycled power.

“How long has Joan worked here?” Preston asked Mary Lynn while Mark worked.

“Maybe a year? She just showed up one day. Marched right up to my desk and asked to see...Mr. Talbot. Well, I told her that no one got in without an appointment. She wouldn't leave. Said Simon ? she used his first name ? would want to see her. Implied he wouldn't be happy with me if I got in the way. We went back and forth for quite a while. She said it was private.”

“Interesting.” Preston encouraged her to go on.

“When I picked up the phone to call security, she opened her purse. I tell you, I had a fright. I thought she might pull a gun or something like that. She took out an old envelope and handed it to me. ‘Show him this,’ she said, ‘then he'll see me.’ Well, I looked at the envelope and it seemed to be addressed in Mr. Talbot's handwriting. I took it in to him.”

“What was in the envelope?” Preston asked innocently.

“Oh, Mr. Salomon. Surely you don't think I would look. It was clearly private.”

“Well, maybe you accidentally dropped it, and the contents spilled on the floor. As you picked it up, you couldn't help but notice something about it.” He smiled and waited.

“Yes, something like that happened.” She smiled back at Preston. “It had a legal document in it, you know, one in heavy blue paper folded up. I didn't read that, of course.”

“Of course not.”

“When Simon saw the document, he got very excited. ‘Who brought this?’ he asked. I told him, ‘A young woman.’ ‘Where is she!’ he almost shouted. ‘Bring her in here!’ So I did.”

“And...”

“They spent the rest of the afternoon together. He even had me reschedule some meetings. The next day, she started work here.”

“That was fast! What did she do?”

“Damned if I know!” Mary Lynn dropped her eyes, ashamed to have uttered a vulgarity in Simon's office. “I mean...”

“No. I understand perfectly,” Preston said, patting her on the arm. “How are you coming, Owl?”

Mark had moved the computer tower onto the desk and was taking the cover off. “Disk's fried, just like I said.”

“What are you doing now?”

“I need to remove it. I have a friend in Austin who may be able to get something off it. He's got some fantastic equipment. Mary Lynn, what did you find out about the backup? This is funny...”

“What?” Preston asked.

“Well, Dad harped about how computers were for business, not for fun, but this machine has every gizmo known to science. It's wired for Ambianca, too, even though he said he'd never do that. Looks like the power supply failed—” The phone rang. Mary Lynn picked up and listened. “Just a sec.” She turned to Mark.

“Adrian says that the latest backup he can find dates from Tuesday a week ago, before your father died. He suspects a corrupt desk. The backup program reported a *general error* when it tried to read it. Adrian said that usually means hardware problems of some kind.”

“Let me talk to him.” Mark strode across the floor and took the phone. He and Slone exchanged arcana for a few minutes while Preston and Mary Lynn waited.

“Right. I agree. What? No, I haven’t heard anything about it. When? OK.” Mark hung up and stuffed the disk drive into his backpack. “It looks like someone degaussed the disk to erase all the information on it. Preston, you may have a case after all.”

“A case?” Mary Lynn asked.

“Preston suspects foul play,” Mark said, curling an imaginary moustache.

“What kind of foul play? May I come in?” Joan stood at the door to the office. She wore a dark blue pantsuit, perfectly tailored, very masculine with a thin pinstripe. A string of pearls at her throat added a defiant feminine touch. Glasses instead of contact lenses completed the business-like image.

Preston found the overall effect quite pleasing. He noticed that Mark did as well and made a mental note to himself to deal with that situation before it got out of hand. “Please, come in. I don’t know what kind of foul play...yet. What brings you to this part of the building?”

“I came to get Mark. We have a problem that I’d like him to look at. Can you come down to the conference room?”

Preston looked at his watch. “I need to leave for Geoff’s funeral, Owl. I guess I’ll catch up with you in Leakey?”

“Guess so. I’ll drop the disk off in Austin, then head out there. Give my condolences to Millie.”

“Mary Lynn,” Preston said, turning to look her straight in the eye, “can you make sure nothing is disturbed in this office for a while?”

“I guess so,” she replied. “Is it important?”

“It may be.”

Preston waited while Mary Lynn took a long look at Simon’s office before closing and locking the door with an air of forlorn finality.

8. Filtering Information

Grace designed the conference room at Magus to intimidate visitors, beginning with a set of double doors, solid oak with European-style handles shaped like sea serpents, their heavy weight proclaiming stability and permanence. The interior had the same fake wood floors as Simon's office, with yet another Persian rug. Joan, after considerable research, had concluded it was a Heriz. It was not up to the quality of the rug in Simon's office, and she knew why. A large oval table supported by a robust pedestal stood in the exact center of the room. The weight of the table would surely ruin the rug before long. Joan suspected there was some flaw with the central medallion covered up by the table and resolved to ask the old bitch about it, provided Grace ever agreed to talk to her.

Simon had told Joan a story about the table. He and Grace had been driving to San Antonio after a visit to a Hill Country ranch. They passed a small shop near Uvalde, Texas that made mesquite furniture. Grace was entranced. "Mesquite? How interesting. How unique. The trees are quite small. It must take a lot of work. We have to stop." They had, and Grace ordered the table for the conference room, together with eight chairs of the same wood, upholstered in needlework, hand made, each showing a different pastoral scene.

Original art decorated the walls of the room, not expensive, but much better than the usual fare, another of Grace's touches. Simon demanded the best audio-visual equipment and Grace ultimately compromised her artistic sensibilities to allow it. One wall held a large screen, the kind that folded up to show a dry writing white board on the other side. Several PC's waited quietly in the corner. A projector for displaying live presentations poked from a discreet hole in the ceiling. Two speakers hung in the corner for the accompanying sound. The entire effect shouted, "We have money to burn! You don't have a chance!" It usually worked.

Joan ushered Mark into the room and introduced him to Adrian Sloan, network administrator for Magus, popularly known as the "alpha geek."

Sloan stood half a foot shorter than Mark but weighed at least 20 pounds more. He needed exercise and sunshine. He wore Levi's Dockers, a shade Levi-Strauss denoted "muted blue," somewhere between blue and gray, washed many times. A belt at least as old as the wearer circled Sloan's waist, showing three marks corresponding to Adrian's increasing girth. Nike sneakers and a dress shirt obviously chosen for the meeting, with no tie, completed his ensemble. His pocket held five pens in different colors, including a Hi-Liter in Day-Glo pink. On his wrist, he wore a cheap watch with a built-in calculator. A holster on his belt contained a cell phone, and another something else that Joan didn't recognize. Sloan's hair, a mousy brown, had been combed with his fingers. He had a small, stringy moustache that needed work. The rest of his face was pallid, pock marked with acne scars but otherwise pleasant enough. His watery eyes had the harried look of one with too much to do.

"Nice to meet you," Sloan mumbled, then took a deep breath to calm down.

Mark shook hands. "Nice to see the face to go with the e-mail finally."

Sloan smiled and replied, "Yeah."

"So how did you meet Matthew?" Mark asked.

“Well,” Sloan explained. “I didn’t really know him until I came here. I got his name from a friend of a friend. Networking, you know. The wetware kind.”

“Wetware?” Joan asked.

“Programmer slang,” Mark explained. “It means people. You know, software, hardware, middleware...”

“Oh, I get it,” Joan said. Her expression showed that she didn’t think much of the term and wasn’t likely to add it to her active vocabulary. “Let’s get started.” *Better get this going quickly, or they’ll spend thirty minutes flinging jargon around.*

Sloan handed Mark a thick folder, which Mark deposited unopened on the table. Joan noted that Mark seemed to share her opinion of heavy handouts at a meeting.

Sloan looked at Joan, who nodded slightly, smiling reassuringly. He manipulated several switches on the wall, lowering the lights while simultaneously turning on the projector, displaying a test pattern for Mark and Joan’s entertainment while he unsnapped the extra holster on his belt. From it, he extracted a small device that turned out to be a laser pointer. He tested it, displaying a small red dot on the wall. Then he removed a device resembling a TV remote from his Dockers, aimed it at the PC in the corner and pressed a button, starting a multi-media presentation.

“As you can see, we first encountered the parasite after we ran a standard cross-check of the computer logs.” He clicked a button. The screen showed two computer printouts side-by-side with lines highlighted. “These two lines should be identical. Ms. Santoro noticed the problem.” Sloan nodded in Joan’s direction. Joan nodded back, noting from Mark’s expression that he was surprised at the revelation.

“I don’t like loose ends,” she said simply. “Neither did your father.”

“As I was saying,” Sloan continued, “These two lines are not the same. The discrepancy is small, representing about 3 seconds of CPU time, but...” He clicked to another frame.

Joan, who had seen the presentation before stole a look at Mark. He had nestled into the comfortable chair, and, with the lights low, seemed to be struggling to stay awake as Sloan droned on through slide after tedious slide.

“That’s when we tried Fractal Filters.”

Joan snuck another peek at Mark. That had waked him up, all right.

“Wait,” he said. “Could you back that up a bit?”

Sloan complied, grinning. “Yes, we did buy FFI, as you suggested. We wouldn’t have found the virus, or whatever the name *de jour* is, without their new code. It’s still beta.”

“The filter’s based on my algorithm, you know.”

“Really. How interesting. Then I don’t need to tell you how tricky the filter is. You have to tune it precisely to have a chance of finding a damn thing. So far, we’ve got squat. We proved mathematically that we’ve been compromised. Some kind of rogue program’s loose in the Magus network. But...”

“But you can’t find it or figure out what it’s doing,” Mark finished for him. Joan sat back with an air of satisfaction. Mark was hooked.

“Exactly,” Sloan agreed.

Joan said, “Think you can help us figure out what to do about it? This looks like something right up your alley.” Joan realized she was guilty of using a cliché and found herself waiting for Simon to say something. When she remembered that Simon wasn’t there she was surprised to find tears in her eyes. She looked at the ceiling to hide them.

“What do you want me to do?” Mark asked.

“Take the data, look at it. Figure out something. We have an ISO 9000 audit coming up in two weeks. We can’t let them find this.”

“Most ISO auditors couldn’t find their own ass without documentation.”

Joan scowled. “Even so, we want to deal with the problem. Sloan can show you everything, right Adrian?” She favored Sloan with what she Simon had called her hundred-watt smile.

“Sure,” he stammered, his pale skin reddening slightly. He addressed Mark, “Just descend with me into the inner sanctum of Magus Corp.”

“I’ll contact you when I have an answer,” Mark said.

“Great.” She shook his hand, and departed.

9. Cube Route

Mark turned back to Sloan and found he had been following Joan's progress as she left. He saw Mark watching him and said in an off-hand way, "Quite a woman, very impressive don't you think?"

Mark grinned. "Impressive hell. She's incredible and you know it."

Sloan grinned back. "Follow me. I'll show you how the grunts live." He led the way down the hall. As they turned a corner, the carpet stopped abruptly, replaced by industrial grade tile. Sloan waved his badge at a steel door and opened it, revealing a room with the darkened, funereal look favored by programmers the world over.

"I see you've opted for standard cave décor," Mark remarked.

"Who needs windows?" Sloan replied. "I've set up my machine to monitor the weather outside so I can check on it whenever I want to. Frankly, I like it this way. Knowing the time can be distracting."

"I know just what you mean." Mark followed Sloan as they snaked their way past several people tapping on keyboards, examining diagrams on the screen. Mark heard snatches of music coming from several carrels.

"Magus, as I'm sure you know, is a holding company for about a dozen other corporations," Sloan explained. "We save money by centralizing all the computing and networking operations, web hosting, that kind of stuff. We outsource the heavy-duty stuff, but retain control over the network here. We monitor it 24 hours a day."

Mark ignored Sloan's blathering. Of course, he knew all that. Maybe some small talk would calm the guy's nerves. "I guess you handle everything from home?"

"Unless there's some emergency."

"So, the virus probably got in through a dial up port?"

"Probably. We haven't figured that out yet. Here's my office." They stopped in front of a cubicle larger than most. It was a tribute to clutter art. Bound printouts of corporate reports, each at least two inches thick, covered the floor of the cube. An ergonomic chair, essential for any programmer, took up all the rest of the space, leaving no room for a visitor. Sloan's desk was nothing but a large, utilitarian table with file cabinets holding it up. On top were two huge CRT screens, a keyboard and a mouse. Underneath the table was a Sun workstation, a real mondo machine.

"Nice rig," Mark commented. "You must be one of those Unix bigots."

"Well, I use a PC from home, but this has the tools for managing the network. You work with what you've got."

The space on the desk not occupied by the computer equipment contained the remains of at least four meals. Mark counted five empty cans of Mountain Dew, a pizza box, the wrapper from a Big Mac, another wadded up wrapper of less distinguished origin, and several Snickers.

Sensing an opening, he asked, “Where’s the candy machine? I could use a Snickers and Dew myself.”

That got the desired response. Adrian recognized a fellow programmer. “Come on, I’ll show you.” Mark followed him down one of the aisles into the hallway and around a corner to a well-stocked pantry and kitchen. A refrigerator contained about 200 sodas of various kinds and nothing else. Mark selected a Coke. Sloan took another Mountain Dew. He took one of the pens from his pocket and added two marks by his name. He was very careful which pen he selected. He commented, “This is a special pen that will write when held at any angle. It even works in outer space. It’s perfect for marking on the sheet.”

“I’ve read about them. What are the others for?”

“This one is for signing my name, whenever I have to do that. It’s a special calligraphy pen. Then I have this one,” he withdrew a complex instrument, “for taking notes. It has three different colors of ink, each for a different kind of note. This one,” he indicated the third from the left, “is a soft felt tip with a broad point. I use it for labels for diskettes and such. Finally, I have my highlighter for marking things on a printout. I used to use six pens before I found a multi-color pen that worked well enough. I also have a pencil for times when I think I might have to erase something I have written, and the laser pointer. How about you? You don’t seem to use many pens.” Sloan’s tone showed that he suspected Mark might not be a *real* programmer.

“Well, I didn’t really plan to do any work on this trip. I have a set of pens in my bag if I need ‘em. They aren’t as complete as yours, though.” Sloan rewarded him with a complacent smile.

They turned to the candy machine. It required actual money. “My treat this time,” Mark said, removing a five from his pocket and feeding it into the slot. The machine took the bill after only three tries. They punched the codes for two Snickers. The machine disgorged the candy and two dollars in quarters. “Bandits!” Mark said. “You got it,” Sloan replied. “I use this machine only for emergencies. I usually keep a stash in my cube, but I’ve been putting in a lot of OT working on this virus thing. That’s in addition to everything else, of course. We have to pass ISO 9000, and you know what that means.”

“The revenge of the bureaucrats.”

European bullies in Brussels, jealous of American dominance and determined to do something about it, invented ISO 9000, a set of requirements all businesses in Europe have to adhere to. They extended it to US companies that wanted to do business in Europe. Then they showed their ace in the hole: Sub-contractors also had to be certified. That meant that their insidious plan extended to the entire world. It was quite a coup. They ensured that virtually everyone would be burdened by regulations as onerous as the European variety, thereby leveling the playing field.

Programmers hated ISO 9000, including Sloan. “Revenge is right! Everything has to be documented and up to date. We put all the docs online. Now, I have to run around to all the cubes and make sure no one has an obsolete, dead tree version. What a crock!”

“I’ve been through it,” Mark allowed, a slight fib. Actually, he had called in sick on the appointed day. The audits were no fun. Everyone worked hard getting ready. The slightest slip-up required a follow-up audit. “A royal pain in the rear,” Mark concluded.

They returned to Sloan's cube. He busied himself moving ledgers out of the way to make room for his visitor. Mark gathered up enough printouts to make a stool and sat down on them, looking over Sloan's shoulder. Music started playing, *Rhapsody in Blue*.

"You a classical music fan?" Mark inquired.

"Not me. I'm the heavy metal type. She must have picked it out for you."

"She? *Ambianca*?"

Sloan smiled. "Yeah. I installed it in all the offices, even the old man's. Sorry, I mean your father. Cool program. Most of the programmers like the music. People who don't like it usually manage to turn it off. Funny thing. It played music when I was in...Mr. Talbot's office, but he had trouble getting it to work."

Mark shrugged. "Interesting. How did you discover the virus, or whatever, in the first place?"

"Ms. Santoro turned it up. At first, I thought she was just the old man's new squeeze, you know. I mean, you know...she looks like the part, and nobody really knew what she did. She's a quick learner. Smart, real smart. She investigated everything about Magus. Cleaned up several holes in our setup, forced us to come up with new passwords, eliminated the obsolete accounts, that sort of stuff. She's first class."

"You need to do all that to pass the ISO audit anyway, don't you?"

"Sure. Like I said, she did good work. Really smart. I said that, didn't I? Doesn't miss a thing. Ran the computer logs through a check getting ready for the audit. When they didn't balance, she got suspicious. Had me working nights trying to find the bug. Then suggested we see if the guys at FFI could help. Got them to run the filter, guess they'll do it for her, won't give me the time of day, and *voila!*"

"So all this is really her work. How'd you get involved?"

"After the old man died, uh...sorry, I forgot he was your father, anyway, after he died she brought me all the output and dumped it in my lap. Told me to get ready to present it. I did. I guess she's the new boss, right?" Sloan clearly relished the prospect.

"We'll see. Can you give me a dump of all the data generated by the FFI program?" Mark asked.

"No problem. I'll make you a CD." His hands whirred as he alternately clicked with the mouse and typed commands. In a few minutes, he created a newly burned CD containing the data as a self-extracting exe file.

"You got a private e-mail address?" Mark suggested. "One outside the company, just in case, you know?"

Sloan considered it briefly, before looking for something to write on. He opened the file drawer of his desk, rummaged around for a bit and came up with a box of business cards. "I always forget I have these," he apologized as he scribbled an address on the back. Then he ushered Mark back to the lobby. "It's easy to get turned around in here." Mark wished him luck on the ISO audit and left.

Time to go to Leakey.

April 16, 1998

Leahey, TX, in the Hill Country

There are several ways to get from Austin to Leahey. If you're a hurry take IH-35 to San Antonio, then US 90 west to Uvalde and US 83 to Leahey, a pleasant drive.

Most birders will prefer the back roads. Head out of town on US 290 to Fredricksburg, a town with a terminal case of the quaints, then SH 16 to the outskirts of Kerrville.

Save Kerrville for a later time. Loop around the city, and pick up SH 16 on the other side. This road meanders into Medina, self-proclaimed Apple Capital of Texas, the start of RR 337, probably the most beautiful stretch of road in the Hill Country.

Many roads in the Hill Country are enchanting, but RR 337 is especially so. Short by Texas standards, only 116 miles long, it wanders through hills and canyons in the general direction of Leahey. Along the way, it passes the Schneider Ranch, a beautiful place that looks like a movie set. A tributary of the Medina River winds through the property, feeding a modest lake, the only habitat for water birds anywhere around, and always worth a quick stop to check for rarities.

Near Vanderpool, formerly known as Bug Scuffle, you pass the turn off toward Lost Maples State Park, which is covered in a separate section of this guide. RR 337 jogs a half-mile to avoid a county line, then continues west. At the last minute, it seems to change its mind about Leahey, veers slightly and winds its way to Camp Wood instead. This stretch of road is a one of the best prospects for locating a Zone-tailed Hawk. Check out every Turkey Vulture you see.

Highway engineers in Texas are enamored of straight lines. They made an exception for the road between Vanderpool and Leahey. Instead of blasting inconvenient hills out of the way, the engineers allowed the road to follow the natural contours of the land. Driving along it is exhilarating. Every turn presents new views of the limestone cliffs dropping to shallow valleys hundreds of feet below. The cliff faces erode into steep slopes where the Ashe Junipers, which the locals call "cedar," compete with Spanish Oaks for space and sunlight. In the valleys themselves, Cottonwoods are common wherever there is water, with occasional Live and Lacey Oaks and even Big Tooth Maples mixed in.

A favorite place to stop is the "Picnic Area." It is actually just a wide place, with enough room on the edge to pull out of the way of the traffic. The highway department installed a couple of metal tables, a trashcan and a sign, converting the shoulder into an instant picnic area. There isn't much traffic here, but since the road curves so much there aren't many places to stop either. Over the years, the picnic area has acquired a reputation with the locals as a "right purdy spot." It is about 600 feet above the valley floor, providing a great view.

This is one of the highest parts of the Hill Country at 2600 feet altitude. By contrast, the valley is about 1400 feet. All the rain that falls on the plateau winds up in the rivers in the valley, leaving the plateau bone dry, a vast expanse of sagebrush, mesquite and a few hardy grasses. The land has been overgrazed for generations. Now, only goats thrive in the area. Some ranchers have tried to diversify by importing exotic species of antelope so hunters who tire of White-tailed deer can try their hand on Gemsbok or whatever.

Don't miss the scenic view from the roadside park north of Leakey, a short detour north on US 83. From atop the bluff, you can see the Baptist Encampment below, nestled in a broad curve of the Frio River. This is all private property, and off limits to casual birders. EcoTours hosts a number of Hill Country weekends based at the Encampment.

John Leakey (pronounced LAKE-ee) moved to this area with his new wife Nancy and started a shingle factory in 1857. A small community grew up around the factory. Nothing much happened until 1913, when the town became the county seat of Real County (population 2500 in 1990) by virtue of being the only population center in the entire county, a distinction it retains to this day.

As you drive down the main street of town, US 83, don't miss the courthouse, a massive structure of native stone surrounded by ancient live oaks, by far the largest building in town. The WPA built the structure in 1935-37, using stone from the immediate area. In all the times I've visited Leakey, I have yet to see anyone entering or leaving the courthouse, though I presume some business is transacted there occasionally.

The motley collection of buildings around the courthouse square attests to the quiriness of the town. An antique car reconditioning shop stands next to a combination tax service and beauty parlor, across from a small bank without an ATM, and near several huge containers for recycling, courtesy of Wal-Mart. However, the most interesting place near the courthouse, and well worth a stop, is the tiny Wildlife Art Museum, which advertises itself as "larger than you think."

In summer, the town hosts a sizable mob of tourists visiting the area for the clear waters of the Frio River, especially where it flows through Garner State Park. A dam there creates a huge swimming pool favored by vacationers.

Although Green Kingfishers can be found along the river in Garner State Park, and Golden-cheeked Warblers nest on the cliffs, I recommend you skip the park. Instead, take the "old road" from Leakey. Drive past the Wildlife Art Museum and keep going on that road until you come to a T intersection, right after crossing the Frio. Turn right onto RR 2748 and drive south. This road roughly parallels the river and offers many opportunities to stop and check the trees that line the route. Virtually all the Hill Country specialties can be found along this road.

Besides the great view and the river, there isn't much to Leakey. I recommend you travel to Utopia, where there are several good restaurants, for dinner. If you're pressed for time...¹

¹ Preston Salomon, *Hill Country Birding Trips*, p. 23, Copyright 1997, EcoTours Press, Houston, TX. Used by permission.

10. Slow Leakey

After taking the zapped disk to his friend LJ in Austin, Mark headed for Leakey, following Preston's suggested scenic route. When he got to the picnic area on RM 337, he parked the truck near one of the tables and sat gazing out over the landscape. A stiff breeze blew from the northwest, behind him, out over the valley, promising rain. "Good," he said to himself. "Perfect."

On a spring morning many years ago when he sought the Zone-tailed Hawk, Mark had stopped much like this. He'd arrived early in the morning that time, and found the valley shrouded in cottony clouds. A Mockingbird had claimed the highest tree, perching at the apex with the fog below him, to sing his Matins. Mockingbirds always seem to be the first birds to welcome the morning, often rushing things a bit by starting before dawn. As the clouds lifted, other birds joined the morning chorus. First, the Cardinals offered their repetitive "Cheer! Cheer! Cheer, cheer, Cheer up!" Then came the Bewick's wrens and Black-crested Titmice. Only when the sun was fully up did the Yellow-billed Cuckoo finally wake up to signal the end of the overture. It was time for the main attraction.

A large flock of Turkey Vultures roosted regularly in the valley trees. As the sun heated the air, the Vultures launched themselves. Seeking out the thermals, they circled the valley, gradually rising toward the overlook. One by one, they peeled off to fly out of the valley, on their daily rounds. As they flew past, Mark checked every one for the elusive Zone-tailed, which allegedly travels with them. Each of the Turkey Vultures seemed to smile at him and wink as it passed, as if to say, "Keep trying. Maybe next time."

"This is the spot," Mark said to himself. Taking the urn from the front seat of the truck, he walked to the edge of the cliff. Removing the top, he gently shook the contents of the urn into the air, letting the breeze do the work of scattering the ashes.

"Sleep well, Dad." To his surprise, Mark found his eyes full of tears.

Delfina owned a cabin near Leakey she'd inherited from her grandmother. Mark lived in it, an arrangement that suited them both. Over two and a half years, he'd installed just about every electronic device known, most devoted to supplying Ambianca's insatiable appetite for information. Ambianca in turn satisfied Delfina's desire for perfect background music.

Mark followed RR 337 passing Bug Scuffle Ranch before turning onto an unmarked *caliche* road heading into the hills. The road followed the ridgeline along Big Henderson Creek for two miles before dropping down to a low water crossing, which are more common in the Hill Country than bridges. They're much cheaper to build, and most of the time there's no water in the creek anyway.

At first, Mark had wondered about the name Big Henderson Creek. After an assiduous search of the area failed to turn up Little Henderson Creek or Just Right Henderson Creek, he concluded that *Big* was part of the eponymous Henderson's name. Certainly, the creek seldom justified its lofty name. It was usually just a trickle, and sometimes merely puddles.

To get to the cabin, he had to cross the creek at the low water crossing, and travel another mile or so to a series of buildings. Delfina owned the third one, a low-slung affair built right into the side of the cliff, with a large deck in front shaded by a 200 year-old Live Oak. Inside, the cabin consisted of one main room, with a small kitchen separated by a counter, a sleeping loft up a spiral stair, and a large bookcase filled with computer documentation and trash books. Near the bookcase stood a large screen TV, fed by a satellite antenna near the deck.

The bookcase concealed the computer room, concealed it, that is, from all except the few hundred people in Real County who knew that the bookcase acted as a sliding door. A large room formed from a shallow cave lay behind the bookcase. A tiny opening to the deeper parts of the cave supplied cool air to keep the room comfortable. Mark had installed several powerful computers in the room, using the satellite antenna outside to communicate with the Internet. It was very private. From the outside, strangers would never guess that the cabin contained a high-powered computer lab devoted to professional hacking.

Delfina arrived on the weekends, usually late Friday evening, and left early Monday morning.

On Wednesday, Mark had the place to himself. He'd made no progress on the parasite, and his friend in Austin, LJ, still hadn't recovered anything from the damaged disk, so he felt happy to quit early when Gordo called.

"Abuelita made some *Carne Guisada*. Got some left over. Interested?"

"Sure. I'll make us some margaritas. When'll you get here?"

"Turning off now." Gordo had guessed Mark would be interested.

Mark walked out onto the deck and saw the dust from Gordo's truck in the distance. He started on the margaritas. *Abuelita* was really Gordo's mother-in-law, not his grandmother, but *abuelita* sounded better than *suegra*. The finest cook in all of Real County, she guarded her *Carne Guisada* recipe closely. Mark had deduced that she used Shiner Bock beer as the cooking liquid and *chipotle* peppers to give it added zing. Only someone trained from birth to like spicy food could tolerate it. The inhabitants of Real County loved it.

Gordo arrived in about ten minutes. Mark walked out to the Ford Bronco with *Sheriff, Real County* painted on the side, and opened the door. Gordo reached over to pick up a chest of food on the seat, lifted it, and stepped out.

"Someday, you're gonna ruin your back doing that."

"Hmmp. I didn't hear you offering to get it."

"You didn't give me a chance."

Gordo, despite his name, was not fat. He got the name when he was a boy, and kept it even when his growth spurt suddenly changed him from *pudgy* to *big*. Standing almost six feet tall, about Mark's height, Gordo weighed well over 200 pounds. He was still muscular, though not as much so as when he'd been star everything at Real County Consolidated High School. Surprising the entire county, he opted to attend Rice, rather than the University of Texas or Texas Tech. At Rice, he combined first class academics with All-American gridiron talent.

Gordo was definitely the most exciting thing to happen to Leakey since 1858.

A broken leg ended Gordo's professional football career with the Minnesota Vikings early. Afterward, he returned to Leakey, married his high school sweetheart, tried ranching, but gave it up and put his Political Science major to good use. Sheriff represents the real power in rural Texas counties. Gordo had the job until he set his sights on something bigger.

Mark was happy to count Gordo as a friend, despite his habit of bugging Mark to marry Delfina.

The two of them sat in silence on the deck, the dishes stained with the remains of the meal. Mark was on his second margarita, Gordo his fourth. The Chuck-Will's Widows began singing their onomatopoeic calls in the twilight. "How you and cousin Del getting along?"

"Just fine. Why d'ya ask?"

"Just wondering when y'all are gonna tie it up, y'know."

"Someday, probably. She get you to ask me?"

"Nah. Her mother called me. Getting worried she won't have any grandchildren on that side. Course that may not be the same as getting married, but she's old fashioned."

Mark picked up the heavy goblet and sipped his drink. "That why you came by, or is this an official visit?" He was always suspicious when Gordo turned on his country sheriff act, complete with the good-ol' boy accent.

"I can't stop off to share *carne guisada* with a friend?"

"So long as you bring the food, you're welcome any time. Now, what do you want?"

"Nothing important. Kinda silly, really."

"Spill it."

"Well, there was a reporter nosing around here, nice looking woman, thirty or so, maybe less, said she was from *Weird* magazine or something like that. Said she'd heard stories about a hippie recluse hacker, middle-aged with big glasses, living out here. Wondered if there was anything to it."

"*Wired*."

"What?"

"*Wired*, that must be the name of the magazine. It specializes in computer and technology stories."

"Whatever. Know why she'd be looking for you?"

"You sure she was looking for me?"

"How many half-blind computer nerds you think there are 'round here?"

"OK. I get the point. That's not good."

"I take it, then, that your paranoia about being discovered is rational, not the result of some childhood incident or anything like that."

“Lets just say that if certain people knew where I stayed, there might be a fire or something like that, something that destroyed all the equipment hidden behind the wall back there.”

“So you think she’s not a real reporter?”

“You’re the cop. What do you think?”

“Seemed funny to me. I suggested she try somewhere else. Sent her to Rocksprings, over in Edwards County.”

“Good. This means they’re getting close, though. Damn! I don’t want to have to move my lab to another site.”

“Funny, I was thinking about Delfina getting the cabin firebombed.”

“I think someone’s been searching for me on the net.”

“How?”

“Simple. Whenever I visit a site, my browser tells where to send the stuff I want. By examining the information about the destination, you can get a general idea of the physical location. Of course, I go to great lengths to make it hard. I squirt everything up to the satellite. Then it gets sent to a server in Houston owned by Magus. From someone on the other end, it looks like I’m at Magus. The information on the server in Houston says I’m a company in Uvalde. That company has a forwarding address in Camp Wood, which in turn forwards to the post office in Leakey. Since the counties out here are, shall we say, a bit behind the curve on computerization...”

“Yeah, poor old Real County. Some of the kids at the high school want to put up a web site. Then we’ll be on the map.”

“Just so long as the courthouse keeps only paper records, I think I’m safe. I don’t like this development, though. How’d they know about the eyeglasses? That means they know what I look like.”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you just lie low? Maybe they’ll take my advice and try looking farther afield.”

“Maybe.”

Gordo drained his margarita. “OK. I better get going. You think of something, you call me. Hear?”

“You got it.” Mark walked Gordo back to his truck, then, on a whim, decided to walk around the property. The moon would be rising soon. With the sun down, the temperature dropped into the 80’s. Fireflies had started lighting up the bushes around the cabin.

With the problem of the parasite still occupying his mind, Mark walked down the road to the creek crossing, still almost dry, in spite of a bit of rain. Pittman’s Dam a couple of miles upstream held back most of the water. The dam was almost fifty years old, so Mark couldn’t really complain about it much. Still, it would be interesting to see the creek without the dam. Delfina liked the dam. They’d made love atop it several times, with the cold water from the creek lapping at their sides, their passion stirred by the chance that Pittman would happen by at the wrong time.

The stars began to appear overhead. Venus hung just above the horizon, barely visible. Mark thought about the stars, about how computers had changed the discipline of astronomy. A couple of real astronomers from UT called him from time to time seeking advice on programming. Most astronomical work involved processing huge amounts of data, sieving it for bits and pieces of a signal buried in the noise.

That was it! How stupid! Days wasted! Mark turned back toward the cabin, almost running in his excitement. One of those astronomers owed him a big favor.

11. Parasitic Currents

Mark arrived back at the cabin completely out of breath. He rushed into the computer room and started looking through his “contacts” file. There! He dashed off an urgent e-mail message to Bernie Rosenberg, attached a file containing all the information from the Fractal Filter, and crossed his fingers.

From: Mark.Talbot@Magus.com
Sent: Wednesday, April 15, 1998
To: bRosenberg@astro.austin.utexas.edu
Subject: Need your help, please.

See what you can do with this, please. I’m looking for something with some structure in these images. Nothing that I have tried seems to work. Any suggestions? I’ll buy you dinner at Jeffrey’s if you come up with something quick.

Don’t be in Chile or some place like that. Please read your mail.

Mark paced around for a couple of hours, turned on the tube and watched a made-for-HBO movie. Two stars at best. *Maybe I should go try looking at the file again. Maybe I should just go to sleep. Ha! That’s easy to say. Just try it!*

Sleep finally came, only to be interrupted at about 4:00 by the sound of the voice of Hal from the movie *2001*. “There is a message for you.”

Groggy from sleep, Mark staggered to the computer and brought up the e-mail. Bernie had gotten the message. His reply:

From: bRosenberg@astro.austin.utexas.edu
Sent: Thursday, April 16, 1998
To: Mark.Talbot@Magus.com
Subject: That was too easy!

1. The signal is quasi-periodic. That’s interesting. You’ll have to tell me about it sometime.
2. There’s something wrong with your image capture system. The signal isn’t on any single frame. Part of it is on one frame, part on the next two frames. Maybe you’re not grabbing enough data at a time.
3. Most frames show no sign of the signal. It appears on a triplet of frames every 16 frames on the average. The time varies uniformly between 13 and 19 time intervals. That’s curious also. I wouldn’t expect a uniform distribution for any natural phenomenon.
4. If this is a signal from outer space, my buddies in SETI are interested. I told them you were probably fooling around.
5. Jeffrey’s sounds nice.
6. If you can’t figure out how to extract the signal after these hints, let me know.

Using Bernie's hints, Mark converted the data into an animated display. The first frame of the movie combined the first three samples from the Fractal Filter. The second frame combined samples 2-4. It was tedious, boring work, the essence of programming. When he finished he displayed all the frames in sequence. He could see the parasite apparently moving around in the image.

Next, he reduced the movie by eliminating all the frames that showed no sign of the parasite. That eliminated a lot of empty noise from the display. The final step was to color the parasite a bright red, an artistic touch that converted it from a simple programming artifact into a malevolent beast, an alien life form writhing around the screen.

Making the movie represented only the first step in a long process of understanding the problem. At least now, he had something to study. Mark still had no idea what purpose the parasite served, or how to eradicate it, but he knew what to do first: He climbed into bed, ignoring the fact that it was mid-morning, and slept till late afternoon.

Mark woke to find Preston sitting on the deck, checking out the birds in the area with a brand new pair of binocs.

"I decided to let you sleep. You were snoring so beautifully. Made some coffee."

"Thanks. I had a late night. I finally made some progress on the parasite, the virus in Magus's system."

"What's this?"

"That's what happens when you leave early. You miss something important. Joan found a virus in Magus. Well, I guess the network administrator, Adrian Sloan, did the actual work, but Joan sniffed it out. Geoff's funeral go all right?"

"Yes, poor Millie. She really liked Geoff, amazing as that seems. He'd still be alive if he hadn't been such a doofus. Why don't you get some coffee, then come tell me about this virus?"

Mark returned in a few minutes with a steaming cup of Edmond's Blend from Trianon. He sat on the deck sipping, trying to get his brain working again. "Here's the deal. Technically, it's a polymorphic, segmented, stealth virus. It also seems to incorporate some artificial intelligence features. It's a real piece of work."

"In English, please?"

"It means that the virus is hard to find, made up of lots of little pieces, sort of like the way DNA is collected into chromosomes. You have to put them all together to have the virus. The virus hides in *holes* within the system. That's what makes it so hard to find. Fortunately —"

"What do you plan to do about it?" Preston had learned the importance of cutting Mark's technical explanations short.

"Don't know yet. Want to go birding?"

"Where?"

"Here. There are Golden-cheeks along the creek, upstream."

"Always ready to see those little darlings. Let's go."

Mark led the way down to the creek, turned upstream and walked about half a mile. “The nest is right around here somewhere. I hear the male singing that little *squeegie-squeegie* song. Hear it?”

“Barely. However, I can see him right there, in the oak. What a treat! That gold on his face practically glows. There’s nothing like spring warblers. Every year, I wonder how many springs I have left. I’m determined to make the most of them.”

“Want to walk to the dam? We’ll see wildflowers at least. The birds are mostly the usual suspects.

“Sure. Let’s go. Why have you kept this place a secret from me?” They strolled quietly along the creek, stopping occasionally to observe some of the resident birds.

“What’s this contraption?” Preston asked, pointing to a tower with a cable stretched across the creek, attached to a similar tower on the other side. “Has it always been here?”

“It’s an old trolley the flood control people used to cross the creek. You climb in that bucket on the other side, cut loose, and wind up over here, with a little bit of manual work. Hasn’t been used in years, obviously. There are several of them around. You’ve never seen one?”

“How much farther to the dam?” Preston ignored anything that exposed his ignorance, however slight.

“Not far. Getting tired?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Just wondering.”

A short while later, they sat on the dam, shoes on the shore, pants rolled up, feet dangling in the cool water like little kids. Recent rains had filled the pond behind the dam. A small trickle came over the top of the dam, feeding the creek below. Cliffs rose along the far shore. A Canyon Wren sang its plaintive, descending song, the notes echoing loudly from some hidden hole in the rocks.

“This parasite, virus, whatever it is. What’s it doing?” Preston asked.

“That’s the big question. Someone went to a lot of trouble to install it.”

“Is it stealing money?”

“Doesn’t seem to be. Joan and Adrian looked for that and didn’t find anything suspicious. It’s almost as if it’s just a test.”

“A test of what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe just testing the concept. The *next* virus will be the one with some real teeth.”

“I don’t like the sound of that. Could your father have found out about it?”

“Anything’s possible. Joan might have told him.”

“Suppose your father realized what it was for. Wouldn’t that be reason to get rid of him?”

“Preston, you’ve got no evidence that he was killed. Why are you so sure?”

“Call it instinct. GISS”

“GISS?”

“Yeah, you know, *General Impression of Size and Shape* – ”

“I know what GISS is. I mean how does it fit. We’re not talking about birding.”

“No, but the principle is the same. How do you tell a Black Vulture from a Turkey Vulture at a distance?”

“Is this a quiz?”

“Yes.”

“Well, the TV holds its wings in a sharp dihedral angle. The BV is usually a flatter angle. Also, the BV flaps ? ”

“OK. That’s enough. Now, suppose I point to a Turkey Vulture and tell you it’s a Black Vulture. How will you know I’m wrong?”

“Well, as I said ? ”

“Exactly. Wrong GISS. The same thing’s true here. You keep telling me your father died a natural death. I’m telling you the GISS doesn’t fit. I can’t explain it better than that. There’s no single thing, just a combination.”

“For example?”

“Well, there’s the locked door to his office. Why’d he lock it while he was still inside? That’s not like him. And there’s all this mystery about a new will, or some important e-mail he was writing you. Then there’s Joan. She arrived and turned everything upside down, found a virus in Magus computer system. It’s got to be connected. Too many coincidences. Where is Joan, by the way?”

“Why would I know?”

“You’re the executor of the estate; she’s President of Magus. I assumed you’d be in constant contact.”

“It doesn’t work like that. I don’t have anything to do with the operation of Magus, except for working on the virus, of course. I haven’t talked to her lately. By the way, your list of coincidences doesn’t even count the reporter looking for me out here.”

“What! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I just found out about it. Gordo dropped by. He said a reporter had been asking about, as he put it, ‘A half-blind computer nerd.’ That sounds like me.”

“I knew it! There is something going on. I’m sure your father was murdered. You need to be careful. They may be after you too.”

“How was he murdered? By whom? And why would they be after me?”

“How, I don’t know. By whom? Well, there are the obvious suspects.”

“Namely?”

“Mary Lynn.”

“What? Now you’ve lost me.”

“Well, we just have her word for lots of things.” He started ticking them off on his fingers. “Simon was alive when she and Matthew left the building; he was working on something important; the door was locked; no one had the key.”

“That would imply that Matthew and Mary Lynn had to be accomplices. That’s not believable.”

“I agree. They’re not exactly the best of friends.”

“You left out Mother.”

“Of course.” Preston didn’t offer to elaborate.

“What about Joan?”

“No way. She’s one of the good guys.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Mark stopped Preston before he could answer. “I know: GISS.” With that, he rose and started back to the cabin, leaving Preston to follow.

By the time they returned to the cabin, Mark had formulated his own explanation. “How’s this, Preston? Someone had the key. They came back later, after Matthew and Mary Lynn had left. They went into Simon’s office and...I don’t know...scared him to death. Then they locked the door, and left.”

“And the security system? Where was it?”

“The parasite! Maybe that’s what it was doing ? sabotaging the security system.”

“Is that possible?”

“Maybe. I’d have to think about it.”

“Interesting. What about the disk drive? Have you been able to read anything from it yet?”

“LJ’s still working on it.”

“Let’s hope there’s something good on it. We need to work that into the equation. Why did someone go to so much trouble to erase the disk? Why not simply delete the files?”

“Deleted files stay around for a long time. We could have retrieved them. If you want to delete them permanently, you have to degauss the disk. There’s a story about IBM and CDC, the famous lawsuit —”

“Really? You have to degauss the disk to eliminate files? I didn’t know that. Can you tell when the disk was zapped? Was it before Simon died, or after?”

“I’m not sure. Why does it matter?”

“Well, if it happened before your father died, then the computer would have been inoperable. Simon couldn’t very well have been working on a broken computer. However, if it happened after he died, then it means that someone got into the office, degaussed the disk, and left, locking the door with the key he managed to return to Simon’s briefcase.”

“Neither scenario seems very likely.”

“Agreed. That’s what makes it interesting. Have you called Joan yet?”

“No. Should I? About what?”

“Absolutely. Tell her you’ve made progress on the parasite. Invite her out here. She may be in danger.”

“Why would she be in danger?”

“She’s the new President of Magus, isn’t she?”

“Maybe. That’s not settled yet. Mother ? ”

“Yes, I know. Never mind. I’ll call her.”

“No problem. I’m always ready to see her. So long as you’re here, Delfina shouldn’t mind.”

“Good,” Preston said as he handed Mark a piece of paper. “This place lacks adequate comestibles. I’ve made up a list of essential items. If I’m going to create a decent meal, I have to have something to work with.”

“Where am I supposed to get all this stuff?”

“Not where you usually shop, which I assume is some convenience store on the highway. I’d suggest Bandera. That store on the edge of town has a nice selection. Get the venison sausage there, and the pepper jelly.”

“Bandrera? That’s over fifty miles. Why not send me all the way to San Antonio?”

Preston ignored the sarcasm. “Better get going. I’m not sure how soon they close.” He patted Mark on the back and shoved him out of the door.

12. Rocky Road

Joan, like many New Englanders, originally pictured Texas as a land filled with sand, cactus, and oil wells. She'd revised her view on her first visit to Houston, when she looked out of the airplane window onto a green forest of pine and oak. Sometimes, she found herself homesick for the East Coast, with its rocky shorelines, low hills, and quaint *old* places. Houston considered anything from before World War II to be old. Then there was the overwhelming *scale* of Texas. On a rare clear day, you could see well into four counties, and counties in Texas were *big*. Even when the normal haze restricted viewing you could see past the three "downtowns" that formed Houston's strange skyline to yet another cluster of buildings rising far out west near Sugarland.

Now, as she drove into the Hill Country for the first time, she had to revise her opinion of Texas once again. Suddenly, the flat prairie was only a memory as the road wove its way through rocky hills covered with drought-stunted tree. The harsh landscape struck her as beautiful, though her business mind also quickly listed problems trying to make a living off the land.

I hope Preston knows what he's doing. This trip couldn't have come at a worse time. Joan had spent the past week putting in twenty-hour days trying to pull together the frayed threads of Simon's deals for Magus. Mary Lynn is turning out to be a surprising assistant. She seems to know everything that Simon had going on. Funny how she knows more than I do about lots of the deals.

Preston had been very specific about the route Joan should follow. "Turn off I-10 onto state 46. Take that to Bandera, then 16 to Medina and 337 the rest of the way. It's a beautiful drive. Also, when you're on 337, you should be able to see if anyone is following you."

Why would anyone follow me? What does Preston know?

Preston is a funny guy. I wonder if he kisses everyone's hand, or if he saved that for me specifically. I wonder if I'm really as beautiful as people say. Mark sure seems to think so. Does he realize how he looks at me? Delfina sure does.

On a long straight stretch of highway 337, Joan tried to remember to check her rear view mirror frequently. She saw nothing particularly interesting behind her, and found herself irritated by Preston's suspicion.

Schneider Ranch was as lovely as Preston had said it would be, and well worth a stop by the side of the road. A broad pond — the locals called it a lake according to Preston — spread over the foreground in front of a line of limestone cliffs. A white bird with a long neck stalked the shoreline, poking its beak into the water occasionally. *Probably catching fish. I wonder if I'll have to learn about birds. Preston and Mark are so fanatical about them. That book they recommended is daunting.*

Two men on motorcycles swept past at high speed.

Only later, when she saw the same two riders behind her did she decide that Preston's warning about being followed might be something more than ordinary paranoia. Unable to outrun them, she decided to stop frequently to see if they were really tailing her. She bought gas in Bandera, and stopped in Medina at a place that sold apples and native trees suitable for

planting. The bikers never stopped where she did, but seemed to be waiting further along the road as though they knew where she was going.

Why would they bother to follow me if they already know where I'm going? They must not know the exact location, only that it's somewhere in the general vicinity of Leakey.

With her mind on the two bikers, she passed the turnoff and had to go another couple of miles before she found a safe place to turn around. As she drove back, she saw the two bikes blast past her at high speed. With them out of sight, she turned quickly into the gravel road and raced toward the cabin, hoping that Preston would know what to do. As she followed the canyon around a bend, she heard the sound of the cycles racing past. *That was too easy. They'll figure it out.*

Hurrying, she pulled up to the cabin Preston had told her to look for and ran to the door, reaching the cover of the deck just as rain began to pelt the roof. Preston opened the door with an elaborate bow. "Welcome to our humble computer lab." His expression changed suddenly when he saw Joan's face. "What's happened?"

"Nothing yet, but I'm sure I was followed."

"Where are they?"

"I lost them briefly when I turned in, but they'll be back. We don't have much time."

Preston thought briefly. "Park your car at the next cabin down, about a quarter mile further on. Then get back here as fast as you can. I'll try to make this cabin look uninhabited."

"Shouldn't we hide somewhere away from the cabin?"

Preston considered this. "No, there's a better place. Hurry!"

Joan decided to trust him and raced back to the car. The rain was getting heavier. By the time she returned to the cabin completely out of breath, she was completely soaked.

Preston stood next to a bookcase against the far wall, binoculars hanging around his neck, motioning her to follow. "Quick. I saw two people down at the creek crossing. It'll take them about 10 minutes to get here. I think they left the motorcycles on the other side of the creek. They'll be walking."

Joan looked around puzzled. "Where are we going to hide?" She looked around the living area seeing no reasonable place. A spiral staircase looked like it led to a loft, but that didn't appear promising.

Preston noticed her concern and grinned broadly. "Here." He pressed on a large book near the end of the top shelf, which produced a loud click. The bookcase slid out easily. Preston bowed again and said, "Shall we move into the lab?"

"Said the spider to the fly." Shrugging, she followed Preston. *It's so crazy, it might just work.*

13. Exceeding Design Parameters

Venison sausage and pepper jelly proved to be easy, but where did Preston expect Mark to find *porcini* mushrooms and fresh pasta? Certainly not in Bandera. Faced with the choice between San Antonio with rush hour traffic and Kerrville, Mark made up his mind quickly. However, by the time he found a suitably trendy market in the Big K, it had grown dark. He hoped that Joan liked late dinners. Just in case, he picked up some candles. Maybe Preston would like to go to sleep early.

Bypassing Bandera, Mark pushed the truck to the limit on the way Leakey. He couldn't see anything in the poor light at the Schneider Ranch, as he blasted by at seventy plus. However, by the time he reached the picnic area, he needed to stop to listen for a Common Poorwill, get a good look at Venus, commune with Simon's last resting place, and take a leak, though not necessarily in that order.

As Mark returned to the truck, the phone trilled a greeting. He pressed the talk button and heard Preston's voice. "Where are you, Owl? Did you find everything? How about the *por* —"

Mark guessed Preston was worried about the mushrooms. Static wiped out the tail end of the sentence. "I found the damned mushrooms, if that's what you're worried about. I had to drive to Kerrville."

"What? Come again."

"I said, I have the damned mushrooms. Did Joan get there?"

"Do you have everything?"

"Yes, damnit!"

"Good. Where are you?"

"At the picnic area on 337."

"Pickling area? What are you talking about?"

"Never mind. This connection sucks. I'll call you back." After three tries, Mark had established a decent connection. "Finally. Can you hear me now?"

"Yes. Much better. The thunderstorm must be interfering with the signal."

"What thunderstorm? It's clear here."

"Well, not here. We're got a real frog strangler. There's a severe thunderstorm alert out for the Hill Country."

"Watch or warning?"

"I think it's a warning. Just a sec... Yes, Joan says a severe thunderstorm warning covering Real County —"

"Shit! I better get moving. I may not be able to make it to the cabin."

“Oh, one more thing. Somebody followed Joan. Be careful.” Preston hung up abruptly, without saying goodbye.

Somebody followed Joan! Jeez, I better get moving. I wonder if they're still out there? The autopilot in his brain took over the driving chores, freeing up the rest of his mind to worry. *If someone had followed Joan, the same someone might have monitored the cell phone transmission. They might know the location of the picnic area. They might be after him now!* He longed for the security of the cabin. Maybe he could reach Gordo.

“Due to the present emergency, normal operations of the Real County Sheriff’s Office are suspended. If this is an emergency, please...” *Damn!*

He pulled his laptop from the backpack on the seat and plugged it into the power outlet of the truck. Then he plugged a cable from the laptop into a special outlet on the truck, allowing the laptop access to one of the many microprocessors controlling the truck. The computer sprang to life, connected automatically with the cabin computers and started reading off Mark’s queued up e-mail. He heard what he was listening for. “From Gordo. Hope your inside. Have to pass on dinner. Preston invited me.” Not the message he wanted. “Reply,” Mark said to the computer, using the *hands-free* option he’d paid LJ so much to install. “Ready,” came the machine voice. “Urgent I talk to you ASAP.” He paused. “Send.” The machine responded with “Done.”

Clearing the top of a long rise, Mark had an unobstructed view to the north for the first time. A line of dark clouds stretched across the sky like a curtain, not an encouraging sign. A strong front moving through struck the truck with gusts of cold air.

The road entered a curving canyon, blocking a view of the storm line. The weather information channel wasn’t promising. “...severe thunderstorm *warning* is in effect until 11:30 p.m. for persons in Real, Edwards, —” *Damn!*

The canyon opened up, providing a view to the north again. The line of dark clouds had moved closer, much closer. The accelerator clanked against the metal strip on the floor. The truck lumbered up to 75 mph, lurching around the curves.

Ambianca took advantage of the connection to the truck and started downloading music. She chose to play *Ride of the Valkyries*. The galloping rhythm encouraged Mark to drive even faster, taking too many chances with the truck. A phrase from the owner’s manual popped into his brain: “Remember, this is not a sports car. Your truck can go many places a sports car can’t. A sports car can go around curves much better than your truck.”

Mark was definitely exceeding the truck’s design parameters.

Another view of the storm. *Closer still.* He prayed to the god whose existence he denied, “Please. Hold that storm back a little while, OK?” As prayers went, it wasn’t much, but it made up in sincerity what it lacked in elegance.

He had gone but a scant five miles when the first drops of the squall line smacked into his windshield like June bugs. His prayers had proved ineffective once again.

14. High Dudgeon

The truck sat at the edge of the water on the highway. Big Henderson Creek, which seldom made it this far before drying up, flowed across the road, a silver ribbon thirty to forty feet wide, pockmarked by raindrops, reflecting the headlights. Where the shoulder used to be, a white plank with hash marks and numbers showed the numeral “2” just above the water line. Two feet doesn’t sound like much, but it was too much to drive through. The creek flowed too swiftly to wade. The weather service published two rules for dealing with floods.

1. Get to high ground.
2. Wait for the water level to go down.

The first part proved easy. Mark backed up the hill until 50 vertical feet stood between the truck and the stream. He pulled off the road onto a rocky ledge between two oak trees. The trees provided some shelter from the storm, and hid the truck from anyone out looking for it.

Waiting was the hard part. Patience wasn’t Mark’s long suit.

Maybe deep breathing would help.

He tried.

It didn’t.

Ambianca played *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head*.

Half of the 2 lay beneath the surface of the water.

Rule of action for all gamers: when blocked try something else.

That sounds like a good idea. What are the alternatives? Drive back to Vanderpool and go around. Would that work? How many times did I pass one of those helpful signs the highway department plasters along the highway, “Watch for water on road?” Next time pay attention.

Preston would know. He claims to have photographic memory. Phone him... Circuits busy. Gordo is probably hogging all the cells in the county tonight. How many traffic accidents does he have to deal with? How many people need rescuing? Is this an emergency? Call the special number?

Mark dithered and did nothing.

All of the 2 had vanished. The rain continued, though seemed to be letting up.

I could walk to the dam. I should be able to cross there. No, the cliffs are on this side. I’d never get to the dam.

The trolley!

The moving part of the trolley, the small car that went across the creek, was on the same side of the creek as Mark. He could hike to the trolley, get in and slide right across to the other side. Then he could hike to the cabin. From here it couldn’t be more than three miles or so, maybe four.

Rummaging around in the back of the truck, he dug out a pair of rubber boots, the kind called “wellies,” with a strap on the top to help keep them closed; a light wind breaker; a

flashlight with some working batteries (a small miracle!); and binocs. No good birder would think of going anywhere without binocs, no matter what the weather.

Clouds obscured the sky. Rain, though abating somewhat, drenched the ground and misted up Mark's glasses. The flashlight started fading almost immediately, so Mark switched it off. After falling three times on the slick rocks, he switched the light back on and decided to leave it on as long as possible.

The creek on his left, deep and full, murmured quietly as it swept past, instead of trickling over the rocks as usual. Mark missed the soft sounds of the night associated with the creek, no owls, no Chuck Will's Widow, no little rustling noises in the leaves accompanied him. All of Nature had retreated before the storm. Only the wellies squishing along in the muddy rocks at the edge of the water made a sound.

The march to the trolley proved again the truth of the *Law of Gravitational Asymmetry: There's always more uphill than downhill*. Mark was out of breath, and his legs had grown tired by the time he finally saw the trolley towers.

The flashlight was almost dead. He switched it off to save what little juice remained, let his eyes adjust to the dark, and groped forward to the tower.

The trolley operated on a simple principle: gravity. Two towers on opposite sides of the creek had a cable strung between them. Suspended from the cable was a small car, just an open cage with a rotten wooden floor and nasty looking, jagged edges where handholds should have been. It wouldn't have passed an OSHA inspection.

The tower itself seemed to be in reasonable shape. The creek hadn't eroded much in the past 40 years, thanks to the rocky bottom and margin. The concrete slab on which the tower stood showed no cracks or other signs of wear. Mark grabbed the ladder, which didn't budge in response to a hard jerk, and climbed eight steps to the top, wondering whether he'd lost his mind completely.

In the dull yellow circle illuminated by the flash, he could make out a rusted wire holding the cage to a pipe set into the concrete edge of the tower. Climb into the cage, undo the wire, and let gravity do its work. Nothing to it. The Second Law of Thermodynamics would exact its toll: there's no free lunch. Friction would drain energy, and unless he pulled, the cage would wind up stranded in the middle. Gloves would have been a good idea. Too late now.

A metal railing ran around the top of the cage, about three feet from the floor. Mark swung his leg over the railing and gingerly stepped onto the floorboards, which gave an alarming *crack!* For his second try, he selected a place near the edge of the cage. The board held, even with his full weight on it. His other leg followed and soon he stood completely in the cage, holding onto the top of the railing, in case the floor collapsed.

Moving slowly, he turned back to the tower and attacked the wire holding the cage. It had rusted into a Gordian Knot. Time for the Alexandrine solution. He worked with his new knife at what appeared to be a weak point. The flashlight gave off only a dull glow now, barely enough to see the wire.

Suddenly, the wire gave way and the car started to move. *Too soon!* He grabbed the pipe and held tight, barely stopping the car before it took off. It rocked back and forth from the

shock. Minutes seemed to pass while the oscillations damped out. The flashlight rolled off the side of the tower and smashed on the rocks below.

Mark peered into the gloom trying to see the other side. Wiping the rain off his glasses, he looked again without success. *What the hell. You only live once.* He released his grip and lurched forward in the car, trying to impart some extra momentum. The trolley slid forward and dropped down with a fall like a roller coaster, with Mark hanging onto the side railings.

The trolley picked up speed, hurtled past the midpoint and started back up the other side. Mark reached forward to grab the cable as soon as the trolley slowed. Too late, he saw a tree branch right before it smacked him across the face. Recoiling, dazed as much from surprise as from the blow itself, he stepped back. The floor gave way, leaving him hanging on to the railing while the car slowed to a halt and started back the way it had come.

He stretched for the cable, and almost reached it. However, the night's activities had been too much for the ancient contraption. With a horrible sound, the cable snapped in two and the car dropped into the creek below, where the swift current carried Mark trapped in the remains of the trolley down the creek.

I'm going to drown, in three feet of water! The remnants of the cage dragged along the bottom of the creek, slowing the mad race downstream, but cutting off a path to the surface. *It's only three feet deep. I can stand up.* The water dashed him against a large boulder, then, when his lungs felt on fire, rotated him up and out of the water. Grabbing a quick breath, he flailed at the metal pieces of the trolley, finally succeeding at extricating himself from their grasp.

He stood in water waist deep and very cold. The wellies filled up instantly, strap notwithstanding, sucking the warmth from his feet. Every part of his body felt cold, except an area on his left arm, where a gash left by the trolley let warm blood flow.

The shoreline, no more than twenty feet away at the most, disappeared into a fuzzy mist. Without glasses, lost somewhere along the way, Mark could see only large shapes.

OK. Think. You want to go to the bank on your right while facing downstream. Downstream! Of course, the water will tell me which way to go. Carefully, he turned until he felt the stream push against his right thigh. Shuffling forward, afraid to pick up his feet, he slid his right foot forward, feeling the bottom for a good purchase, then his left, and repeated this slow ballet, moving in the direction of the unseen bank.

About that time, two things happened. First, the moon broke through the clouds, providing some light. The bank loomed directly in front of him about twenty feet away. *Don't hurry. You'll fall if you do. Yeah! Better to freeze than to drown!*

The second event began as a slight tingling in his right foot. For a moment, he thought it was simply the effect of the cold. Then it grew larger. He figured out what was causing it in time to look upstream.

Pittman's Dam, weakened by the rain, had given way, releasing all the water in one gigantic flush. He could hear it as it closed the half mile between them, a deep rumble. In a panic, he tried to run for the bank. He lost his footing immediately and fell into the creek.

Flailing with his arms, he managed to right himself. Turning to look upstream, he could see a wall of water eight feet high descending. It resembled cappuccino in color, with the foam

at the crest serving as the milky froth. He had time for one final thought before the water engulfed him:

For once, Big Henderson Creek is going to live up to its name.

He ducked his head, letting the main wave pass over. The rush of water propelled him downstream again at a dizzying pace, rolling him over and over like a ball. *Which way is the surface?*

You are supposed to go downstream feet first in a situation like this. Flailing his arms, Mark managed to reposition himself. Maybe. The surface seemed a long way away, barely visible in the light of the moon. He moved toward it.

His head burst above the floodwater's surface. He filled his lungs with air, not knowing how long it would be before the onslaught pushed him under again.

The rain-swollen creek took him downstream like a bobbing cork.

What to do? Swim? That didn't seem right. Float? Maybe. He struggled into a floating position. That seemed better, some slight control.

Maybe I can steer toward a shore. Either one will do.

The water became shallower, more turbulent, swirling around in a whirlpool motion, taking him close to the bank, then away again. On the next pass, he tried to put his feet down and lunge toward the shore. It was too deep. *Wait! Time it right! Now!*

He stood up, touched bottom, lunged forward, and was rewarded by the sight of the bank appearing from the gloom. *Now, catch a branch, anything to keep me from going downstream.*

With a crushing blow, the water drove him onto a log that had fallen into the creek. At least he wasn't moving. Now he needed a rescuer. He called out, "Hello! Help! Anyone there?"

Only the loud whisper of the creek as it brushed the shore answered. He pulled along the log toward the bank. Every move hurt. *So cold. Tired. Need to rest.*

When Mark realized that he was about to die, a feeling of great sadness washed over him. He thought of all the spring migrations he'd miss, of all the birds he would never see. He thought of Delfina. Then, fulfilling a promise he'd made to himself years ago, his last thought was of Becky Bell.

15. Booting Up

Despite the overcast sky, the temperature in the parking lot of the Basin Campground in Big Bend National Park on the last day of May 1968 hovered in the low 90s.

“You kids will have a good time without me. Remember what to look for?”

“Yeah. Mainly the Colima Warbler, but check out the other specialties up there.” Becky parroted back the catechism we’d studied for days.

“You might see the Colima Warbler at Laguna Meadow, but keep going to Boot Springs. It’s worth it.”

“We’ll be fine, Preston,” I said, with far more confidence than I felt. “You have a good time with your friend.” I nodded in the direction of the big van he’d spotted. Two men removed large cameras from the back. A tall, slim woman checked herself in a pocket mirror. She was *the Vireo*, short for *Red-eyed Vireo*, according to Preston, who hadn’t been himself since he spotted her. I thought that was why he had changed his mind at the last minute about coming with us to Boot Springs. She looked like better company than Becky and me.

We walked to Preston’s old VW van and started putting gear on. Time for one final check. Was there anything to throw out to lighten the load? “What about this ground cloth?” I asked. “We don’t have a tent, so do we really need it?”

“How much does it weigh?” Becky asked.

“I don’t know. Not much.” Wrong answer. She just smiled radiantly. I stuffed the ground cloth into the top of my backpack.

An old man, thin and wiry, and at least 70-something, approached. He had only a single water bottle, a small daypack and binoculars strung around his neck. Breathing heavily, he reached out and touched the car parked next to the van. Then he smiled and sat down on the ground. “If that had been five feet farther, I don’t think I would have made it.” Becky laughed. I joined in when I realized it was a joke.

“Where have you been?” I asked.

“To Boot Springs and back.”

“Boot Springs and back! You went up there and back in one day! What time did you start?”

“About 4:00 this morning.”

“You hiked up there in the dark?”

“Well, it was light by the time I made it through all the switchbacks.”

I looked up the face of the cliff. The trail to Boot Springs started up a nice easy slope until it disappeared around a bend. “Switchbacks?”

“Sure. That’s about all there is for the first few miles. They start almost as soon as you get out of sight. That way till you get to Laguna Meadows. Then you get a bit of trail. Y’all going up?”

“Yes.” Becky answered without hesitation.

I asked, “Did you see the Colima Warbler?”

“Oh, yes. Plenty of ‘em. They ain’t singing much, though. Must be the drought. Gotta work for ‘em. Y’all got plenty water?”

Becky answered him with an authoritative air, “We have two liters per person per day, just like the book says.” I needed to warn her that if we went to Houston, she’d have to be careful to say, “*as the book says.*”

I turned to the old man. “They say you can’t drink the water up there. That right?”

“Well, not much water to start with. Don’t know as I’d drink any of it. The ‘springs’ part of Boot Springs is mostly a myth, you know.”

“So I hear.” *If he can climb up and back in one long morning, I should be able to make it up in the course of the afternoon.*

“If you want to see a Colima Warbler, though, gotta come here to do it.” Our new chum leaned back against the wheel of the car, relaxed, and smiled. “Here or some mountains in Mexico. I reckon they are even harder to get to than here. No convenient parking lot at 3000 feet.”

“We need to get started,” Becky said, taking charge again. We hoisted out backpacks, waved to our advisor and started toward the sign marked “Laguna Meadows/Boot Springs.”

As advertised, we had an easy stroll out of sight of the parking lot, then started up the switchbacks. Under ordinary circumstances, the trail would have been easy, sloping no more than 5° or so. However, the phrase “ordinary circumstances” means nothing in Big Bend, unless it means “hotter’n hell.”

At least it’s overcast. I’d probably die in the full sun.

I watched Becky’s back, wondering if she would turn out to be one of the women Mother talked about, those that never seem to perspire. In the low humidity of the desert, sweat didn’t last long. I stared at a single drop that appeared near the collar of Becky’s shirt. It started rolling down her back, but evaporated before dampening her shirt. Where the straps of the backpack blocked the air, tendrils of water appeared in the cloth, spreading like veins in leaves.

If she can do it, so can I. Count the paces. I counted 123 on each of segment of the trail.

Becky insisted on stopping at every turn, drinking some water carefully and taking a pulse before setting out again. I had to keep reminding myself that she was the one recuperating from a serious injury. She seemed to be in better shape than I.

Our target was at 6600 feet, but to get there we had two unappetizing choices. We could take the long, gentle way, an extra ten miles, or the macho route, which climbed up to 7300 feet before starting back down. Experienced hikers probably take the long way and start early in the morning. We had blown our chance at that by spending the entire morning sitting in the shade at the Sam Nail Ranch, where we added the Varied Bunting to our growing list of bird species identified. Now we were committed to charging up the hill after we finished the damn switchbacks.

The zigzag, monotonous climb seemed never ending. For variety, one especially long segment crossed to the other side of a deep canyon. I could see the series of slopes we'd just come up. *Well, we've made it this far.*

We reached Laguna Meadows about 4:00 in the afternoon, with plenty of light still left. We took off the packs and walked through the meadow, an uncommonly lovely spot, even in a drought. I saw small flowers tucked in among the grasses. *What would happen if I picked some and gave them to her? What if I did that then took her into my arms and covered her with kisses? What if we made love right here in the soft grass?*

I didn't do anything, of course.

What can she see in me anyway? I'm just a kid as far as she's concerned. She's a grown woman. Twenty-three's not old, though.

I looked at her as she walked ahead of me, focusing first on the tight shorts she wore, then on smooth and tanned legs ending in hiking boots and thick socks. *Her legs are so slender. They don't look right in those boots. I like the way her muscles stand out as she walks up the trail. What would it be like to rub her legs, what might that lead to?*

She turned to look back at me. "You doing OK?"

"Yes," I gasped, "just dandy." I thanked whatever god controlled the weather for the relative coolness of the overcast sky. A slight breeze blew over us deliciously. "Ah," Becky said, taking off her hat and running her fingers through her hair. She removed her bandana, poured some of the precious water on it and wiped her face and neck.

O, that I were a glove upon that hand, That I might touch that cheek!

"That feels better. Ready for the well-known hard part?"

"Ready as I'm likely to get." We donned our backpacks again and started up the steep slope marked "Boot Springs: 1.5 miles." *Surely, I can go that far before I collapse.*

We had gone about half way up the steep trail when I heard my first Colima Warbler in a small shrub right next to the trail. I called Becky, who came back to me. We stopped just long enough to tally the warbler, in case it was the only one we saw, then got back to the business of climbing the trail.

Instead of even sloping paths with carefully marked turns, we now climbed up a steep, rocky excuse for a trail, straining at every step. Few people used the trail, and the trees had grown over it forming an opaque canopy. The climb took longer than we'd anticipated, and it was already beginning to get dark. When we came to an opening in the trees, we found out why it was getting dark early. About that time, the first scattered drops of rain hit.

"We need to get moving," Becky said.

"Right," I agreed. "Let's go." About half an hour later, we pulled ourselves onto the ridge marking the highest point of the trail. Now we had to go only about half a mile down to the Boot Springs camp.

We almost ran. Rain fell steadily. The temperature dropped rapidly. We were getting an example of Big Bend's famous unpredictable weather.

Becky had gone over our emergency plan with Preston before leaving. If necessary, we were to find the cabin in the camp and take some shelter there. We found the cabin all right, but there was a very big lock on the door, and no overhanging porch to shelter us. We were stuck: no tent, rain coming down, no place to go.

Becky began some sort of litany: “Food, water, shelter. We have the first two. We need shelter, and quick.” She examined the area around the cabin, looking for something to use. “You did bring the ground cloth, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“OK, here’s what we’re going to do. Turn over that picnic table there. We’ll move it so the back of the table is facing into the wind. Then tie one side of the ground cloth to the legs of the table and the other to those two trees. It’ll be like a tent without sides.”

With the rain still coming down heavily, we huddled in our makeshift pavilion, backs against the picnic table, hugging our knees to our chests. The table provided some shelter from the wind and rain, but we got wet from the spray as the drops ricocheted off the rocks around us.

The rain grew heavier, the air colder.

Becky put on everything she had to wear and huddled next to me. I could feel her shivering and overcame my shyness enough to put my arm around her for warmth. She clung to me, trying to stop shivering. I could smell her wet hair, and see small drops of spray condense on her ear and drop to her shirt.

When the rain let up a bit, Becky untied the cover and wrapped it around her, before sending me to scout around. “Go find us a better place,” she said with teeth clenched to stop the chattering.

I took off down the hill, where the official camping spots lay. I found ours, number six. It was vast expanse of mud.

I found another couple snug inside a tent. *Wonder if they’d be willing to share? No. It’s cozy enough with two of them. Doesn’t look like they’re in a mood for company anyway.*

“What are you doing?” the girl asked.

“I’m checking out our campsite. It is nothing but mud. Where we are is better than this.”

“Where are you?” I told her about the makeshift shelter under the picnic table. She looked dubious. “Good luck.” She disappeared back inside the tent.

I reported back to Becky. She considered the options briefly. “We have to find better shelter. We have to get warm. Hypothermia is the second biggest danger of hiking.”

“What’s hypothermia? And what’s the biggest danger?”

“The biggest danger is driving to the trailhead. Never mind. How could it turn so damned cold when it was so damned hot earlier! We’ll pay whatever the fine is for trespassing on government property. *We have to get into the cabin.*” She stood and walked over to examine the cabin closely. “The windows look like the kind they have in cheap motels, the kind that don’t lock well. Try them. Try around back. You should be tall enough to reach the window from there.”

How did she learn so much about cheap motels?

I went over to the back of the cabin. Someone had been there before. Stones piled up against the side of the cabin formed stairs to get to the window. A single touch dislodged the screen, which fell to the ground. I put my hand on the window and slid it open with minimal effort. *It's not even locked!*

“Come on! The window’s not even locked!” The rain started up again, even heavier than before. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

“I’m going to need your help,” she said calmly.

I boosted her up through the window, threw the backpacks after her, then gripped the sill and hauled myself through.

The cabin was heaven. The rain beat a tattoo on the tin roof, but the roof didn’t leak. We found cots with mattresses.

“Drag a couple of those onto the floor, spread the bags out, and zip them together,” Becky instructed. She sat down and tried to unlace her boots, but couldn’t get her fingers to work. “You’re going to have to help me get undressed.”

“Get undressed?” *Tell me I’m not dreaming.*

“Our clothes are soaked. We have to get out of them if we’re ever going to get warm. Hurry up with those bags. I’m freezing. Aren’t you?”

“Sure. I’m hurrying.” I redoubled my efforts. The bags didn’t want to zip together. “Here. Give me that.” She took the sleeping bag from me. “See if there’s anything like a heater in here. Check that closet.” I searched the closet.

“This looks like a heater,” I said, holding up a small green object with a metal top.

“Great. That’s one of the new Coleman’s. It’ll run for hours. Any fuel?”

I shook the heater, which made a delightful sloshing sound. I carried it over near where Becky had laid the sleeping bags.

“Get undressed,” she ordered. She took a book of matches taped to the heater and lit it. After a few seconds, the flame went out, but a mesh top produced a reassuring red radiance.

“I can’t get my boots undone. Will you help me, please?” I had pulled off my boots and rushed over to her, curiously glad to delay undressing. Her bootlaces had swollen from the rain. They took a long time, but I finally got them undone. I looked up for congratulations to find that she had removed her shirt. I stared at her breasts, held up by a bra that looked unequal to the task. She noticed me and smiled. “I may need help with the bra, too.”

She turned her back to me and began removing the jeans she had put on over her shorts. Then she pulled her shorts and underpants off in one quick motion and slid halfway into the sleeping bag.

I stared at the strap of the bra where it crossed her back and tried to undo the hooks. Unfamiliar with the task, I fumbled with the straps, unable to get enough slack to unhook them.

“Start at the top,” Becky instructed me calmly, “and undo one hook at a time.” *So that’s how it’s done. Easy.*

She took the bra and threw it against the wall. “An invention of the devil for sure, or at least a man.” She laughed at her own joke. “I’m going to burn it the first chance I get.”

I stared at her breasts in the warm red light of the heater. Her nipples had contracted from the cold and stood out from her wrinkled areolas. As I watched, she slid down into the sleeping bag and started repeating the mantra she’d begun earlier. “Food, water, shelter, warmth. Food is now our primary concern. What do we have to eat?”

“Snickers?”

“Perfect. Grab all the Snickers you can find, get out of those wet clothes and get into this sleeping bag. And quit dawdling.”

I gave her a Snickers, stripped off my own wet clothes, and slid into the sleeping bag.

“Turn around,” she instructed, and pressed up next to me. I felt her cold nipples against my back, hard enough to make pits in my skin. One of her arms snaked around my neck. Her other hand slid up my thigh onto my arm, pulling me close. We lay pressed together like spoons. I was grateful for the position, because it concealed the erection I had almost immediately. I blushed from embarrassment, the blood flooding my face. At least parts of me were warm.

Becky’s hand slipped off my arm and found out about my excitement. She chuckled softly. “Not now. We have more important problems to deal with.” I could feel her shiver next to me.

“Need to get warm,” I said, trying to show I wasn’t a complete dolt.

“My Dad always recited a poem at times like this,” she said.

I couldn’t figure out what she meant, so just mumbled something. She took it as an invitation.

We for a certainty are not the first
Have sat in taverns while the tempest hurled
Their hopeful plans to emptiness, and cursed
Whatever brute and blackguard made the world.¹

“Like it?”

“So God’s a brute and blackguard?”

“If God made the world, I think he must have been having a bad day. Actually, though, I doubt God had anything to do with it. I think we made this mess all by ourselves, and we have to get out of it ourselves.”

“What mess is that?”

“The war, of course. Don’t think I’ve forgotten about it. My month is almost up.”

I choked out a reply. “I’ve been hoping that you’d lost count of the days.”

“Just a few left. The sleeping bag will keep us warm. We just have to relax and let it work. So just relax for a while, OK. You feel so nice and warm. Get warm, that’s the first order of business.” She snuggled even closer. I felt her all along my body. I did feel nice and warm, and fell asleep, with her body pressed up to mine.

¹ A. E. Housman. Need a citation and probably permission.

The lightning and the rumble of the thunder were so close and strong they jolted me out of a sound sleep. The rain poured down in sheets, lit by lightning more often than I liked. *Is the cabin protected?* I hadn't noticed any lightning rods, but then I hadn't been looking. *Nothing to do about it anyway.* I wasn't going to leave the cabin until the storm was over.

Becky slept soundly, her breath slow and regular. She'd rolled over onto her back. The sleeping bag was almost too warm. I could feel the cooler air of the cabin on my face. The heater glowed red, providing the only light except for the intermittent bolts of lightning, which weren't receding. I tried counting the time between the flash and the peal of thunder, never getting beyond two, much too close for comfort.

I gazed at Becky. She seemed more beautiful than ever in the dim light of the heater. Her eyes were closed, the lashes making a tiny picket fence against her face. I could barely make out the shape of her mouth. It was easier to locate from the soft susurrations of her breathing. I bent over her, breathing in the breath she let out, as though I could capture part of her soul that way.

Another bolt and a loud clap of thunder finally woke Becky. She jerked upright, almost hitting me with her head.

"Wow! That was close. I guess we don't have to worry about trying to find the Flammulated Owl tonight. I hope the cabin is protected." She stretched and yawned, her breasts gleaming in the soft light of the heater.

I want her so much. Why can't I summon the courage even to confess my feelings to her? I'll never feel worthy to claim such a noble prize. What could she see in me? Was she suggesting something earlier? Did I miss my chance?

"You warm?"

"Uh...yeah, you?"

"Toasty." She reached out and put her hand around my neck, pulling me down toward her. Her other hand slid up my thigh. "Now," she said, "I think we have some unfinished business to attend to."

The sun shone through the windows. We tidied up the cabin and slipped out of the window. The screen wouldn't fit back, so I left it leaning against the glass, as I'd found it.

With only a couple of Snicker bars for dinner, and more exercise than I'd expected, I was famished. So was Becky. She dug into the backpacks and removed all the food we'd brought, a couple of oranges, some small tins of tuna, some more candy bars, some crackers.

We were cleaning up when the couple from the tent showed up.

"How did you make out under the picnic table last night?" the girl asked.

"Oh," I replied, "we found a better place."

"We got drenched."

"Yeah. It was quite a rain."

“All the water came downhill and into our tent. Everything is soaked. We’ve got it hanging out to dry.”

“Too bad.”

“What are you going to do this morning?”

“We thought we’d go birding for a while, then hike back down.”

“Birding?”

“Yeah, you know, looking at birds.”

“Really? Are there birds up here?”

“A few, yeah.”

“Well, good luck.”

We were alone again. We left the packs by the picnic table and set off for some birding.

“Hutton’s Vireo.” A lifer: one of the target birds.

“Where?” she asked.

“That small tree over there, beyond the stump. See it moving?”

“Yeah. Got it. It looks like a Ruby-crowned Kinglet.” We had seen one of them in High Island. That seemed like a century ago, but it was only a couple of weeks. Preston had made us study the Kinglet. “It’s late to see one here. Take a good look so you’ll be able to tell it from a Hutton’s Vireo when you see one.” I remembered the difference and launched into a lecture.

“No, this bird is different. First, doesn’t move like a kinglet. Notice how sluggish it is? Then, it has a broken eye ring; the kinglet’s is complete. Finally, the wing bars are different.”

“You’ve been studying!”

“You caught me. I read up on them in bed last night.”

“Ask me if I believe that.”

“Well, OK, maybe it wasn’t last night.” I grinned.

“If you think last night was something, wait till I get you alone again.”

I could feel the heat in my face.

“You’re cute when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Blush. It’s cute.”

“I wish I thought so.”

“Hey. It’s part of being you.” Becky looped her arm through mine and leaned her head on my shoulder. It felt great. *Wonder if we should go back to the cabin? No, we’d probably get caught this time.*

“Maybe we should start down,” she suggested.

“Let’s.”

We almost flew down the trail back, though we did stop twice. Once for a great look at a Western Flycatcher, aptly named *Empidonax difficilis*, the third bird Preston had insisted we see while we were up there. We didn't want to disappoint him. We stopped a second time when Becky wanted to collect a feather she noticed beside the trail.

"That's probably illegal?"

"How can you tell it's from an eagle?" She smiled as she put the feather into her backpack.

"No, I mean it's illegal to pick up a feather in a national park. Collecting isn't allowed."

"Don't rat on me, OK?"

When we got back to the Basin Campground, Preston was nowhere to be found. We asked the Park Ranger if he had any word. "Yeah. He left a note for you."

Kids,

I've left you the van. The keys are hidden on top of the left rear tire.

The Davis Mountains are great! Let's meet at the State Park near Fort Davis. Can you get there by Tuesday? I'll wait around at the Indian Lodge, a motel that's part of the park. Call me there if there is some problem.

The Vireo says hello. She wants to meet you both.

Preston

"So," I asked, "want to find out what the Davis Mountains look like?"

She smiled. "I think that a motel sounds like a good idea. I'm getting a little tired of camping out, aren't you?"

We found the van. Sitting on the driver's seat was a Texas map with the route marked. It was farther than I'd thought.

I drove. Becky navigated. We didn't talk much. Every once in a while, Becky would break into a smile, hum to herself and caress me lightly on the thigh.

"You're going to make me have a wreck."

"We don't want that."

"No. How much farther?"

"Another 50 miles or so to Fort Davis. Then just a short distance to the State Park and Indian Lodge."

"That far?"

"Yeah." She shifted her position in the seat, leaning over next to me. "When we get there, you're going to be really glad that you let me keep that feather."

Preston banged on the window. "Time to get up! Birds won't wait! Breakfast in fifteen minutes."

Becky called out to me as she leaned out of the window of the cabin. “Come on! Take my hand. Climb up.” I reached out to her.

“Over here, Sheriff!”

“Becky! We’ve got to get out of here. The pigs are on a rampage. Come on, please!” I could smell the first wisps of tear gas. I was about to retch. I had to drag her away. “They almost killed you once. Isn’t that enough?”

My ribs hurt where the cop hit me.

“Becky! Help me! I can’t quite reach!” I stretched my hand again, trying to touch her.

Lightning. Start counting, “One thousand, two thousand...” The thunder never came. Strange lightning. Another bolt.

“Help me please. I’m going to get wet.”

Joan smiled at me.

“Over here!”

Someone’s coming! Quick! Into the cabin quickly before they find us. I jumped up, trying to reach Joan’s outstretched hand.

She grabbed my hand. She had on a glove. Strange.

No. It wasn’t Joan, it was a Great Gray Owl, a huge creature. He swooped down, talons extended. Gripping me by the shirt, he struggled to rise. He won’t be able to do it. No. I’m wrong. He’s taking off, lifting me up.

16. Catching a Bug

For several seconds, Mark's brain registered only the presence of light and warmth. Then, he confronted a gauzy tableau in shades of brown and black that slowly resolved into the familiar face of Gordo Salazar scowling at him. "Shit!" Mark said. "I must have died. This must be hell." He heard a song playing in the background, a Kathy Mattea song, *Where Have You Been?* Ambianca! He was home.

"Someone want to tell me what's going on? And maybe someone would like to fetch me some glasses. I keep a spare pair in the drawer by the sink in the bathroom." Footsteps approached, a female shape appeared, with the requested glasses. Clarity, at least of vision, returned. Mark saw Joan's worried face.

Gordo studied Mark. "He'll survive. Got beat up, but doesn't look serious."

Joan brought bandages from the bathroom and busied herself with the cut on Mark's arm. "This needs stitches," she said. "Have a good first aid kit somewhere?"

"I got one in the copter." Gordo spoke into his radio and shortly a young man appeared with the kit.

"Let me handle this, ma'm. I've been trained." Everyone stood back as the young man patched up Mark's arm. The Med Tech looked at the bruises on Mark's chest and applied rolls of tape to prevent further damage to the ribs.

"Can you stand up, Owl?" Preston asked.

"Don't know."

"Here. Let me help." Gordo wrapped his huge arm around Mark's waist, lifting him unsteadily to his feet.

"Whoa! I hurt everywhere. What's going on?"

"You mean besides the latest flood of the century?" Gordo grouched. "I'm getting a bit tired of them."

"It's flooding?"

"All over the Hill Country. Worst is up by Llano north of here. They got thirteen inches in an hour. We got a mere eight. National Guard's out everywhere. I gotta go, as a matter of fact. This ain't gonna be my only rescue tonight I'm afraid."

"Wait! I remember now. Preston! You called me on the phone. It's not secure. I was afraid they might be monitoring for a call."

"If by *they* you mean two nasty looking guys on motorcycles, I think you may be correct. Fortunately, it took them quite a bit of time to get across the creek. Joan and I moved our cars to another cabin, then hid in the computer room. Your little secret came in handy. We heard them out here, looking around. Then they left, probably when they heard the helicopter."

"Helicopter?"

Gordo answered, “How the hell do you think I got here! Told you everything’s flooded. Lucky for you I had one standing by to rescue people who got stranded. Thought it’d be some dumbass tourist, though, not a semi-local. What made you think you could get across the creek in a flood?”

“I almost made it. The dam must have burst – ”

“Yeah! It’s gone all right. Dumped a shitload of water downstream in minutes. You weren’t the only one in trouble. We’d never have known to look for you except for that silly program.”

“Program? Ambianca?”

“Whatever. I kept calling your phone in the truck, thinking maybe you’d be smart enough to stay there. All I could hear was the song *Bridge over Troubled Water* playing in the background. Decided to check it out. Saw your truck by the highway. Took us quite a while to find you. We weren’t any too soon. Heard you mumbling a lot of incoherent nonsense. Something about *Becky* and a *Great Gray Owl*, whatever that is.”

“It’s a bird,” Preston began, “*Strix nebulosa*, found —”

“Not important.”

“I guess not.” Preston shelved his lecture until a more appropriate time.

“Why’re y’all here?”

Preston considered the question briefly, then turned to Mark, “Well, Owl? What have you got to show us?”

“I’ll need to set it up.”

“I’m outa here. Y’all take care, you hear. No more adventures!” Gordo galumphed out the door.

Mark explained, “I’ll need some help. We need to patch the output to the big screen TV. I can...ugh...show you what to do, but probably can’t bend over...”

“Sit still. I’ll help,” Joan volunteered. “Tell me what to do.”

Mark waved in the general direction of the computer room. “Plug the cable marked *RGB* into the slot marked *TV* in the patch panel right inside the door. Then run *Parasite Demo* on the left-hand computer.” Joan did as instructed.

Mark clicked on a remote control and a picture appeared on the screen.

“I know this looks like a bunch of oatmeal. With no parasite in the system, we should get a completely chaotic image. Some complicated mathematical tests show that the probability of a parasite is greater than 75%.” He paused for effect.

“This is the same stuff Adrian showed me,” Joan objected. “What does this prove?”

“Just wait. I made a movie from all the images I got from Adrian. I combined several frames together into a single frame.” He punched a button and the screen ran a series of images one after another. The picture on the screen danced around. Shapes appeared and disappeared without any obvious pattern.

“I don’t see a damn thing,” Preston complained. “What am I supposed to see?”

“Nothing yet. I wanted to show how cleverly this thing hides. Here. This version is slowed down.” The movie replayed in slow motion.

The images appeared the same, but every so often one popped up that looked different. Blobs materialized on the screen then evaporated. Tendrils on some blobs whipped out like jellyfish tentacles.

“Cute,” Preston said. “But so what?”

“That’s what I thought at first,” Mark lectured. “However, consider those tentacle-like things. You did see them? I made another movie that had only the images that had tentacles on them. Guess what I found out.”

“Let’s skip the parlor games, Owl. Just tell us.”

Joan, though, was equal to the task. “I’ll bet you found some stability in the images. The tentacles persist, don’t they?”

“You got it. Here, this is the movie showing only the images with tentacles. I colored parts of the picture red for effect.” He punched the button again.

Now, the screen seemed to be alive with a writhing, malevolent object. It looked alive, whipping out tentacles to blobs on different parts of the screen, retracting them, whipping them out again to other areas repeatedly. The central blob moved from spot to spot on the screen, as though trying to get away from a predator. At each site, the tentacles reached out to touch several small particles in the image, as though examining them.

“That’s the parasite,” Mark declared.

“Wow,” Preston said. “It reminds me of the Caribbean Reef Octopus, *Octopus briareus*.”

“It does look like an octopus, doesn’t it? I thought of a Brittle Star, but octopus fits. It’s just a program, though. At least we know that it’s real. Now, I can see about eliminating it.”

Joan looked unusually thoughtful. “Is there any pattern? What I mean is ... does it appear on every tenth screen or something like that?”

“Not exactly. Good guess, though. The little globule in the center shows up on every sixteenth screen, plus or minus three. The rest of the octopus-like object only appears a little bit at a time. The movie you saw combines three frames from the original set for each image. The octopus is hiding. Excuse me. I find it easy to slip into anthropomorphic terms when discussing the beast. This is a very clever piece of work. I’d love to meet the person responsible.”

“What’s with the tentacles?” Joan asked. “What’s happening when they snake out like that?”

“We’re looking at a picture of the system’s memory. The Fractal Filter eliminates everything that belongs, sort of like looking at negative space in a picture. Each tentacle is a part of the parasite examining and interfering with another program. The parts of the image show the instantaneous state of the entire system. The parasite examines other programs while they run. When the central body moves, that represents wholesale relocation to a different part of memory. Just like a real octopus, the creature lives in *holes* ? this time vacancies in system memory. When the operating system allocates the space the octopus lives in, the parasite moves to another

hole. It never shows up on the log of programs running because, in a sense, it isn't in the system anywhere."

"What's it doing to the other programs?" Preston asked, focusing on the only part of Mark's explanation that made sense to him.

"That's the really weird part. It doesn't seem to be doing anything."

"What!" Joan exclaimed. "You mean all this work goes for nothing?"

"Not at all. It means that your humble servant can't figure it out... yet. The parasite, virus, whatever we want to call it, is not stealing money ? you'd have detected that ? it's not deleting files, doesn't seem to *do* anything. It just lives in the system."

"That doesn't make any sense," Joan complained. "Why would someone go to all that trouble to slip this...this animal into our computers if it doesn't do anything?"

"We're not looking at it right," Preston pronounced. "Sometimes what seems to us to make no sense makes perfect sense to the one doing it. For instance, the male Sakalava Weaver, *Ploceus sakalava*, of Madagascar, builds nest after nest, each one requiring hours of work. To us, that appears to be wasted energy. Why build five nests when one would do? Moreover, most of the nests never receive any eggs. However, the female weaver selects a mate based on how well the nest is built. So, the male keeps building nests trying to get it right."

"You're not suggesting," Mark asked incredulously, "that we're observing some weird mating ritual?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm merely suggesting that we examine this from another point of view. What do we know about the person who made this thing? Mark? Joan?"

Mark answered first. "Well, he's a terrific programmer."

"Or she," Joan corrected him.

"Or she," Mark said, nodding to Joan. "This is a very clever construction. If you wanted to create a virus that would be hard to detect, you'd start this way. Most of the program is not around most of the time. Only that little bit at the center stays active. The other parts pop into memory and disappear quickly. That's why I had to combine three frames to get anything to show up."

"So," Joan took up the thread, "whoever did this qualifies as an experienced hacker, and a good one."

"One of the best. I'd be proud if I'd done something like this. Of course, when I do it, it's different, you understand. I don't come in uninvited."

"That's a start." Preston said. "What can you tell me about a very good, experienced hacker?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you do. Pretend I asked you to describe a bird. Describe the field marks of a good, experienced hacker."

After a bit of thought, Mark began, "Well, to begin with, he'd, sorry, he or she, would have to be a good programmer. Then he'd have the characteristics of a hacker: stealth,

deviousness, good at games, maybe a bit immature..." He looked up to find Preston and Joan grinning at him.

"Let's go back to the good programmer part," Preston suggested. "Field marks for a good programmer?"

"Well, all the ones I know are compulsive, very careful, details oriented, but with a good imagination. You have to have imagination for debugging."

"Compulsive, careful, details, expand on those," Preston suggested.

"Well, you have to think out everything ahead of time, plan, try a few approaches till you find something that will work, test everything..."

"Wait!" Preston stopped him. "About testing. Could this be a test? Maybe that's why you can't find anything."

They all just looked at each other. No one spoke for several seconds. "When you look at it that way," Joan said, "it seems to make sense. I'm not anxious to see the real thing. Can you disable it?"

"There are other possibilities," Preston noted. "It may be spying...or it may be...well, a trap."

"Let's hope it's a test," Mark said. "I'll get to work on it."

"Any chance of getting the food from the truck?" Preston inquired.

"You're welcome to try. I don't think I can walk that far."

"Pity...your housekeeping talents, Owl, leave something to be desired."

"Do what I do, Preston," Mark explained. "I can persist for days on nothing but Skittles and coffee. Delfina calls it the 'breakfast of champions.' This has the look of a two-bag problem. See y'all later." He started a pot coffee, and retired to the computer room, bag of Skittles in hand.

Preston shuddered. "I think I can wait till the waters go down. It won't be the first time I've gone to bed hungry. Would you like the sleeping loft, my dear? I'll take the sofa."

Preston tiptoed past the open door of the computer room just as light penetrated the leaves of the oak outside. Mark slept at the computer console, his head on his arms. "Joan," Preston whispered. "Are you awake? Want to see about breakfast?"

"Breakfast sounds nice." She climbed down the spiral stairs, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

"I thought we could go see if the water has gone down enough for us to get to the truck. We may have to wade across the creek, but at least we can eat."

"Great idea. Let me wash up quickly." She moved toward the bathroom.

"What's happening?" Mark lurched awake. His hands hit several keys on the keyboard, displaying a cascade of error boxes on the screen and setting off a cacophony of warning bells.

He swore softly and closed all the windows, all but one. “Hey. Fantastic. There’s e-mail from LJ. He recovered a file from the zapped disk.”

“Download it into your laptop. And put everything else you think you’ll need on it. We’re going to be living off the land for a while.”

Joan emerged from her morning ablutions. “Did you make any progress last night, Mark?”

“Progress?”

“On figuring out how to disable the parasite.”

“Well, it’s weird. I found something, but I’m not sure what to make of it. Let me get some coffee. It was a long night.”

Preston stood in front of the microwave, heating water. He seemed especially thoughtful. “I’ve got some new questions, Owl.”

“Fire away,” Mark replied.

“How did the parasite get into the system?”

“Good question. I don’t have a clue.”

“Simon prided himself on security. Magus owns several computer security systems, doesn’t it?”

Joan supplied the answer, “Magus is the premier computer security company in the world. We have software in all areas as a result of several acquisitions.”

“Therefore, hard to crack, right?” Preston continued.

“And a challenge for every hacker,” Mark countered.

“Yes, but I’ve been thinking...this is a slightly different tack. Could someone have beamed something into Simon’s office, I mean some kind of radiation, not like *Star Trek*.”

“Nope,” Mark answered. “We built a Faraday Cage into the walls around the office before we moved in.”

“What’s a Faraday Cage?” Preston asked.

“Nothing more than a hollow wire mesh. It prevents electrical charges from propagating from the outside to the inside of the cage or vice-versa. When lightning strikes an airplane, it doesn’t harm the passengers inside. Same principle.”

“Interesting.”

“Where are you going with this, Preston?”

“I’ve been considering this problem as though it were a difficult bird ID. The same principles should apply ? careful observation, fitting the observations into a coherent pattern, questioning items that don’t fit the pattern, new observations, refining the pattern, and so on.”

“For the benefit of a novice,” Joan complained, “could you explain what you’re talking about?”

“When you identify a bird,” Preston explained, “you seldom rely on a single characteristic. Instead, you add up a number of subtle inferences, which in the end tell you what you’re looking at. I’m trying to use the same technique on Simon’s murder.”

“Murder! I thought he had a heart attack.”

“Indeed. I think I might know what caused it. Have to factor this Fara-thingamabob into it now.”

“Faraday Cage,” Mark supplied.

“Yes,” Preston said absent-mindedly as he poured boiling water on a bowl of instant oatmeal. “Eat up. We need to be on our way.”

“Where are we going? Why do we need to leave?”

“What does a bird do when threatened?” Preston asked.

“Now who’s into parlor games?” Mark said. “I’m not any good without another cup of coffee.”

“Fly away!” Joan exclaimed. “We need to fly away!”

“Exactly,” Preston replied. “Our two friends on motorcycles will be back as soon as the flood waters recede. I don’t want them to learn about this cabin.”

After a hurried breakfast, Mark buttoned-up the computer room, issuing a few last minute commands while Preston and Joan grabbed things for the trip. Ambianca played the plaintive strains of *Ashokan Farewell*, from the *PBS Civil War* series as Mark locked the cabin door. Then the trio drove to the creek crossing in Joan’s car.

“We’ll never be able to drive through that,” Mark observed, looking at water still flowing several feet high.

“We can wade though,” Preston said. “Let’s rope together. Then we can have two people on the shore at all times, while one crosses.”

“I’ll go first,” Joan volunteered. “You two should be able to hold me no matter how strong the current is.”

A half hour of careful work and all three stood on the opposite shore. “Now,” Preston said, “A brisk hike to Mark’s truck.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Mark replied. “You don’t have broken ribs and what all.” The air already showed waves of heat rising with the morning sun.

“We’ll take it slow,” Preston promised.

The creek still flowed across the highway, meaning that no one would be around for a while yet. Sweat rolled down Mark’s face and suffused his shirt as he considered how to drag himself up the last rise to where the truck stood. He stepped into the creek on the highway and splashed some water on his face and the back of his neck.

“Wait!” he called to the others, checking his watch. “I have a magic trick to show you. I programmed the computer in the cabin to start the truck so the air conditioning would have a chance to cool things down. We got here sooner than I expected.” He checked his watch again. “The truck should start...now!”

The blast hurled all three of them into the creek.

“My truck!” Mark shouted from a sitting position in the creek. “My laptop!”

Pieces of the truck were still falling, hitting the cliff and bouncing into the creek.

“Damn!” Mark said when he stood up.

“Time for a new strategy.” Joan had already stepped out of the creek and retrieved her cell phone from her purse. She punched 911 and listened. “I’m getting voice mail on 911. What the hell is going on?”

“Gordo’s probably still fighting the flood of the century. Did they give another number for emergencies? Never mind.” Mark reached for the phone. “Let me call him on his private mobile number.” He punched in the number. “Gordo! Someone just blew up my truck...Right on the highway where I left it...Yeah. We sure as hell aren’t going anywhere.”

He returned the phone to Joan. “We’re going to fly sooner than we thought. He’s sending the copter.”

Gordo wore a frown as he alighted from the chopper. “Shit! Ever since the three of you got together in my county, we’ve been in the middle of a crime wave. Do you know the last time I had to deal with anything even close to attempted murder? Martha Zimmer chased her husband around the barn with a kitchen knife. That was two years ago and we decided not to prosecute. She should have killed the son of a bitch, or at least bobbitted him. When are y’all leaving?”

“As long as you asked,” Preston said, “we were wondering if you could provide us with a lift into San Antonio? We planned to take Mark’s truck, but...”

“San Antonio?” Mark questioned. “Why not go back to the cabin?”

“Too dangerous, obviously.”

“How about Houston, then? We can hole up at Mother’s house, or Magus headquarters.”

Joan answered him this time. “Mark, we don’t want to endanger your mother, or Magus employees. We need to disappear for a while.”

“Where in San Antonio?” Gordo wanted to know before he agreed to anything.

“How about the airport?” Preston suggested.

“Climb in. Better waste an hour getting y’all out of the way than have to keep cleaning up after you.”

April 20, 1998

Austin

The Colorado River, the longest river contained completely within Texas, begins on the *Llano Estacado*, the *Staked Plains*, near the town of Lamesa. It flows generally southeast past Colorado City, through rolling prairie and rugged hill and canyon country and across the coastal plain to enter Matagorda Bay some 860 miles later.

Along the way, it passes the jewel of the Texas Hill Country, the state Capital, Austin.

The name *Colorado* means *red* in Spanish, which explains the frequent and confusing use of the name for rivers. Some people suspect that early Spanish cartographers confused the Colorado with the Brazos, mixing up the names. The Brazos flows through sandy plains and is usually muddy brown. The Colorado flows through limestone cliffs and is brilliant blue-green most of the time. Perhaps the early explorers witnessed one of the floods for which the river used to be famous, when the waters surged out of its banks, sweeping rocks, mud, trees and houses downstream.

In the 1930's, freshman Congressman Lyndon B Johnson pushed for a series of dams along the river. Near Austin, these dams convert the river into a series of cool, generally placid lakes called the Highland Lakes. After the Mansfield dam created Lake Travis west of Austin, the hydroelectric energy it generated served the needs of thirteen counties. Today, it supplies less than 2% of Austin's needs. In spite of the dwindling importance of the lakes as a source of electricity, they remain one of the defining aspects of Austin. The lakes divide the city along a rough east-west line into old Austin, home to the University, Legislature, and Business on the north shore, and good old boys, hippies, and techno-rich on the other.

A second river divides the city on the north-south axis. Interstate Highway 35, the NAFTA highway, a vast stretch of concrete reaching from Laredo to Duluth, carrying far more traffic than it was designed for. The highway separates Austin from east Austin, home to minorities and the poor, as well as the best Mexican restaurants anywhere.

Enough of this folderol! It's birding, we're interesting in, and Austin possesses more than its share of great spots. Its central location makes Austin an ideal place to begin our Hill Country travels. For example...¹

¹ Preston Salomon, *Hill Country Birding Trips*, p. 7, Copyright 1997, EcoTours Press, Houston, TX. Used with permission.

17. Toying with an Idea

“We have to make a short detour here to pick up Delfina,” Mark informed his fellow travelers as he turned from US 183 onto RR 620. Delfina worked at Berger Family Enterprises, Inc., usually called simple BFE, or Berger Queen. They made smart cards, credit cards with silicon chips on them. When sales of the cards failed to reach expectations, Mark suggested switching to potato chips as a way to realize some return on investment. That proposal did not endear him to the marketing department at BFE.

In spite of their adventure with smart cards, BFE had so much money it would take decades to blow it all. During the 1980's, before the big building boom hit Austin, they'd spent some of their lucre on the Austin site, creating the finest office complex in the entire world, even counting the rest of Austin.

Nestled deep in the woods, invisible from the road, the campus consisted of six separate buildings linked by covered walkways. The buildings, made of native stone, but with all the modern technological advantages money could buy, blended into the landscape so well it looked as if they'd grown there. Each was a carefully planned hodgepodge of angles that maximized the view while minimizing the afternoon sun. Together, the buildings took up about 25% of the total site.

The rest lay almost untouched, if not wild at least landscaped with native plants. In the spring, employees and visitors could watch the succession of colors, with the deep blue of Bluebonnets and the red of Indian Paintbrush gradually yielding to persistent yellow. So many different yellow flowers abound in Texas that local botanists refer to them as DYC's, Damned Yellow Composites. Eventually, they overwhelm all the other flowers.

A winding nature trail led down into the canyon, through the woods, and up onto the plateau, the only evidence of human imprint on 75% of the land. A leisurely walk around the trail took about four hours. A short cut reduced the time to 30 minutes, just right for a quick ramble after lunch. Golden-cheeked Warblers nested there every year, as well as Wild Turkeys and many other species.

Frequent visitors became adept at dodging White-tailed Deer while driving to the buildings.

BFE preferred a low profile, for security reasons. Otherwise, the place would have been in every Sunday supplement, with tour buses lined up outside the door. Few non-employees even knew it existed, as they whizzed past on RR 620 not realizing what they were missing.

The Berger Queen used traditional managerial structures, namely feudalism. The Austin campus served as a foreign outpost, a remote barony on the fringes of society. Civilization flourished only dark cold places, where an apartment the size of a good walk-in closet cost enough to start a small company. The European hierarchy of the company considered such places celestial. Besides the great natural beauty, programmers around town remember BFE for the parties honoring departing employees, those rewarded with a return to civilized places.

Years ago, in the summer of 1995 to be precise, Mark had attended one of these Berger Bashes at Del's private invitation. This bent the rules slightly for Mark, a mere contractor, but Del, a regular employee with a perfect sinecure didn't care. Delfina tracked the licenses for

software, a position of immense practical power that required virtually no work, leaving time to pursue her two passions, gossip and flirting. She excelled at both. She knew every programmer in Austin and maybe the entire world. She invariably discovered who was sleeping with whom, whose divorce was imminent, and so on. All programmers love gossip.

Del's flirting caused problems.

Jean-Pierre Faubère, the VP in charge of the Austin center, reputedly held more than a passing interest in delightful Delfina. Jean-Pierre, sentenced to hard time in Texas for annoying a Latin American Duke, liked only one thing about Austin: the preponderance of good looking women. He liked that a lot.

As Mark arrived at the party, Jean-Pierre occupied himself busily congratulating a newly promoted vassal. No one paid attention. Jean-Pierre's spoke with such a thick accent few people could understand him when he ostensibly used English. In this case, no one cared, since the speech seldom varied. Jean-Pierre waxed enthusiastic about the yeoman service delivered by the honored underling. Soon he would wax even more enthusiastic about the great opportunities and challenges awaiting the fortunate serf wherever it was that the feudal overlords had decided to station him.

Not wishing to take part in the charade, but willing to quaff the good bubbly provided for the occasion, Mark sidled over to where Del stood by the champagne table. Mark took a glass of champagne, downed it and got another. Del did the same, though she had already had a few.

Del noted, "The Midnight Cowboy finally got his promotion."

The programmer in question acquired his moniker from his work in the wee hours of the morning and his nasty habit of modifying the system while others slept. Those who cleaned up after him weren't pleased with this particular character trait. These nocturnal pursuits usually caused more problems than they solved.

"I hope he's heading for Kamchatka or some equally desirable location."

"Milan," Delfina replied.

They wandered over to the food table, covered with interesting canapés made from the inedible parts of animals favored by the French, and had decided to settle for more champagne, when a burst of applause by the assembled crowd signaled the end of the presentation.

"Time to go," Mark suggested. "Heading home?"

"No way! I better go back and do some work! I'm much too sizzled to drive home."

Mark walked with her back toward her office. "What's this I hear about you and JP?"

"What do you hear?"

"Only that he comes to your office a lot more than he really needs to."

"Yes, sigh! The people you *want* to come seem to *never* show up." She looped her arm through his, leaned her head against his shoulder and looked up with bedroom eyes.

Mark decided not to comment on Delfina's use of a split infinitive, replying instead, "Now seems like a good time."

“Indeed it does.” Del dragged Mark inside, backed him into a corner and rubbed up against him. She giggled and reached down to touch him to see whether her work had the desired effect.

“I suppose you know that this is a *serious* violation of the policy on sexual harassment.”

“No. We haven’t gotten to *serious* yet. Hide and watch.”

“Del, this is not the place.”

“Let’s go to my place then,” Del suggested.

“I thought you were too drunk to drive.”

“I got better.”

Thus began their life together.

Delfina, alerted by Joan’s phone call, rushed from the door as soon as Mark turned in the drive near the main entrance. The truck had barely stopped when she opened the door, jumped in, grabbed Mark around the neck, kissed him vigorously, and settled into the passenger seat. “Gordo says you damn near got killed...again. I don’t like the way things have been going lately.”

“Sorry. At least your cabin was OK when we left. Gordo promised to keep an eye on it.”

“Then it’ll be OK. Where’d you get this vehicle?”

“Like it? We picked it up in Santa Fe.”

“That where you’ve been? Coulda called.”

“Too dangerous. We just stopped there to pick up some cash. Preston has some useful talents when it comes to gambling.”

“You gambled for the cash?”

“Turns out Preston has some useful skills at the Blackjack table, and Joan is deadly at Poker. I fear we put a large dent in the profits of the local Native American tribe’s casino.”

“We also spotted the Black-backed Woodpecker at Bandelier National Monument,” Preston added, beaming. “The Indians caught on after three days and threw us out. By that time, we had enough to fund our expenses for a while. By the way, Owl, take Loop 360 if you don’t mind. This is Joan’s first trip to Austin in spring. Let’s make sure she sees all the wildflowers.”

“No problem,” Mark assured him.

“There is one problem,” Del warned.

“The bridge,” Mark said before Del could say anything. “We can’t go over the bridge without my little lecture.”

“Damn!” Del said. “This will be the 473rd time for me.”

“What about the bridge?” Joan asked.

“Wait a few minutes, till you see it,” Mark requested. “Meanwhile, here are the promised wildflowers. The yellow ones with the funny looking leaves are Englemann Daisies. The really bright yellow ones, the ones with the red centers, are Coreopsis. There are several species. The red-orange ones are Galardia, Indian Blanket.”

Delfina kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Why don’t you leave the running commentary to Preston and concentrate on driving instead of the road margins?”

Within minutes, they saw the reddish-orange bridge that carries Loop 360 across Lake Austin. The emerald color of Ashe Junipers contrasted with the new yellowish-green jade of the Spanish Oaks, covering the cliffs along the river in a two-toned quilt. The water of the lake reflected everything in a deep aquamarine mirror cut with white wakes of pleasure boats.

“This bridge ? I like to call it the ‘new bridge’ since it’s the last one built ? is fabulous,” Mark said to Joan, proving he could watch the road and still find something to talk about. “I use it as an example all the time.”

“An example of what?” Joan asked.

“Here it comes,” Del complained.

“Well, people are always trying to compare writing programs to building bridges, especially the people who think *software engineering* is something besides an oxymoron. I like to point out that not all bridges are alike. The MoPac Bridge over Lake Austin, which we’ll see shortly, is just a bridge. If you didn’t see the lake, you wouldn’t realize you were on a bridge.”

Mark had to stop talking while he negotiated his way past a minor traffic jam of boat trailers heading for the ramp on the lake.

“The MoPac Bridge looks like another part of the freeway. It’s not beautiful or interesting. Now look at this wonder. It leaps from the north shore to the south in one delicate parabolic arc. Besides that, it slopes downhill from north to south. That way, the water that falls onto the bridge winds up in those settling ponds instead of falling into the lake. Lake Austin provides drinking water to the area, so that’s important. Notice that no part of the bridge is in the water. It’s a terrific bridge, beautiful and functional at the same time. Some programs are like that. Most are like the MoPac Bridge; they just get the job done.”

“Ah, so that’s where you were headed,” Joan said. “You consider yourself an artist.”

“Sometimes, yes,” Mark admitted.

Mark drove along Town Lake to show the fruit trees in bloom, and continued on to Cesar Chavez into east Austin. He drove down what he still thought of as First Street, its old name, looking for a restaurant Preston favored.

“There it is,” Preston said. “*Juan in a Million*. Wait till you see the tacos. Can we have dessert with breakfast? The *tres leches* cake has to be tasted to be believed.” Mark recognized a rhetorical question when he heard one and said nothing. Joan followed suit.

Mark parked the new truck in one of the shady spots in back. Then they went inside to savor the *Don Juan and Only* tacos. Preston had been talking about them since dinner yesterday, in Lubbock, where they had been forced to make do with what Preston characterized as “merely inadequate, as opposed to unacceptable.” It had been a long drive back from New Mexico in the new truck.

“Are you sure we’re safe here in Austin?” Joan asked. “We’re pretty close to where they tried to kill us all.”

“I hope we’re OK,” Preston replied. “We’ve got New Mexico plates on the truck, and it will take at least a week before any information is available online, at least that’s what our computer wizard here tells us.”

“Relax,” Mark said. “That was Santa Fe. They’re even more laid back than Austin. Besides, the only computer in the place was hooked up to the bank. I checked it out while you two did your tag-team negotiation. No one can track us, at least not yet.”

“How about the money trail?” Joan asked. “Couldn’t someone figure out from that where we are?”

“You mean Santa Fe? We aren’t there any more. Now, if Preston would just tell us what’s going on, and about this secret plan of his...”

Preston just smiled and held the door open for everyone.

After their late breakfast, Mark drove carefully up Chicon Street. “Where’s the damn sign? I can never remember the address. I just look for the place. Ah, there it is.” He pulled into a drive with a grocery store in a dilapidated metal building on one side and the *Ephphatha Full Faith Baptist Church* on the other. The name for the church was so obscure, the sign thoughtfully added “(Mark 7:34)” as an explanation.

A small sign proclaimed the presence of LJT Electronics in back. They drove back and pulled up in front of another metal building in a poor state of repair. “Rent’s cheap,” Mark explained.

“From the looks of it, he may need divine protection. Maybe the church helps?” Joan said.

“He likes being next to the church,” Mark agreed. “He claims it keeps things quiet, except on weekends of course. Besides, the Church owns the building. LJ rents it from them.”

“Let’s get going,” Preston said, barely concealing his impatience.

Pieces of equipment lay scattered everywhere under the harsh glare of fluorescent lights. The floor needed a good sweeping. A few not-quite-finished tacos sat out on a table they passed. Some things never change.

“Shh!” Mark warned. “LJ is about to test one of his recruits. See that cute black girl. Watch this.” LJ was known for running his own private welfare-to-work program. He hired high school grads from east Austin and taught them valuable skills in electronics. In return he got labor very cheap. People who stuck it out long enough got great jobs. All the swift companies around Austin knew about LJ and snapped up his “graduates” eagerly.

LJ’s real name was Lincoln Jefferson Thornton, in homage first to his mother’s favorite President and secondly to his alleged ancestor. His mother had been heard to call him “Jeff,” but to the most of the world he was just “LJ.” He was one of those people who started tinkering with electronic equipment when just out of diapers. By the time he got to junior high, he had set up a small repair shop in the kitchen of the family home, much to the annoyance of his siblings, who

had to eat somewhere else. When he was ready to go to college, he had saved enough to pay for four years, but got a free ride anyway.

Not much to look at, he was medium height ? Joan could look him right in the eye ? and decidedly overweight, with skin the color of a Semipalmated Plover, or wet mud. Today, LJ wore a Dilbert T-shirt with the slogan, “You can never be too good looking or too well-equipped.” The shirt stretched tight in an attempt to cover his midriff and almost succeeded, leaving just a small gap at the waist. In addition, he wore the requisite jeans and some sandals that probably dated from the Pleistocene epoch; a tool belt containing a medley of different pliers and screwdrivers; safety glasses, plain except for bifocal lenses at the bottom; and a bandana on his head. The bandana needed changing. Mark noted that his hair was starting to show more gray than last time, and that his beard was as bad as always: patchy, the texture of a Brillo pad, mostly black, but with some gray. Some remains of breakfast clung tenaciously to his mustache.

As usual, LJ was sitting in an ancient chair on rollers. He stood only when the occasion demanded, such as when he walked from the car to the restaurant door.

LJ was talking to a pretty, black girl in her late teens or early twenties. She wore the required uniform of a T-shirt and jeans, with clunky steel-toed shoes peeking out at the bottom. Her hair, cut to a black fuzz about 1 millimeter long, emphasized the aristocratic shape of her head. She leaned close, with her brow furrowed and lips pursed. Mark crept up behind LJ to listen in. He motioned to the others to follow, signaling them to be quiet.

“Now, Chemayne, we’re going to do what we call a *smoke test* on this board. The idea is to just plug it in and make sure nothing burns up.” He held the board up in the air, tilting it so the light struck at an angle. Then he turned it over and looked at the bottom. “Looks fine. Let’s see how it plays.” He plugged it in to the tester and flipped a switch. Nothing happened for about thirty seconds. “Looks OK.” He started to reach for the board, when it gave a brief “pop” and sent forth a cloud of white smoke. “Oh, no! Looks like we done elected a new pope!”

Chemayne struggled to hold back her tears. Mark took pity on her. “Don’t let him get to you, Chemayne. It’s a trick.” He stepped forward and removed the board from the tester, turning it over as he did. There was some suspicious powder on the top of the CPU chip. “Show me your hands, LJ!” he demanded. LJ sheepishly turned his hands over. He had some gray goo on his fingers.

“See,” Mark explained, “he puts that goo on the chip when he handles the board. The CPU heats up and ignites the stuff. Then he gets to tell that dumb pope joke for the ten millionth time.”

“Cheyman, meet the Wizard. We make computers run. He makes ‘em dance.”

Chemayne swatted LJ on the arm. “Butthead!” She stalked off.

“Wait, Chemayne, come back. I was only having fun. Damn! Kids getting more sensitive all the time.”

“She’s young. She’ll get over it,” Mark said.

Joan didn’t like that assessment. “LJ, your management ideas may be sound, but your technique sucks. I’ll be back.” She walked off after Chemayne. LJ noticed her for the first time. “Hoo, boy! Who’s the silver fox?”

“Joan Santoro,” Preston informed him in a tone that showed he didn’t approve of the way LJ looked at her. “President of Magus Corp.”

“No shit. Smart, too, huh?” He continued to stare after her. Turning back, he looked up at his visitors. “Hey, Del. You’re looking pretty good, too. And you must be Preston.” Delfina glared at LJ and walked away. “I’ll be with Joan.”

LJ wiped his hand on his jeans and offered it to Preston. Preston ignored the grease on LJ’s fingers and shook his hand enthusiastically. “Mark tells me you’re a genius with hardware.”

“Well, I ? ”

“Cut to the chase, LJ. You got the box?” Mark asked.

“Yeah. I got it. Almost anyway. Chemayne needs to put it together.” He braced one foot against the table and pushed, sending the chair across the floor. He deftly spun it around and stopped himself at workbench against the wall, where he lifted a laptop computer from the bench and held it out to Mark. “It’s a real beaut, if I do say so myself. Chemayne there built it. Chemayne, honey. Please come back.” He waved her over. Joan and Delfina stayed by themselves, talking earnestly.

“LJ, I’ve often wondered why you don’t just get a wheel chair,” Mark kidded. “It would probably work better than this one.” He kicked the chair.

LJ ignored him the way only old friends could and held up a new laptop computer. The cover was stainless steel, with a design on it that Mark recognized as an abstract rendering of a Spectacled Owl. “This here’s Chemayne’s master work. I helped her with some of the hard parts, but she built it all, right?” He looked up at Chemayne for confirmation. She nodded and smiled. LJ opened the case, inserted the circuit board in the computer, and buttoned everything back together.

Mark took the laptop from LJ and settled down on a convenient stool. He opened the lid of the computer and started fiddling with the system, humming contentedly. “Nice...Ah, very nice. I love new toys.”

“Mark’s been having withdrawal symptoms for days,” Preston told LJ.

“There’s a small problem we need to discuss, amigo,” LJ warned.

“What’s that, besides the fact that it wasn’t really ready when we got here?”

“Minor cost overrun. Had to get some special chips. The off-the-shelf stuff couldn’t handle the load. Talked to some buddies over at Moto. These chips are samples, but they seem to work fine. Supposed to be able to call even from inside a building. Try it.”

Mark fiddled around. “Good... Hey. Dell’s at 88.”

“I don’t want to hear about it,” LJ grumbled.

“What’s that all about?” Preston asked.

“We both bought Dell stock when it came out. LJ sold his. I like to remind him about that every now and then. If you’d held on, you could probably afford the rent on this place.”

“The chips cost me a grand.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope. That was in cash, too. This deal’s strictly off the books, you understand.”

“A grand?”

“Well, I got overhead to cover.”

“I’ll give you \$500.”

“What? Stiff your ol’ buddy?”

“You probably got them for free on some test contract and are trying to bilk me.”

“Moi?”

“Yes, you.”

“Make it \$800. I really did have to shell out to get my name on the hot list.”

“700.”

“Give me the box. Maybe I can sell it to someone at a garage sale. I know. I’ll keep it for a few years and donate it to a museum. Tell them the famous Mark Talbot, also known as Pulsatrix, used it for hacking...”

“OK, OK. I was just kidding. Here’s 800.” Mark took some bills out of his pocket and started counting.

“Make it an even grand, why don’t you?” LJ leaned back in his chair and smiled contentedly. Mark handed him ten bills, grinning as he did so. “You haven’t changed.”

“Neither have you, amigo. You always did have too much money for your own good. I, on the other hand, have had to scratch for everything.”

“Save it for the sob sisters. Thanks for the quick work, LJ.” They shook hands. Mark caught Joan’s eye and signaled that it was time to leave.

“Oh,” LJ called after them. “I copied the file I got off the degaussed disk. It’s a URL.”

“Thanks, LJ. That’s interesting. See ya.”

“Pulsatrix?” Preston asked, opening the passenger door of the truck. “As in *Pulsatrix perspicillata*, I presume. What’s that all about?”

“That’s my nom-de-hack. LJ is one of the few people who know that Pulsatrix and I are one and the same. I wouldn’t like that to get around.”

“I see. So he blackmailed you into paying him the full price he demanded.”

“Nah, it’s just a game. He knew I’d ultimately pay him whatever he wanted. As he said, I’ve always had more money than I need.”

“Interesting. Did you recommend Dell to anyone in the family when it came out?”

“Everyone. Mother bought some. I think that was just to humor me. Dad didn’t buy it right away, but when we computerized the office he caught on. He tried to buy the whole company, but they weren’t in a mood to sell. Too bad.”

“Matthew? Mary Lynn?”

“Don’t know about Mary Lynn. Matthew performed some investment banker analysis on it and pronounced it incredibly overvalued. I think he even sold it short. He doesn’t have real good luck with his investments. That made it easy for the big boys in New York to rope him in. They showed some investments that were guaranteed.”

“Very interesting. Who else knows about *pulsatrix*?”

“No one’s supposed to know that’s me. Why?”

“I think you’ve revealed more about yourself than you think. I believe that’s how the reporter Gordo told us about knew to look for someone with big glasses. Anyone could have looked up the meaning of the word. There are only three species in the genus. It’s not hard to guess the connection with Spectacled Owl.”

“Shit! You must be right. It’s too late to do anything about it now. I’ll have to work on a new identity when we have time.”

“How about the box? Will it do everything we need?”

“Let’s find out.” Mark typed a couple of commands. “I’m connected to Magus. Now, I have the cabin online. I’m accessing Ambianca.” Music came out of the tiny speaker: Willie Nelson singing *On the Road Again*.

“Yes. It’s a go. I’m downloading the files now.” He waited a few minutes, then closed the case of the laptop.

“Beautiful,” Preston said. “Simply beautiful. When this is over, I want you to get me one of these for myself. You’re sure we can’t be traced?”

“Not absolutely positive, but I doubt anyone can find our exact location. The laptop communicates directly with the satellite, and from there to Magus. To anyone on the net, it’ll look as if we’re in the Magus headquarters in Houston. I’m taking my normal precautions when I’m online to remain anonymous. I still don’t know what you have in mind, though.”

“Me, either,” Joan said as she joined them finally, “and Delfina couldn’t explain it.”

“It’s just like birding,” Preston said. “Some birds are easy, like the Tufted Titmouse over there. They come when you call.” Preston demonstrated by making a *pishing* sound. The Titmouse flew over and began scolding them. “Others, though, such as the Ground Rollers in Madagascar—”

“Funny you should mention Madagascar, Preston,” Mark teased. “Got something on your mind?”

“Others,” Preston continued, ignoring the interruption, “need to be coaxed out of the shadows. We need to coax our murderer out of hiding. Meanwhile, we need to remain concealed ourselves while we do the coaxing.”

“I suppose you know the murderer’s identity,” Mark said.

“No, not yet, but I’m sure Matthew’s involved deeply.”

“Matthew!” both Mark and Joan cried at once. Both hesitated for a moment, then said, “No way!”

“Why do you say so?” Joan asked Mark.

“Well, let’s just say that he got the athletic skill in the family, but he’s a bit behind the curve in the brains department. How about you? What makes you so sure?” he asked Joan.

“He’d never have the nerve to kill your father.”

“I agree with you both,” Preston explained. “That’s why we need to do more observing. Mark needs to figure out the parasite and get rid of it, and we need to smoke out the real villain behind Matthew.”

Delfina came out of the building, having stayed behind to freshen up. “You must have dropped these,” she said, handing some keys to Joan.

“Since my car is still at your cabin, they aren’t much good.”

“Keep them for luck,” Delfina said.

“Now,” Preston said, “the essential part of the plan. The Dolphin will be our contact here. Are you clear, my dear, on what needs to be done?”

“Sure,” she replied. “Every half hour the laptop will connect to the computer in my cabin and report its location using the GPS receiver. That way, I’ll know where you are. When you activate the *bugle call* program, Gordo will lead the cavalry to rescue...again. It’s the last part I don’t particularly like.”

“Me either,” Joan put in, “Seems to me that we’re setting a trap and using ourselves as bait.”

“Exactly, my lovely,” Preston said. “If you want to catch a hawk, sometimes you have to act like a rabbit.”

Mark fired up the truck. “And where do you propose we act like rabbits?” he asked Preston, wondering whether they were to imitate *all* aspects of rabbits.

“Rockport,” Preston answered simply.

“Rockport!” Mark brightened up considerably. “Cool.”

“Where’s Rockport?” Joan asked. “What’s there?”

“On the coast,” they both answered. “Good birds.”

April 21, 1998

Rockport, TX

This delightful community is one of my favorite places along the Texas coast. Sheltered by Mustang Island from the most severe ravages of Gulf hurricanes, blessed with groves of ancient trees sculpted by the wind into the shape of horses' manes, the town has long been a Mecca for artists and naturalists alike. A drive along the back roads near the town should prove rewarding in almost any season, but especially in spring, when you may find yourself in the midst of a migration. Once, I had the pleasure of watching a stream of thousands of Broad-winged Hawks at eye level as they coasted in for a landing after crossing the Gulf.

A variety of different habitats enhances the birding opportunities in the area. The trees can be full of warblers in the right season. Hummingbirds are common both in summer and during migration in the fall, and many homeowners put out feeders to attract them. The shallow reaches of Copano Bay support immense flocks of shorebirds and waterfowl. Mustang Island, a short ferry ride away, has several good spots along the twenty-mile drive into Corpus Christi.

Perhaps best, though, the world-famous Whooping Cranes winter in the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, about an hour away by road and equally close by boat. I strongly recommend you take one of the boat trips up the Intracoastal Waterway to see these magnificent birds. You will get a much better view from the boat than from the ground, even including the observation tower in the refuge.¹

¹ Preston Salomon, *Birding the Texas Coast*, p. 43, . Copyright 1996, EcoTours Press, Houston, TX. Used with permission.

18. Coasting Along

“What a fabulous day!” Joan said as she came into the room Mark and Preston shared. “I never would have believed anything could be that spectacular. I’ve heard about Whooping Cranes before, but...well, all I can say is thanks for convincing me to come along.” She dropped into an armchair, leaning back and draping her legs over the arm.

“Spectacular birds,” Preston agreed. “I never tire of seeing them, especially at this time of year, when they’re starting to practice their dancing.”

The trio had spent the afternoon on the Intracoastal Waterway with Captain Ted, who had a boat designed for work close to shore, the best way to get a good look at the famous cranes, as well as numerous other birds.

Mark sat at the small table, earphones plugged in, staring at the screen of the laptop. Joan got up, wandered over and put her hand on his shoulder. “Getting anywhere?” she asked.

“What?” Mark pulled the earphones from his ears. Joan could hear tinny music spilling out. “Couldn’t hear what you were saying.”

“Just wondered how you were doing? Any progress?”

“Nope. Most of the work’s going on back at Del’s cabin. The computers there are lots more powerful. I still doubt we’ll get anywhere with a brute force attack, though. The key space is too big.”

“Explain that part again,” Preston requested.

“Sure. Dad sent me an encrypted e-mail. The format isn’t ? ”

“Yes. I understand that part. Why haven’t you cracked it yet?”

“That’s what I meant by the key space being too big. The hint is 33 characters long. Assuming the answer is some kind of permutation of those characters, that’s what the program is trying now, we have 33 factorial possibilities. That’s 33 times 32 times 31—”

“I know what factorial means,” Preston interrupted. “I’m not completely math illiterate. I even took statistics at B-School. I got a gentleman’s C+.”

“All right. Anyway, thirty-three factorial is a very big number: 8.6833 times 10 to the 36 power. That’s bigger than an 8 followed by 36 zeros. We can’t possibly check all those combinations.”

“But most of those permutations don’t make sense. They’re just random garbage.”

“Exactly. The program is looking for any combination that makes sense. As I said, though, I don’t think we’re going to get there by brute force. We’re going to have to guess the pass phrase.”

“Wait. Back up,” Joan demanded. “What’s this about e-mail from Simon? When did this happen? I meant to ask about progress on the parasite.”

“The parasite? Oh, yeah. There’s something really peculiar about it. Late last night, though, I checked out the URL LJ recovered from the zapped disk. Remember that file? The

address was a site called SecretMessage.to. Cute name, don't you think. See, the Republic of Tonga—”

“Yes, yes. So, when you went to the site...” Joan hinted.

“OK, the actual URL was secretmessage.to/?Pulsatrix:7145236695. When I entered that into the browser...well, I'll show you.” Mark re-entered the information and the screen displayed this:

The Sender has protected this message with a password.

From: Dad **Subject:** Important message

Your Confidential Message:

<ksj3*35';]=\4-8KjD((2MF'Mk158;h kd+KLah+"@3dio-4',,H192-
+*3f;mk',/qn0
lo)29'./(39+dk|=48'70fi3&7fnqn[00(#*+kd"/.,){92\+34h"/.}[l2js;nls-4j;sn0-3=;9ns]

Enter Password: [\(what's this?\)](#)

Hint: Wholly Joan, Cowardly Knight

Password:

asd84js83put[6-tu4&65-50i9+=34rj345oj8o7yw3f=789=-
*(&_7JHm&s98=mfoel'
30ve;]0-\4r8ge4l=4\)(#&%*#n3oa;f934=-*\$%-'/.hz93jf[=40te5=-IPAkd94=mmm

“Damn!” Joan said. “It's one of his blasted puzzles.”

“As I was explaining to Preston, I started a program running back home to look for words and word combinations from a dictionary. We may get lucky. Otherwise, we have to look for inspiration.”

“You won't get there with brute force,” Joan said. “He used to send me these things all the time. I never got them.”

“Great,” Mark said. “I guess we'll have to depend on inspiration.”

“Where are we going to find inspiration?” Preston asked.

“Don't know.”

“Forget about it. Let’s plan the route for tomorrow,” Preston suggested.

“You do it. I need to check in with Delfina. It’s almost 6 o’clock.” Mark went back to the laptop and plugged in his earphones. Preston got out the map and called Joan over to look it over with him. “Here’s where we are now. Now what I thought we’d do tomorrow is take a long drive down Mustang Island, winding up in Corpus. There are several great places. For instance...” Mark ignored them and went back to staring at the screen.

“Hi, lover. You there,” he heard through his headphones.

“I’m here. How’re you doing?” he asked, speaking into the microphone on the laptop.

“I’m fine. How about you? Any more truck bombs or anything like that I should know about? How’s Preston doing as a chaperone?”

“No bombs, and as for chaperoning...” Mark plugged in the auxiliary microphone, the one he could whisper into. “Preston guards Joan like she’s a national treasure. If I even look at her, he’s right there to make sure nothing happens. Was that your idea?”

He heard Delfina giggling on the other end of the connection. He couldn’t quite make out the music playing in the cabin, only that it had many violins and sounded romantic. “Ambianca, cut it out!” Del suddenly said.

“What’s happening?”

“Oh, she’s started again. She’s playing sappy love songs. As soon as Gordo showed up and mentioned the ‘M’ word, she’s gone off the deep end.”

“How’s Gordo? He guarding you close?”

“Oh, sure. He’s here. Want to talk to him?”

“Nah. Just say hello. I just called to check in. Preston and Joan are planning some birding for tomorrow and the day after for all I know. We’re heading down the coast, but slowly. You should be able to track our progress.”

“We have. If the GPS is working correctly, you’re in the Best Western Motel in Rockport.”

“That’s right. Can you tell which room?”

“No,” she said, adding, “I can’t deduce the sleeping arrangements either.”

“Rest easy. Preston doesn’t go to sleep till he hears me snore.”

“Good. Take care, now. Don’t do anything foolish.” She hesitated. “I want you back...in one piece. I...” She broke it off. “Gotta run. Bye.” She was gone.

Mark looked up. Preston and Joan were still going over the plans for the morrow. Preston had the field guide out and was explaining the finer points of identifying shorebirds to Joan.

“I don’t see how you tell them apart,” she complained. “They all look the same to me.”

“They are all similar,” Preston admitted, “but you can learn to tell them apart if you want to. Tomorrow, it will be easy. Mark and I will be there to tell you.” Mark hoped that Preston

would do most of the identification. He still found shorebirds challenging after thirty years of working on them.

“Time to go eat?” Preston suggested.

“Charlotte’s?” Mark queried.

“Of course. Hope everyone’s in the mood for fried shrimp.”

They sat on the deck at Charlotte Plummer’s, happily working their way through fried shrimp and margaritas. The sun set the harbor ablaze with its dying light. Some tardy Cormorants tried for one last meal before settling down for the night. A squadron of Brown Pelicans flew in formation low over the water, their wings moving in perfect synchronization, each bird beating a fraction of a second later than the one ahead of it. A gentle breeze blew in from the Gulf, keeping the mosquitos away. It was Rockport at its finest.

Over Key Lime pie, Preston launched into a lecture, speaking in a way Mark associated with avian minutiae.

“I’ve been thinking,” he began, “that...what did you call it, the address?”

“URL,” Joan supplied.

“Yes. That URL contained the word *pulsatrix*. That’s the name you use for your nom-de-hack, as I recall. We talked about it yesterday.”

“That’s right,” Mark confirmed.

“Recall that reporter who asked about a computer hacker *with large spectacles*. I suggested that your name *pulsatrix* gave away information about you.”

“Sure, I remember that. But—”

“Let me finish. So long as you used the name for your anonymous e-mail, there couldn’t be any way to track you down. However, if someone at Magus sent e-mail...”

“Of course. When Dad sent me e-mail as *pulsatrix*, that gave the connection.”

“Wait,” Joan interrupted. “That means that someone at Magus—”

“Someone,” Preston said, “or some *thing*.”

“The parasite!” Joan said.

“Exactly. The parasite is a spy.”

The waiter appeared at that moment presenting the bill. Preston took it and passed it over to Joan, who had assumed control of the cash.

As they walked out to the parking lot, Joan, who appeared to have something on her mind, suggested a course of action, “We’ve wondered how the parasite got into the system. I’ve been thinking that it must be an inside job. Our security is too tight for an intruder to introduce something that complex without our knowing about it. What if we look for evidence of a *human mole*?”

“How?” Preston asked.

“We know that the parasite read e-mail. Why don’t we do the same?”

“Whose e-mail?” Mark asked.

“I was thinking of Mary Lynn’s,” Joan replied.

“No way!” Mark objected. “She adored Dad. She’d never do anything to hurt him.”

“What about hell’s fury?” Joan countered. “She never liked me, always resented me. Perhaps she believed her own bullshit about Simon and me.”

“I suppose that’s possible,” Mark agreed. “Anyway, I can penetrate her account easily. I know her password.”

“I made everyone change their passwords recently, as a precaution.”

“She won’t change this one. It has sentimental attachments for her.”

“Mary Lynn?!”

“She told me about it once. Her password is *AmbergrisK*, pronounced, Ambergris Cay, like the place in Belize where you go to scuba dive. She went there on vacation once, came back and raved to me about it. I often wondered what really happened. Anyway, she told me that was her password. Even if she changed it, I’ll bet she changed it right back.”

“OK. So we can read her e-mail. I suggest we do it soon,” Joan said.

“Think you can read Matthew’s?” Preston asked.

“Sure. Piece of cake. He doesn’t have the imagination to think up a clever password.”

“Why Matthew?” Joan asked Preston.

“Instinct. GISS. We roomed together for two years. We took classes together. He copied my homework. As a matter of fact, he was pissed when I left to start my business. He wouldn’t have anyone to prop him up. He’s our man, I’m sure.”

“This is weird,” Mark said, handing a sheaf of papers to Preston and an identical one to Joan. “Here’s the printout from Mary Lynn and Matthew’s e-mail. I printed out everything just in case, but I ran a search while I was online, looking for *pulsatrix*. Didn’t find anything. When I searched for *Wholly Joan*, though, I found something. Look at that first sheet.”

From: selenops@anon.fi
Sent: Tuesday, April 14, 1998
To: MaryLynn@magus.com
Subject: Need your help, please.

Any idea what “Wholly Joan, Cowardly Knight” might mean?
 Please reply ASAP.

“So it was Mary Lynn after all,” Joan said.

“Look at the second sheet,” Preston said. He had already read it.

From: selenops@anon.fi
Sent: Tuesday, April 14, 1998
To: Matthew@magus.com

| Subject: Need your help, please.

Any idea what "Wholly Joan, Cowardly Knight" might mean?
Please reply ASAP.

"Are they *both* moles, then?" Joan asked. "Working together?"

"No. It's more interesting than that. Both messages look like fakes. The header information is bogus. Maybe one of the messages is legitimate and the other is a plant, in case we did exactly what we did and read the e-mail," Mark explained.

"This person *Selenops* is using the same anonymous e-mail forwarder you used as *Pulsatrix*," Preston noted. "Anything in that?"

"Probably just a coincidence. The forwarder is the best in the business."

"Can you break into the site, *anon.fi*, and track down this *Selenops*?" Joan asked.

"I hope not. That would mean that *Selenops* could track me down. We both chose that site because it is secure as all hell. To find out who *Selenops* is you'd have to get a search warrant for the site and go to Finland to serve it."

"Finland? That's what the domain *fi* stands for?" Joan asked.

"You got it. Another reason to use the site. However, I already know who *Selenops* is, at least, I know something about him. That's what's strange about the parasite."

"What is it?" Joan asked.

"I found *Selenops*'s signature on the parasite."

"Explain that, please," Preston requested.

"Most hackers like to sign their work. It's sort of like the way chip designers etch their names into a chip."

"I didn't realize they did that," Joan commented.

"Oh, yeah. They do. Hackers do the same thing, but usually in some hidden way. They want to be able to prove they wrote the program, but not to advertise it. I know *Selenops*. I've run into him on several game boards. He cheats."

"I thought you told me everyone cheats," Preston said.

"Sure, but *Selenops* cheats in a dirty way. I got mad at him once and analyzed a virus he'd used to infect a game. The virus reversed a change I'd made to the game. The way it worked—"

"We don't need a complete history, Owl. Just tell us about the signature."

"Oh, OK. Anyway, as part of that, I figured out his signature. It's—"

"And you found the signature in the parasite," Preston interrupted. "That's not really strange. We know from the e-mail that *Selenops* was probably the author of the parasite."

"But that's not the strange part," Mark replied. "There were *two* signatures in the parasite."

"Oh," Preston said, "that *is* interesting. Do you know who the second signature belongs to?"

“Yes,” Mark said. “Me.”

April 24, 1998

Riviera, TX on the Central Coast

After you leave Corpus, you may be tempted to drive to the Valley at top speed. If you do, you will miss the excellent birding around Kingsville, and especially the small community of Riviera, pronounced, with the peculiar Texas predilection for changing accents, as Ree-VER-a.

As the name implies, this was once trumpeted as the next big resort along the Texas Coast. It achieved limited success during the 1920's, but afterward declined and reverted to ranching.

The area between the barrier island, here North Padre Island, and the mainland spreads out near Riviera into a shallow bay called, for reasons that defy explanation, Baffin Bay. This serves as a magnet for shorebirds and ducks, with rarities such as Oldsquaw turning up regularly.

However, the chief attraction of the area is the proliferation of small farm ponds, which provide the only fresh water habitat for miles. These attract many ducks and waders that you are not likely to see elsewhere, particularly the elusive Masked Duck. Only a lucky few will catch a glimpse of this lurker, which prefers hiding in the reeds to flying. I have spent many hours scanning the ponds hoping that one would swim into view, going home disappointed more often than not.

Until recently, accommodations in the area were virtually non-existent. Now, however, a bed and breakfast has opened that caters to birders. Only a few cottages are available, but they are excellent. To reserve one of them, call...¹

¹ Preston Salomon, *Birding the Texas Coast*, p. 54, . Copyright 1996, EcoTours Press, Houston, TX. Used with permission.

19. Musical Appreciation

Mark looked haggard. Three days with almost no sleep and persistent aches from his injuries had taken their toll. He sat on the porch of Lou Ann's Bread and Breakfast in Riviera, Texas, and stared out over the arid pasture to the shallow inlet of Baffin Bay. He felt too exhausted to think clearly and elected not to think at all. Letting his mind wander, he sat and stared at the bay, occasionally raising his binoculars to check out an odd looking gull.

Joan strode across the lawn from her cottage and onto the porch, freshly showered, looking radiant. "I've been going over the checklist. We saw over 100 species again today. That's four days in a row! I never knew *birdwatching* could be so much fun. I checked with Mary Lynn, and everything is humming along at Magus, so I don't need to get back right away. We can keep up this schedule until our cash runs out. What are we going to see tomorrow?"

Preston, who considered it his life's work to convert as many ordinary people as possible into *birders* regarded his latest recruit with affection. "Tomorrow, my lovely, we're going to try one more time to find the Masked Duck in the ponds around here, then we're off to the Valley. I thought we'd drive over to US 281. Birders call the road connecting US 77 to US 281 *Hawk Alley*. We should have *beaucoup* hawks flying overhead. With luck, we'll stumble onto a major flight, truly something to behold. Regardless, we'll continue down 281 to McAllen. There's a spot near Falfurrias where we'll stop for an hour or so, then it's straight on to the *Valley*." Preston said the last word with a reverence only a birder could understand.

"Funny," Mark said.

"What's that?" Preston asked.

"I was thinking how much everything has changed in thirty years. Remember when we came down the coast in '68, you, me and Rebecca? Remember how Riviera looked back then? We didn't believe you when you told us how to pronounce it. Things are different now. Imagine a B&B here. Amazing."

"Rebecca?" Joan asked. "Oh, Becky Bell."

"Mark is probably the only person who consistently called her Rebecca," Preston said. "Her real name, we discovered, was Rebecca Bellini. She shortened her last name when she became a professional revolutionary. She told us she didn't intend to be a *little bell*. Mark fell very much in love with her."

Mark blushed. He didn't care for the casual way Preston mentioned his first, maybe his only, genuine love. Joan noticed his discomfiture and changed the subject. "Anything new on the parasite?"

"Yeah. I figured it out and disabled it. The breakthrough was finding the signature of *Selenops*. Then I was able to track down the pieces of the program by watching the memory of Magus computers for that signature. I think I found all the pieces. I analyzed them and figured out what the parasite was infecting. Then I sent Sloan a note on how to get rid of it. I also sent that bastard *Selenops* a little note about it."

"Wow! That's great! Why keep this a secret, though?" Joan asked.

“I’ve been trying to understand what it all means.”

“You’d better explain.”

Mark stood and paced along the porch, composing his lecture. “To begin with, I figured out the parasite infected *Ambianca*.”

“*Ambianca*! Your music program?”

“Exactly. When I examined the parasite, I realized I looking at a copy of *Ambianca*. That’s why I found two signatures in the code: mine from the original work, and *Selenops*’s from the modifications he made.”

“But why bother to introduce a new version of *Ambianca*?” Joan asked. “And why be so devious about it? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I think,” Preston said rising from his chair, “that the light is perfect on the sand bar down there now. We should go check out the shorebirds. *Ambianca* will keep. The main thing is that you figured out how to disable the damn thing.”

Mark stopped pacing in mid-stride, his hand raised ready to make a point. When Joan rose in eager anticipation of some heavy-duty birding, the lecture ended abruptly.

Joan peered through the telescope. “OK. This better be a Western Sandpiper. Otherwise, I give up.” She stepped back, letting Preston have a look.

“Excellent. It is indeed *Calidris mauri*. Now, if I can...Here we have a Semipalmated Sandpiper, *Calidris pusilla*, a close relative. You can compare them in the scope.”

Joan took another turn at the scope. “All right. The Semipalmated has a shorter, stout bill.”

“Correct,” Preston agreed, “but that’s not enough. Sometimes Westerns have short bills. We’re lucky. They’re both in breeding plumage. Otherwise, they’re virtually impossible to tell apart. Notice that the Semipalmated is grayer; the Western browner. Then, the Western’s bill is longer and narrower, and has a slight droop. The clincher, though, is that little rusty patch on the shoulder of the Western. Those feathers are called *scapulars*. The Semipalmated never has that rusty patch. It’s the combination of subtle marks that reinforce the correctness of the identification.”

“These are *hard*,” Joan complained.

“Definitely an acquired taste,” Mark agreed.

“Why don’t you two tell me about your trip with Becky Bell while we walk back to the cabin?”

“I believe our new confederate is trying to tell us that she’s burned out on shorebirds, Preston,” Mark suggested. “Shall we turn back?” He wondered briefly why Joan hadn’t asked him to resume his lecture on the parasite.

“OK. I don’t see any rarities here anyway,” Preston said, shouldering the scope. Then he launched into the tale. “Back in 1968, Mark and I had met each other, but only to say hello. Thus, I was a bit taken back when he appeared on my doorstep carrying a lovely young girl with

blood dripping from a head wound. I recognized Mark, however, and invited him inside. Matthew was supposedly at the library, but as usual, he was chasing women instead of studying. He'd chosen the location of our apartment for the plethora of bars in the area."

"I was happy to let Preston take charge," Mark added. "I put the girl on a sofa in the living room of the apartment."

"I saw at once that Mark's young friend needed medical attention. I suggested he should have taken her to the hospital. He adamantly refused."

"We'd both have been arrested," Mark pointed out.

"True. Fortunately, I knew a medical resident, a fellow birder. I called him up and talked him into coming over. He stitched up the cut on her head, and said she probably had a mild concussion. Wanted to know how it happened. We told him she'd fallen down the stairs. Didn't want to take her to the hospital because we suspected she'd taken drugs. Something like that."

"Preston is being polite when he uses the plural pronoun. I was in shock and just watched."

"The instructions were simple. The treatment for a concussion is bed rest. However, if she made a turn for the worst, we had to get her to a hospital immediately. We agreed and sat up all night, taking turns waking her every hour, making sure she was still alive. Sometime around morning, she started making sense. That's when we found out her real name, Rebecca Bellini."

"Where was Matthew all this time?" Joan asked.

"He showed up about 2:00," Mark explained. "He'd drunk a lot and went straight to bed, barely saying hello. He didn't spend much time in the apartment anyway. We fed him some ridiculous story and he bought it. Left us alone while we nursed Becky for a couple of days."

"Who decided you had to leave?"

"I did," Preston said. "I went out to buy provisions and saw Mark's picture, front page of the *Times*. The paper was already a day old. The article said the police were looking for the ringleader, Becky Bell. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Rebecca Bellini and Becky Bell were the same. Now, I wasn't any radical, but I felt sympathetic to the Cause. I didn't see any reason to turn Becky in. Besides, I'd been planning to go on a long birding trip."

"I could tell that Preston was getting antsy," Mark said. "I realized he must have some plans that we were interfering with. Preston tried to explain about birding, but I wasn't very focused," Mark admitted. "I would have agreed with any suggestion he made. Birding sounded interesting, but I had no idea what it involved. It wasn't till the next morning, after driving for 18 hours straight, that I realized I had put Becky and myself into the hands of a *fanatic*."

Preston chuckled.

Mark continued, "We were somewhere in Tennessee when Becky finally returned permanently to the land of the living. She started asking all sorts of questions, beginning with who the hell were we, where were we taking her and so forth."

"I told her a fable," Preston recalled. "Plus, we convinced her that she'd promised to stay with us for a month while recuperating. She was too weak to argue."

“What was the fable?” Joan asked.

“I told her about a migrating warbler,” Preston said. Then he repeated the story.

Imagine you’re a small bird.

Let’s say you’re a Blackburnian Warbler. That’s a beautiful bird, black and white, with a brilliant orange throat the color of molten iron, with streaks of orange on its face, as though the fire has spread from its throat. It’s a tiny bird, weighing just a few ounces. Rebecca reminded me of a Blackburnian Warbler. Full of fire!

In order to mate, you have to reach the forests of eastern Canada or New England, thousands of miles from your winter home in Central America.

You’ve made it this far, to Yucatan, but now a challenge faces you. You have to fly over the Gulf of Mexico.

You start just as night falls. Night is best for flying. It’s cooler, with fewer winds, and fewer predators. Surrounded by your friends and family, you take off.

At first, the sheer audacity of the enterprise exhilarates you. How absurd to think that a tiny bird can fly hundreds of miles without stopping. That thought sustains you for the first few hours. Then, you fall into a hypnotic rhythm: flap, flap, glide. Then again, flap, flap, glide. Quick-quick-slow. A dance in the air.

On through the night you fly. Above you, the stars serve as a guide. Below you lies the vast ocean. You head north. The prevailing winds force your course westward, toward the upper Texas coast.

The night passes and day appears in the east. As the sun moves higher in the sky, you begin to tire. The sun is hot. It saps your strength. Did you eat enough before leaving? Will your fat reserves be enough?

The morning passes. It’s almost noon. Still, you keep up the relentless flap, flap, glide. North. Keep flying north. Don’t turn back: that way is certain death. Don’t change course: that way lies the unknown. The only hope is to keep flying, searching for a place to land.

Noon passes. Still no land in sight. The flock disperses. Some companions fall behind. Many disappear forever.

Still you struggle. You sense that the end of the journey is approaching. Ahead, you see land, a beach, trees.

A sudden breath of fresh air provides some relief. Cool. The air feels cool! For a brief moment you relax into the wonderful coolness. It revives you.

Then you realize the full import of what you’ve felt. The cool air is the harbinger of the dreaded “norther.”

If birds dream, a norther is the stuff of nightmare.

Soon, you feel the norther in earnest. The air is no longer cool and refreshing. The air is cold, cold and wet. It begins to rain.

You forget about gliding. This is now a fight for your life. Flap, flap, flap. More. Flap, flap, flap. Don't stop, don't glide. Fight. Quick-quick-quick.

The headwind blows stronger now. You wish you could rest for a minute. That way lies death. Rest and you'll tumble down to the waiting waves of the ocean and oblivion. No! You struggle on.

There! Through the rain and mist you can just make out the dim shapes of trees. Can you make it? Keep going. Flap, flap, flap. Is it getting closer? Yes. Can you make it? Maybe.

Struggling, you use up your final reserves of fat. Unable to keep up your constant flapping, you fall.

You are one of the lucky ones. You find land beneath you. Ahead you can see magnificent oaks, hundreds of years old.

Exhausted, you reach shelter in the oaks of High Island. Morning, you say. In the morning, I'll feed. Now, I have to rest. Exhaustion overwhelms you. You're literally too tired to move.

"I told them we'd see a spectacle in High Island, hundreds of birds in spring finery," Preston concluded.

"We did, too," Mark said. "I could hardly believe it. I've never seen anything like it since. Warblers dripped from every tree, along with Grosbeaks, Orioles, all kinds of birds. I was hooked. I've been a birder ever since."

"Will we see something like that?" Joan asked.

"Not likely. It takes a lot of luck to hit a major fallout. If you bird long enough, maybe you'll be lucky as we were. I try to accept whatever gifts Nature brings me. For instance, those shorebirds we just saw sported magnificent plumage. They aren't usually that striking. Spring has marvelous rewards for the birder, especially here in Texas. We need to savor each spring, knowing that we have only a few of them to enjoy. That's why I insisted we hide by traveling along the coast. If everything goes wrong and this is my last spring, this is how I want to celebrate it."

On that cheery note, they returned to the cabin.

After dinner at the main ranch house, the trio returned to their cabin, where Mark checked in with Delfina. He came back looking downtrodden.

"What's the matter," Joan asked him. "Is something wrong with Delfina?"

"No, she's fine. It was what was waiting for me in my inbox. Good news, bad news. The good news confirmed that the parasite is gone. The bad news: an e-mail from *Selenops*, with a document attached."

Preston and Joan both jumped up. "What's it say?"

"The e-mail says, 'You son of a bitch! I didn't think you'd figure it out that quick. I have to admit, I'm impressed. However, I beat you to that file of your father's. I'm surprised you didn't guess the password. It's easy. I've attached the file.'"

“And the file...” Preston hinted.

“A long note from Dad. I’ll let you read it.” Mark sank down into the chair. He felt a horrible depression. He felt sick. Was it simply the result of exhaustion? He had been reliving that wonderful time thirty years ago, but now it all seemed so meaningless. He handed the papers to Preston, who read the first page, then passed it over to Joan.

“Mark, you realize...” Preston said, but Mark had left them and gone to bed.

20. Chocolate Intemperance

From: TheMan@Magus.com
Sent: Tuesday, April 14, 1998
To: pulsatrix@anon.fi
Subject: I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but...

I've decided to finally get this all off my chest, to explain why I have been acting the way I have since Joan arrived. I'm sure you'll find out about it anyway, sooner or later. The story begins, not with Joan, but with that beautiful woman you brought into my life thirty years ago, Becky Bell.

Some of this may be painful for you to read. I apologize. But, you need to understand that it wasn't really my fault.

The first I knew of the furor at Columbia University was when I saw the picture of you and some girl on the front page of the Times. I couldn't believe my eyes. I remember asking Grace, who as usual knew all the details. She'd heard about it from some friend in New York and called Matthew. He was fuzzy on the details, but remembered you showing up at the apartment with a girl. He was pretty sure you'd left.

I was furious. Why had no one told me? I put two investigators on it immediately, and they tracked you down using contacts at American Express. Hint: if you want to hide, don't use credit cards.

I instructed Amex to send a wire as soon as you charged on the card again. That's how I got in touch with you. What in the world were you doing in the Davis Mountains?

I remember my first sight of Becky. She was dirty and tired, but no amount of grime could conceal that beauty. No tiredness could hide the fabulous body. I've always had an eye for women, and I knew immediately that I had to know her better.

As Grace would say, "She cleaned up good." God, did she. Grace lent her a dress for the evening, something I'm sure she regretted when she saw Becky wearing it. I recognized the dress. I bought it for a special presentation in the Rose Garden. It was the first designer dress I ever bought, a bright yellow sundress with thin spaghetti straps. When your mother wore it, she looked elegant. When Rebecca wore it, she looked ravishing, her breasts pressed against the fabric of the dress. She was much shorter than I, perhaps only 5'3". She'd shortened the hem considerably and showed some terrific legs. The front of the dress was loose, and I couldn't resist the temptation to peek. She wasn't wearing a bra. I remember thinking how dark her nipples looked compared to Grace.

Rebecca wore her hair pinned in a long ponytail down her back. It was a dark, lustrous brown, almost black, that went well with her complexion. Your mother called her swarthy, though not that night of course.

Her face was a perfect oval, with light brown eyes the color of raw honey and dark brows that set off a thin, retroussé nose above full lips. She wore no makeup, which somehow enhanced her beauty. Her eyes sparkled with intensity.

Why am I telling you all this? You surely remember her yourself. You must know the effect she had on every man she met.

She looked me straight in the eye and said, "I've heard so much about you from Mark. I've been dying to meet you." Then, she took my arm and said, "Where's this barbecue pit that you're so famous for? I trust we're getting barbecue." I felt her breast through the thin cloth of the dress and thought she must have done it on purpose. I knew this was going to lead somewhere. If I'd only known where.

How old was she? Older than you, of that I was sure. Years of practice in getting people to reveal details came in handy. In conversation, I learned that she was older than 21 ? she referred to voting ? but not much older. I remember what I was doing at that age. Not demonstrating against the government, that's for sure! I was doing my part to win the war against tyranny, and learning how to run a business courtesy of the Quartermaster Corps. What could have made Becky Bell into a radical? Was the war evil, as she suggested?

Were there more than two people at dinner that night? At times, the world shrank. We were alone. She lectured; I listened. I have an image in my mind of her gesturing with a rib bone, suddenly realizing what she was doing, looking embarrassed, and putting it carefully down on the plate. Then she laughed. It wasn't a girlish giggle as I'd expected, it was a strong laugh. The laugh said, "I must look ridiculous." I remember looking up at Grace, who was watching the performance. Grace did not approve, but said nothing.

I was surprised to learn of your plans to go to Chicago for the Democratic Convention. Was that your way of rebelling? I realized that I had to act quickly.

"Why so soon?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"We need to recruit people for the convention. We're going to take a long time getting there, stopping wherever there's a chance to draw a crowd. Would you like to hear my speech?"

Your mother stepped in, suggesting that it had been a long day, and that perhaps speeches should wait until the morning. Grace had her way, as she always did, and the party broke up. That was about 11:00 or something like that.

I couldn't sleep. Usually Grace drops off instantly, and sleeps soundly. Then she wakes up at 6:00 without an alarm and starts her day. I don't know how she does it. That night, she lay awake for quite a while, but finally I heard her soft snoring and knew she was out for the rest of the night.

Full of nervous energy, but with no real plan, I went downstairs. I noticed a light on in the kitchen and investigated. I went quietly, and my heart skipped a beat when I saw Rebecca. She was wearing a filmy peignoir, another loan from Grace. I wanted to rush over and take her into my arms, but somehow managed to hold back.

"Still hungry?" I asked.

She leaped up. I thought she'd hurt herself. "My God! You scared the shit out of me."

I loved the way she said that. We never used the word shit in our household. I, of course, use it often at the office. I felt drawn to the girl even more and fought to maintain my composure. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. Are you hungry?"

"No, of course not. How could I be after that Lucullan feast?"

"It was hardly Lucullan. That implies lavishness that we certainly didn't have. We have feasts like that occasionally, Grace invites half of Houston, I barbecue for days getting ready. This was just good old down home barbecue." God, I sounded so pompous.

She laughed, fortunately.

"I've heard about your talent with words," she said. "So tell me, what would you call that feast, if not Lucullan?"

"Epicurean comes to mind."

"Ah, a fine distinction. The difference between discriminating taste and over-indulgence." I didn't know what to say. For once, I was nonplussed. Moreover, I was having trouble not staring at her in the peignoir. She noticed my preoccupation and made sure I got a good look.

"I was having trouble sleeping," she explained. "My father used to swear by warm milk. I was exploring the refrigerator when you caught me."

"I couldn't sleep either. Kept thinking about what you said, especially about having a duty to try to stop the war." That was bullshit, of course. I wondered if she was having trouble sleeping for the same reason as I.

"You could do a lot, you know. You're famous. You have a lot of influence." She turned serious instantly. I realized I'd made a strategic mistake. I'd have to play this out.

"Influence is a tricky weapon to wield," I countered. "Use it too often, and it evaporates. I did try, though. We called Lady Bird and passed on a suggestion: If we managed to lose the election in Vietnam, the new government would ask us to leave. Lady Bird sent a note. She'd mentioned it to some people in the White House. They thought I'd lost my mind. Maybe I had."

"No. It's a brilliant idea. It might even work."

"Impractical. Were you thinking of hot chocolate or something like that?"

Her head jerked at the abrupt transition from war to chocolate. "That sounds good."

"Come on, then. Let me show you a new toy in the cabaña." I led the way outside, past the pool and into the small building guests used for changing clothes.

"Bittersweet chocolate?" I asked as I flipped on the lights.

"Sounds appropriate."

She lounged on a couch watching me as I busied myself with the preparation, melting chocolate squares in a pan over a small stove. I put on quite a show. "Ghiardelli chocolate. I think it's the best."

"You're the expert I hear."

I took out two mugs and a pitcher, filling the pitcher with milk. I could feel her watching me as I walked over to my gleaming brass contraption. I turned it on and waited for it to warm up. She still said nothing, just watched. I frothed the milk using steam from the cappuccino machine. Then, I mixed the milk and chocolate together, added a bit of sugar, and filled the mugs.

"There," I said as I presented the mug to her. "The world's finest hot chocolate."

"That's a pretty fancy way to make hot chocolate."

"What's the point of being rich unless you can buy toys? This came all the way from Italy. You're supposed to use it to make cappuccino, coffee with frothed milk. I'm experimenting with other uses. I had to pretend to be a restaurant owner to get them to ship the machine to me."

"The chocolate tastes delicious."

As delicious as you. "Shall we go outside?"

The moon was almost full, bathing the area in a cool, soft radiance, it's image reflected on the surface of the pool. Rebecca sat on the edge of the pool, dangling her feet in the water, the folds of the peignoir pulled up around her waist, making sure I realized she wore no underwear. I sat beside her, after rolling up the legs of my pajamas so they wouldn't get wet. She stretched out, patting the water with her toes. The wavelets made the moon dance.

"How much money do you have anyway?"

"Not enough to make anybody's list of the richest people, but I'm still working on it."

"Must be nice."

"Mainly, it's just a way of keeping score. After a while the total is simply a number on a piece of paper."

"How did you make it?"

"I buy castoffs with other people's money, fix them up, and sell them for a great profit."

"Castoffs? What kind of castoffs?"

"You've heard the saying, 'Inside every fat man is a thin man trying to get out?'"

"Yes."

"Well, the same thing is true about companies. Inside every large company there are usually several small companies trying to get out. Often, the large companies are happy to get rid of them. They don't fit the strategy. I facilitate the operation. I find people with capital; we buy the small company at a bargain price. Then we fix whatever was wrong with the little company and sell it back to the public. Oftentimes, the only thing wrong with the little company was the meddling by the big company. Makes the job easy. If I require help fixing things up, I know people who excel at such tasks. I bring them on board to run things while I look for another deal. It's very lucrative. Oh, well, sometimes it doesn't work. Then I have to admit defeat and close down the little company. Not often, though. Most of the time, I win the game. I'm pretty good at it."

"I'll bet you are. That's why they call you Magus or the alchemist, then, because you convert lead into gold."

"I suppose so." I tried to make the moon dance, but it didn't work right for me. She did it some more.

"Nice night," I said.

"Yes, very nice."

"You're leaving tomorrow." Please say no!

"Have to."

"It could be dangerous, Chicago I mean."

"You worried?"

"Yes." I started to say more, but decided to wait for a better time. We sat in silence for a while.

"I've been thinking about your idea of losing the election. You know, it's ironic that all this trouble came about because we didn't lose the first one."

"The first one?"

"Yeah. Back in the fifties. We were supposed to have an election for all of Vietnam, north and south. We reneged. We would have lost, so we didn't hold the election. If we'd lost that election we wouldn't have to worry about the war today."

"Might have to worry about something else, though."

"You mean the spread of Godless Communism."

"Well, you said it, not I."

"What we're doing now is worse."

"You haven't fought as many despots as I have."

"That's what I'm doing right now! The only difference is that the despot isn't a single person, it's a bureaucracy."

"War by bureaucrats! What a concept. Reminds me of a joke: Bureaucracy defends the status quo long past the time when the quo has lost its status. If truth be told, the status quo is not terribly interesting. I'd rather focus on the future."

"Past, future, what's the difference? If you believe Einstein, it's all an illusion anyway. Maybe we should focus on the present." That's what I wanted to hear!

She stood up and untied the belt of the robe. Then with a shrug, she dropped it to the ground, where it sank slowly, the silk collapsing like a deflating parachute. Before me stood a naked goddess, worshiping the feel of the soft night before diving into the water.

She swam elegantly, slicing through the water with steady practiced strokes, barely leaving a wake, her long hair trailing behind her. She did a couple of easy laps and swam over to the side. "Join me."

"I have a better idea." I took both her hands and lifted her out of the water. I remember staring at her while the drops ran down her skin, tiny rivulets in the moonlight. She sparkled in the low light, like a glossy black and white photograph.

Even today, I can see her hands as they moved from my shoulders to my chest, to the buttons on my shirt, undoing each in turn. The shirt joined the robe on the ground. I felt rather than saw her breasts against my chest. Her eyes sought mine, her arms reached around me, pulled me close. We kissed long and deeply, her tongue probing. With a small shudder, she broke contact, took a step back, cocked her head, waiting.

I picked her up easily—she was as light as smoke rising on a fall morning ? and carried her back into the cabaña.

The next morning she decided you could stay a few more days before leaving for Chicago. What a week! I schemed every moment to arrange to be with her. We met three times at the Rice Hotel downtown. She was an amazing lover for someone so young, subtle and inventive, a delight.

She started blackmailing me almost immediately. It began innocently, with a request for money for the trip. Then in a few weeks she hit me with the news: she was pregnant. Christ! What a mess! I paid for everything, of course. That's one advantage of being rich. If she'd realized how much I could really afford, I'd have been in serious trouble. As it was, she took me for tens of thousands of dollars before, well, you know what happened.

Anyway, Joan is her daughter, hers and mine. She'll tell you everything.

I'm sorry this all happened. Truly. I wish I could go back somehow and change things.

Maybe you'll find some way to forgive me.

Dad.

April 26, 1998

South Padre Island

This stretch of the barrier island that parallels the Texas coast is one of the prettiest and least developed. The only road down the center of the island terminates abruptly 15 miles from town in huge sand dunes so white they hurt your eyes when the sun strikes them. Headquarters for numerous college students during Spring Break, the island can prove equally delightful during off-season, when it may be virtually deserted.

Several good hotels cluster on the southern tip of the island, but the best way to visit is to rent one of the many condos for a week or weekend. Outrageously expensive during the peak season, these are surprisingly affordable the rest of the time. Get one facing the Gulf. Then you can set up a scope on the balcony—virtually all have balconies—and check out the birds flying along the shore. You may be lucky enough to spot a rare *pelagic*, one of the many species of birds that live at sea and come ashore only under duress.

Don't miss the small marsh near the Convention Center. The reeds should usually produce Clapper Rails, American Coots, and Common Moorhens. The sand flats nearby often have good representations of shorebirds.

Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge is fairly close to South Padre, about 20 minutes away by car. Plan to spend at least half a day at the refuge, part of it sitting in the shade by the visitors' center. A small fountain there attracts all the local bird life, including Green Jays, Olive Sparrows, and other specialties of the area. The circle drive around the refuge will often reward the careful observer with views of Reddish Egrets and other wading birds.

If you like seafood, you are in luck. Thanks to the resort traffic, South Padre possesses more than its share of good restaurants, for example...¹

¹ Preston Salomon, *Birding the Texas Coast*, p. 74, . Copyright 1996, EcoTours Press, Houston, TX. Used with permission.

21. Dreaming up an Answer

Early the following morning, following a superb breakfast at the ranch house, Preston drove a tortuous route on the back roads near Riviera searching the ponds for a Masked Duck. Joan sat in front with Preston, eagerly scanning the ponds with him. Preston pointed out a Common Moorhen for Joan, who wrote a note in her field guide. Mark sat alone in the back and said nothing.

“Too much habitat,” Preston complained. “We need lots of luck to see a Masked Duck. This is just the kind of stuff they like, shallow water with lots of weeds. Keep looking for any movement.”

After a short time that seemed like hours to Mark, Preston gave up and with a sigh of resignation said, “I think we may as well head for the Valley.” Without asking for a vote, he returned to the main highway and headed south, stopping at a rest area south of Falfurrias.

The trees in the area proved to be very productive for birds and a small spring-fed pond hosted a varied collection of new species. Joan saw her first south Texas bird, a Green Jay. “Wow! What an incredible sight! It’s so big. And all those colors. Why don’t we have them in Houston?”

Preston said. “They like it warm. Probably find Houston winters too harsh. South Texas is the only place in the US where you can see them easily.”

Mark sat with the truck while Joan and Preston searched the trees for warblers, finally turning up one Preston had been seeking, a Tropical Parula. “There, see him flitting around near the top of the canopy,” he said to Joan, who was having trouble seeing the bird.

“Just when I get my glasses on him, he moves,” she complained.

“Try this,” Preston suggested. “You want to see the bird first with your naked eyes, and then put the glasses in front of your eyes.”

“I remember you said that once before, in Rockport or somewhere. It’s hard.”

“It takes practice. Don’t worry; you’ll get the hang of it. Try it without the binoculars, just with your hands. Then you’ll get used to moving your hands without looking at your binocs. That’s the secret.”

Joan practiced a couple of times. Then she did it for real. “There he is. Oh, what a pretty thing. He has an orange necklace! What did you call him?”

“Tropical Parula, *Parula pitiayumi*” Preston said. “There’s another very similar, but more common bird called Northern Parula, *Parula americana*. Did you see an eye crescent on this bird? That’s an eye ring that’s broken in the middle.”

“No. Should I have?”

“Nope. It doesn’t have one. That’s a quick way to tell it from the Northern Parula, which does have one.”

Joan looked through the guidebook to find the bird, writing the date in the margin. Mark watching from afar couldn’t help smiling, remembering his own enthusiasm when he first

discovered how many different birds existed, and how you really could tell them apart. When he and Rebecca traveled the coast with Preston, they had a friendly competition to find new birds, though Preston enforced the rule that everyone had to see a bird before it counted. Rebecca was better at catching quick glimpses out of the corner of her eye and consequently won the competition easily. Preston, however, commented on Mark's ability to hear the calls and suggested he concentrate on honing that talent.

After a day of sheer hell Mark — who'd been unable to quit obsessing about the story of Rebecca and his father — watched the sun disappear beneath the waves of the Gulf of Mexico as he nursed a drink and a blue funk. Four exhausting days keeping pace with Preston and Joan birding, then working most of the night, had taken their toll. A steady breeze blowing off the Gulf over the balcony of the condo on South Padre Island, a welcome relief from the heat of the day, failed to raise his spirits. Worse, Joan and Preston seemed to be having a great time and sharing a private secret. They looked at Mark, looked at each other and smiled a lot.

Now, all three sat quietly drinking margaritas and watching the sky fade from blue to black. Mark had suggested buying ready-made margaritas at the liquor store, but Preston wouldn't hear of it. He insisted on premium Tequila, genuine Triple Sec and fresh limes. Sometimes, Mark thought to himself, Preston could be a bit difficult.

“Well, are you and Joan ever going to clue me in on your little secret,” he asked Preston finally. Night had fallen ending the birding for the day and Preston was about ready to tackle supper.

Preston looked at Joan. She spoke up, “Ready to analyze the document our spider friend *Selenops* sent?”

“Spider friend?” Preston asked.

“*Selenops* is a genus of spiders found in the desert in the southwestern USA and other similar habitats around the world. I looked it up on the net.”

“Why a spider, though?”

“Well,” Mark put in, “he lives on the web.”

“Oh,” Preston said. “Back to the document. First question: why did he write the document?”

“Maybe it's just as he said,” Mark said with exasperation. “He wanted to finally set...” he broke off, realization slowly spreading over his face. “It's a fake! *Selenops* manufactured the document!”

“Indeed, Owl. The document is bogus, as you should have noticed. If you'd stayed around a bit last night, we'd have explained it to you then. *Selenops* is just pulling your chain. Joan and I analyzed the document at length. *Selenops* made a couple of trivial mistakes, but even had he taken greater pains we would still have seen through his stratagem. I believe he sent the file for two purposes: to gain time, and to drive a wedge between you and Joan by making it appear as though she were the cause of all the problems.”

“Some of the facts in the narrative are correct,” Joan offered. “I did come to Simon to confront him about my past. However—”

Preston waved her to silence for a while. “Now, let’s analyze this carefully. As you realize now, there is a split infinitive in the very first line. I can’t imagine Simon using one.”

“No way,” Joan echoed. “At least not in this case. I remember one of his mini-lectures on the subject. He caught me in what he termed a *gratuitous splitting*.”

‘Now, I am not doctrinaire about grammatical rules,’ he began. ‘The rule against splitting an infinitive is not sacrosanct. In fact, it didn’t exist until the 19th century. It’s something of a holdover from Latin, of course, as though Latin grammar should apply to English. I for one can’t imagine Star Trek’s catch phrase being said *To go boldly*... On the other hand, I do object to splitting an infinitive gratuitously.’

She stood and stretched. “This one is certainly gratuitous.” She’d been thinking about the document and had some more insights to share. “There are several clichés as well. ‘getting things off his chest,’ for one. You know how he hated clichés. And I *never* heard him use the word *shit* in the office. Finally, that scene by the pool sounds like something from a bad romance novel. I mean, really, carrying her to bed. Give me a break.”

“Excellent,” Preston said. “There are other items I noticed, such as *it’s* with an apostrophe instead of *its* without one. Also, the word *retroussé* sounds forced. I think Simon would have preferred *slightly upturned*. He used words correctly, but not pretentiously. Then, all that conversation by the pool sounds staged, don’t you think? It sounds like Simon from the television biography. In fact, I think that business about small companies wanting to get out *was* in the TV show. Perhaps most importantly, the document fails to mention another member of the party, namely me. The description of the dinner contains several inconsistencies from the way I remember it. For example, there’s no way Becky could have worn a dress Grace lent her. The differences in sizes couldn’t be overcome by *taking up the hem*. As I recall, Becky wore clean jeans like the rest of us. Finally, Becky was simply not the way the document portrays her. Yes, Simon helped her with money, but I can’t imagine her blackmailing anyone. Did you notice the clever way *Selenops* implies Simon might have been responsible for Becky’s death? That was a master stroke. We have underestimated our foe. He is extremely clever, but the three of us are a match for him.”

“I’ve had a bit more experience dealing with fake documents than you,” Joan said to Mark. “Don’t feel bad for not spotting it.”

“*Selenops*.” Mark said. “He’s trying to throw me off the scent. Sorry, another cliché. He wants us to think he’s broken the password.”

“Precisely,” Preston said. “However, I suspect that Becky did seduce your father. She looked on most men as a challenge. The incident around the pool has an air of verisimilitude, despite the hackneyed prose. I think I should tell you what I know about Becky.” He moved to the kitchen and spoke as he prepared dinner, making vinaigrette dressing, tearing lettuce for a salad, preparing sea bass for steaming.

“Becky liked having power over men and took advantage of that power,” Preston continued. He carried the salad to the table, poured some wine, and gestured to Mark and Joan to take a seat. “I’m ashamed to confess that I was one of her conquests.” He put down the salad and retreated to the kitchen to mother the fish.

“You slept with her, too?” Mark was crestfallen.

“Yes, Owl, I did. Even before you returned to New York. She used to invent errands for you to run so we would have time alone. Then after you left, she seemed to lose interest in me. The game was too easy. We quarreled a lot, for example over whether to spend some time during our travels looking at birds. When she refused to take a day off to look for Kirtland’s Warbler, I realized we had no future together and left. That was early in 1969. Then—”

Mark had lost his appetite. He stood up abruptly, walked away from the table and spent long minutes on the balcony staring out over the Gulf of Mexico, watching the glow of tiny phosphorescent plankton outline the whitecaps. He returned wearing a look of determination. “I’m going to figure out the damned password on that message. Y’all go on to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.” He picked up his laptop and returned to the balcony.

The phrase circulated in Mark’s head, like a song you can’t get rid of. “Wholly Joan, cowardly knight.” What could it mean? He checked on the anagram program running on the computer in Del’s cabin. COWARDLY KNIGHT could be rearranged into THY OWL CARD KING. That looked promising, maybe referring to Mark. When he added JOAN to the mix, one possibility was CAD LARK TONG WHY JOIN. Now, if he just knew where the CAD LARK TONG hung out, he might be able to make sense of it. Overall, though, he didn’t think the approach promised success. He stayed logged into the larger computer, letting Ambianca select music for him.

He tried assigning numbers to the letters to see if the numbers showed up any pattern. Nothing jumped out at him. He adjusted the search programs running on the big computers in Del’s cabin to see if they came up with anything. Brute force wasn’t working, though. He reminded himself to be creative. This was his Dad’s clue. It would be clever, devious, not mechanical.

About 2:00 in the morning, Mark’s body won a long battle with his brain. Lying in a hammock on the balcony, listening to music Ambianca piped to his earphones, he drifted off to sleep with a song echoing through his head: Leonard Cohen’s *Joan of Arc*, sung in duet with Jennifer Warnes, a favorite.

I lie on the ground, a soldier, wounded, among fallen comrades.

Every part of my body hurts. Using my sword as a crutch, I lever myself upright up and look out over the battlefield. In the distance, the scorched village sends up tendrils of smoke. The air smells of dead and burning flesh. I wrinkle my nose in disgust. So much for the glory of battle.

I see her in the distance. In spite of the gloom, she seems shrouded in light. The Maid. Does she like her handiwork? Can it be worth all this suffering to install a weak, vacillating fool on the throne? Why? What about the villagers caught in the middle of the two armies? Is this what the Maid’s coming portends: Flame and smoke and death? War is evil, just as Rebecca said.

Joan rides out of the mist and smoke, her armor stained brown, with either rust or blood, I can’t tell which. She and her horse are both near collapse. The horse’s sides are lathered, and heave with each labored breath. With a sigh, Joan dismounts and comes forward to greet me.

“Bon soir, mon chou,” she calls. I reply, “Good evening to you, cabbage two!” A clever play on the French, and rhyming as well. “Mon chou” can be used as a phrase of affection, but literally it means “my cabbage.” Where has Joan learned her French?

She comes toward me as though she had more on her mind than a simple greeting. She leers. “Si tu veux, on peut party. Ya’ wanna party?” She drawls out the final word like a southern redneck ready to down a six-pack. My body begins to betray my emotions. My clothes disappear. Joan giggles. She takes off her armor, standing in front of me in a filmy negligee that appears from nowhere. Then she inexplicably puts on a bright yellow raincoat.

“Ce n’est pas mon bleu mac fameau, c’est jaune.” “This isn’t my famous blue raincoat, it’s yellow.” She is making a joke based on the album title. The song still plays in the background, like a movie soundtrack.

Joan’s raincoat, her “mac” is bright yellow. She looks like a school crossing guard, except she wears nothing beneath the raincoat. The negligee has disappeared. The raincoat is buttoned up securely. She pulls the hood up over her head.

She begins to model the raincoat, turning around completely. It looks like a child’s. Remember going to elementary school, splashing through puddles in your galoshes to the consternation of your mother? Joan turns back to face me and coyly unbuttons each of the metal clips, one at a time. As she released each one, she exposes more of her cleavage. “No! I cry! No!”

Then, she starts to turn dark, as though burning. Sunburn? It’s bright at the beach, easy to burn. Joan turns the color of a Killdeer, café-au-lait with bright orange on the back. She calls, “Killdeer, killdeer, kill, dear.” Then she grows ever blacker. “Oh dear! I’m growing dark! What will I do?” She has switched to English.

Joan reaches out to the Owl, her arms beseeching. The flames do their work. The Owl is the fire, “the one beneath the smoke.” He grips her with his talons. She crumples, like smoldering paper. “Help me! I’m afraid. No! I’ll not be afraid. Let them never say I was yellow!”

She rises into the air, like ashes on a fall breeze. Still holding her, the Owl flies up with her. I look down on the ground below, seeing the widespread devastation for the first time. I weep. Then Joan disappears. The Owl holds the ashes of Joan’s negligee in his claws. No longer able to fly, he plunges to the earth.

Mark woke up on the deck, with the hammock swinging back and forth above his head. The dream was fresh, and with it, the solution to the puzzle. He could hardly contain himself as he lifted the computer to try it.

Joan emerged from the shared bathroom toweling off her hair. Mark sat at the breakfast table eating *huevos rancheros* with gusto. Preston stood at the stove cooking, lost in thought. “You did it!” Joan exclaimed, when she noticed Mark’s change in demeanor. Mark nodded, putting some of the eggs on a tortilla and rolling it up.

“Well, what’s the answer?” Joan asked.

“Tell you later. Preston wants a chance to figure it out himself. We have some more reading to do. I’ll tell you while we’re driving.” Nothing she said would make him change his mind.

“The password is a multi-lingual pun.” Mark gave them a hint after they returned from an early morning visit to Laguna Atascosa Wildlife Refuge. They were on the way to a place Preston knew about that Mark hadn’t heard of, about an hour from Harlingen.

“What was that you said about a pun, Owl?”

“The clue uses a pun in two languages.”

“Which two?” Joan asked.

“French and English.”

“Don’t tell me,” Preston insisted. “I want to think about it some. I guess another hint wouldn’t be out of order, though.”

“Say the clue out loud.”

“Ah. I think I see part of it,” Joan said. “The WHOLLY JOAN part is really HOLY JOAN, that is Joan of Arc, Saint Joan. I should have guessed that.”

“So far, you’re on the right track. Now what? And no more hints.”

They parked by *El Sal de Rey*, a shallow salt lagoon with several thousand Northern Phalaropes swimming on it. The lagoon was on private property, near Harlingen, but Preston knew the owners. Preston had spent the past half hour checking out the birds with the telescope. There were a few ducks, but mostly just the phalaropes. Satisfied that no rarities hid among the shorebirds, he relinquished the telescope to Mark. Mark adjusted the focus and rescanned the same area Preston had just checked, just to be sure. He loved to spot something Preston overlooked.

“I give up,” Preston said.

“Mmmm,” Mark replied.

“I said, I give up.”

“Me, too. Nothing but the Phalaropes.”

“I mean I give up on the password.”

“Well, finally,” Joan said, displaying her exasperation. She’d surrendered about an hour ago.

“First, take Joan of Arc,” Mark began. “In French it’s *Jeanne d’Arc*. That matches the HOLY JOAN part of the clue. Now, we need to factor in the second half. *Jeanne* sounds similar to *jaune*, which is French for *yellow*. In English, yellow can mean cowardly. Then the night is not a knight, but simply the ? ”

“Dark!” Joan shouted. “The answer is *jaune dark*. Simon must have been proud of that one.”

“That’s it, all right. I decrypted the file. It’s completely different from the junk *Selenops* sent us. This is definitely from Dad. Here. I printed it out.” He handed the papers to Joan. “So what’s next, Preston? What should I do now?”

“I think,” Preston said, “that we should tweak *Selenops* a bit, let him know we’ve decrypted the file. That should smoke him out of wherever he’s hidden. Maybe we should just let him know we know the first file is a fake, without being too specific.”

“How about this? I send him a message using that same service Dad used to send the message to me. Moreover, I encrypt using the same key and the same clue. We let him stew for a day, then send him the answer.”

“Good. Send it.”

Mark fiddled around on the computer a bit, then sat back, relaxing for the first time in days. Joan started reading the document Mark had printed out, a letter from Simon to Mark.

22. Dead Letter

From: TheMan@Magus.com
 Sent: Tuesday, April 14, 1998
 To: pulsatrix@SecretMessage.to
 Subject: Things you need to know

1. Magus

Magus is under attack. Someone has infiltrated the system and planted a virus. Joan discovered it yesterday. We don't know what it is doing. I'm depending on you to get rid of it.

2. Joan

Joan is Rebecca's daughter. She may be mine as well. We've ordered DNA tests. Get her to tell you her story. I will figure out some way to tell your mother; you don't have to worry about that. I want you to become better acquainted with Joan. She's a remarkable young woman whom I admire a great deal. I feel guilty for not doing more for her than I have; I am trying to make amends.

After Rebecca's accident, I consented to let Rebecca's father, Professor G.W. Santoro, take care of the baby.

The Professor had bad luck with the women in his life. Rebecca's mother died when Rebecca herself was only a few years old, killed in an automobile accident. Did you know that? G.W. reared Rebecca by himself.

The Professor wanted another chance; it's as simple as that. He told me he felt guilty about the way Rebecca had turned out. I do not know why he felt that way. I thought Rebecca was remarkable, though I did agree that her methods were extreme.

Ask Preston to explain; he was there.

3. Matthew

Your brother is in deep trouble. He came to me again tonight looking for money. I've had an investigator checking him out. He's associated with some nasty people. I haven't figured out what to do about that yet. I confess that I fear the consequences.

Matthew owes these people about two hundred thousand. I could have given him the money. Perhaps I should have. Instead, I told him to dig himself out of the hole for once. He stormed out of my office. I think I made a mistake.

Perhaps you can talk some sense into him. He no longer listens to me.

Your loving father, SPT.

23. Job Interview

“Is that all there is?” Joan asked.

“That’s Dad, master of the one-page memo. He expected you and Preston to fill in the details.”

Preston was driving, and hadn’t seen the letter yet. “What does it say?”

“It says we should ask you about Rebecca’s death, among other things.” Mark studied Joan, trying to see a resemblance to her mother. It had been so long, he couldn’t picture Rebecca in his mind. The only image he could conjure up was from the old photographs on the trophy wall at home.

“The letter reveals that I am Rebecca’s daughter,” Joan added.

“Ah,” Preston said. “Maybe you’d like to tell us some more. How did you come to be there? You must have sought Simon out.”

“I’d start by telling you about my childhood, but I never had one, and I know almost nothing about my birth. I was born in Montreal, Canada and the birth certificate lists my father as *unknown*. My maternal grandfather adopted me when I was less than three years old. Simon’s note claims Papa wanted another chance to raise a child. I doubt it. He had forgotten all about child rearing by that time in his life, so he simply treated me as one of his students, one who was quite a bit younger than normal.”

“I’ve heard stories like that,” Preston said. “They call the children *little adults*. You appear to have survived.”

“Thanks to Aunt Emily, my grandmother’s younger sister. I spent most weekends with her, the only semblance of a normal childhood I knew. Papa was grateful.” Joan swiveled around on the front seat so she could look at both Preston and Mark while she told the rest of her story.

Papa didn’t know what to do with me most of the time, so he simply took me with him everywhere he went, when I wasn’t in school anyway. The earliest memory I have is wandering around the library at Yale on my own.

Elementary school classes bored me. I learned to read before I started kindergarten, so there went the first two years. I begged Papa to let me stay home, but naturally, he refused. “I need the time to teach my own students,” he explained. We compromised in a funny way. I agreed to go to school and he agreed to let me come with him at night. I didn’t realize how weird my upbringing was.

Papa taught Classics. As a result, I learned things other children didn’t. I thought everyone knew some Latin and that the Greek myths were bedtime stories. One day, I explained what *Ex Libris* meant to a classmate in the second grade and my teacher overheard. Papa had to endure a parent-teacher conference, at which he was politely told that he was ruining my life. We had a good laugh over that.

I can't remember exactly when I started helping him with his research. I know it was before I was ten years old. People who saw me in the library used to try help me, thinking I was lost. I got used to explaining that I knew where I was and that I was helping Papa with his research. They always smiled indulgently, not realizing that I was telling the truth. Lots of the old manuscripts were hard to read, and Papa's eyesight was fading. I used to help him figure out the letters. If anything in this little adventure happens to be in ancient Greek, let me know.

I was sort of a campus mascot most of my life, which made for some tempestuous years as a teenager. Papa was protective and refused to let me go out on dates with the Yale students, even during high school.

I had always expected to go to Yale for college ? the University would have waived tuition and fees for me ? but Papa said he had plenty of money saved up for me to go anywhere I wanted. I went to Brown, which was close enough for me to come home on weekends, but still gave me some freedom. I remember how proud I was of Papa to have shown such foresight.

He suffered a stroke in 1990, and never recovered. I took a job as a research assistant at Yale and cared for him. As Simon said in his letter, I'm great at research. That's not surprising, given that I've spent virtually my entire life at it. I discovered computer databases early in the 80s, long before the Internet, and long before most academics. They sent me more work than I could handle.

Papa hung on for over six years before he died. He couldn't speak at all by the end of his life, but he managed to write a note to me. It took him days, pecking it out one letter at a time on a laptop computer I bought him. Sometimes he could manage only one line a day. I wanted to help him, but he was too proud. The note said he knew I would do well, and that he was happy to have shared his last years with me. One of his old friends told me that Papa was afraid I would die young, just like my mother and her mother before me. I finally understood why he was so protective.

After he died, I let his colleagues take anything they wanted, then set about sifting through the rest. I found reports on a trust fund in his files, which explained how he had been able to support me in school. In the bottom of the file was an old envelope containing a legal document, one of those bound in blue cardboard, which turned out to be the trust agreement. To my surprise, someone I had never met, Simon P. Talbot, was the maker of the trust.

Of course, I ran a search on Simon P. Talbot and got very excited. Children in my situation, those who didn't know their fathers, typically fantasize about a rich man who couldn't afford to claim them. Suddenly, it appeared that the fantasy might be true!

I put my skills to their most strenuous test, tracking my mother's activities around the time of my conception, finding that no one could account for her whereabouts. Of course, there were reams of material about Simon. I studied everything available before confronting him, even checking on pictures of him with women, trying to guess what he would like.

I had no program, no plan. I knew, no I *hoped*, that he could tell me more about my birth, and my father.

I appeared at his office and faced my first hurdle: Mary Lynn. She did not intend to let me in to see Simon. I don't know why I didn't show her the envelope with the trust document right off the bat. It didn't occur to me. When I produced it, her eyes grew huge with shock. I could tell right away that she recognized the handwriting and my heart started racing. I could barely breathe while she disappeared down the hall carrying my prize.

She returned in about a minute, greatly agitated. "Mr. Talbot will see you. Try not to take up too much of his time." I followed her into the office, trembling. I can't remember when I've been so nervous and had to fight to control my breathing. Before I could introduce myself Simon demanded, "Where did you get this?"

I'd read enough about him to have prepared for this approach. "Why do you want to know?" I asked in reply.

"Wouldn't you want to know?"

"Why do you ask?"

He paused and studied me carefully. I hoped that the outfit I'd chosen, a dark blue pantsuit with a blue silk blouse, met with his approval. People tell me that combination brings out the color of my eyes. Pictures of Simon showed him often with women in pants, especially in business situations. I'd spent more on my clothes, and a hairdo, than ever before in my life. After what seemed like hours but was really only a few seconds, he said, "Would you like some coffee?"

"Are you going to have some?"

He smiled. "It's a game, isn't it? You're answering every question with another question."

"If so, didn't you just lose a point?"

He chortled with genuine delight, as though I'd told him the funniest joke he'd ever heard. I relaxed for the first time and smiled slightly.

"Please. Sit down. The coffee is Mexican *Altura*, freshly ground, brewed with pure spring water."

"Sounds wonderful." I usually made do with a Diet Coke to start the morning.

He pressed a button on his phone. "Mary Lynn, could you send in some fresh coffee. Two cups." He looked up at me. "Black," I said, guessing that was the way he took his. He repeated my preference to Mary Lynn, then added, "and clear my schedule for the rest of the afternoon."

"You have the meeting at—"

"Tell them something's come up. They can manage without me for once."

"Yes, sir." I could sense that Mary Lynn didn't like the way our meeting was progressing.

A young girl brought us coffee a few minutes later. She tried to disguise her curiosity, but I could see her studying me. The gossip mill was going to have some grist today!

He read my mind. “You have to forgive them. This is quite unusual. Are you truly Rebecca’s daughter?”

“Yes. I brought some proof.” I started to take out the information I’d collected, my birth certificate, passport and other documents. He waved them away.

“I pride myself on my ability to judge people. I don’t need to see any of those documents. Tell me about yourself. What brings you here?”

We spent the next two hours talking about everything and nothing, like two old friends who’d run into each other in an airport waiting lounge. Gradually, he led the conversation back to the question he’d asked, which I’d avoided. Why had I come? I wasn’t sure I had an answer to that myself.

“I could use a job,” I concluded finally.

“What can you do?”

“I’m great a research. Do you need research done?”

He didn’t say anything for a bit, then swiveled around in his chair and picked up a stack of files, which he handed to me. “Read these and tell me what you think.” He pressed the button on the intercom again. “Mary Lynn, Ms...” he arched his eyebrows in a query. “Santoro,” I supplied. “Joan Santoro.”

“Ms. Santoro will need an office. Will you please set her up?”

He didn’t wait for Mary Lynn’s confirmation. “We’ll talk again after you’ve studied these.”

That was it. I was an employee of Magus. No questions about when I could start. No mention of salary or duties.

I read the files, which turned out to be business plans submitted by entrepreneurs looking for funding. Most were crap. Only two were worth a second look. I dug into them. I found a problem with one of the plans, a patent they’d overlooked that was likely to cause problems. I told Simon, who was ecstatic. First, we agreed on the only two plans worth consideration. Second, he didn’t know about the patent. I’d just saved Magus a bundle.

That was the beginning of the story. You know the ending. The middle was just a lot of work, and learning about each other. He gradually gave me more responsibility, till I asked him what his plans were. He said he was grooming me to take over the business. “It’s funny,” he said, “I always wanted a son to take over the business. What a surprise when she turned out to be a daughter.”

Her voice trailed off into silence. Preston and Mark didn’t say anything. It was a lot of information to digest.

“I loved him,” Joan said unexpectedly, tears brimming in her eyes. “I hated it when he died. He’d been planning to tell Grace all about me. I wanted to tell her after he died. You saw how she looked at me.” She glanced at Mark. “I couldn’t say anything.”

“We’ll figure out some way to explain things,” Preston assured her. “Timing is important. Now, speaking of timing, we’d better get moving. It’s ?” He stopped and raised his binoculars. “Peregrine Falcon.” He opened the door and jumped out. “Watch this. See how she’s flying around the flock. She’s trying to scare them.”

Mark and Joan scrambled out of the car in time to see the Falcon swoop low over the Phalaropes on the water. In a panic, the Phalaropes took to the air. The Falcon turned her attention to another group of birds on the water, diving at them, panicking them as well. After a few more passes, the entire flock of Phalaropes, thousands of birds, swirled about in the air.

“Now,” Preston said, “she’ll make her kill.”

“How do you know it’s a female?” Joan asked.

“I’ll show you in a minute. Keep watching this.” The Falcon dove through the flight of birds, almost catching one, but coming up empty. She climbed quickly back into the sky, above the flock, which was still milling about. Another dive, another near miss. Then, on the third attempt, she slammed into a Phalarope, killing it instantly. Her prey no longer flew; it fell. The birders could hear the Falcon calling. “It’s almost like she’s bragging,” Joan said.

As they watched, the huntress made one final dive, neatly catching her kill before it hit the water. She took the carcass to the shore, where she proceeded to eat it in full view of all the other birds.

“Well,” Mark noted. “You don’t see that every day.”

“No, indeed,” Preston said. “Mark, show Joan how to tell male and female Falcons apart while we drive back to the island. I hope this restaurant is as good as it was the last time I was there.”

24. A Dragon in the Village

When Mark returned from washing up, he found Joan and Preston engaged in a lively argument.

“I tell you, that man at the third table over there was in Rockport,” Preston insisted.

“So what? Maybe he’s a birder.”

“No, no. I swear he was our waiter that night in Charlotte’s.”

“How is that possible? How could anyone know that we’d be there?”

“That’s simple,” Mark interrupted. “Preston told them.”

“What?” Joan asked.

“It’s all in his book. We’ve been following the plan he laid out in *Birding the Texas Coast*. He mentions Charlotte’s specifically in the recommendations for places to eat.”

“Damn! You’re right, Owl. What a stupid mistake. They could have been shadowing us for the whole trip.”

“It’s not quite that easy. They might have assumed we’d start on the Upper Coast near Houston. Still, all they had to do was stake out obvious places and see if we showed up. Now that you mention it, I think the man eating with your putative waiter was on the Whooping Crane boat.”

Preston turned carefully to check out Mark’s assertion. “Yes, it’s possible. He might have been the one with the camouflage hat and the cheap binoculars.”

“That’s the one I had in mind. So what do we do about it?”

“Nothing we can do now. However, we have to consider changing our methods. Maybe we should switch to camping out.”

“That would help our cash flow,” Joan noted. “We are running out of money. We have about two days before we need to come up with some more. That will be like sending up a flare.”

“Preston,” Mark said, “is it OK to ask if you still think your plan is working. I am ready to admit that I don’t like the notion of people following me. It casts everything in a different light.”

Preston took a sip of iced tea. “I think things will come to a head soon. Act natural. We’ll give these guys the shake when we leave. I know some ways through town that they aren’t likely to be familiar with. Meanwhile, Simon said I should tell you about Becky. Now seems a good time.” He paused to let the waiter deposit gargantuan plates of seafood on the table.

After Becky and I parted in Michigan, I didn’t see her for over a year. The next time was in New York, in 1971. Simon sent me to her.

Simon summoned me to his office in early February. I feared that he was going to pull the plug on EcoTours, which had hit a dry spell. I went to his office with great trepidation, sure that my brief fling with independence was about to end. Could I return to business school? What would my own father say, besides, "I told you so?"

Simon sensed this when I came in. "Don't worry," he said immediately. "I'm not going to dissolve our partnership. I told you to expect losses for the first several years and not to worry about it. I meant it. You have a good idea, Preston. Don't give up on it."

The relief must have shown on my face as I collapsed into a chair. Simon laughed. You remember that cheerful way he had of laughing, especially when something went wrong. I can still hear it when I think of him. He laughed like that when I told him of my disastrous first trip to Brazil.

I wondered what he wanted with me if not to upbraid me for lack of marketing or accounting skills. First, we went through his little coffee ritual. "We have some excellent brew today: Kona, medium dark roast." I agreed with alacrity. We waited while he summoned Mary Lynn. Then we engaged in mindless small talk until she brought the coffee and left us alone again.

"I want you to do me a favor," he said simply, sipping his coffee. "You can refuse if you wish."

"Simon," I replied, "how could I refuse you? What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to go to New York... And to deliver a package."

"New York. Please don't throw me into that briar patch."

"Good," he laughed. "I was hoping you were ready for another visit. When does she leave for wherever it is?"

"Africa. She'll be gone for at least six months, maybe longer." We were talking about the Vireo, of course. Rae Ellen had just gotten her first big break: a contract with *National Geo* to guide a crew into Africa.

Simon nodded. I suspect he already knew the answer, which is why he didn't mind asking me to go to New York for him. Later, I realized that Grace knew everything and everyone. She must have told him. All he said to me was, "I'll pick up expenses, including a per diem for the city. Is that acceptable?"

"Of course. What about the package?"

He produced a beautifully gift-wrapped package, silver paper with a white ribbon, a discreet Nieman-Marcus label in the corner. "It's for Becky. I need you to meet her and give it to her personally."

I must have scowled. He leaned back in his chair, looking up at the ceiling.

"It's a gift. Money. Quite a bit of money." He didn't remove his eyes from the ceiling. It was as if he didn't want to see my initial reaction, but wanted me to have time to consider the task, sure I would agree.

"Becky's still on the run, I take it."

"And will be for some time. Circumspection is the watchword."

“I see. What about me? Will I be in danger?”

“Surely not! She would never let harm come to you. She’s spoken of you several times.” He looked me straight in the eye. He had a practiced way of looking at you when he was negotiating ? he was always negotiating. His eyes were soft brown, warm, but when he turned and looked straight at you, they seemed to be boring right into your brain. All warmth disappeared. His eyes said, “Don’t mess with me.”

“She told me all about the two of you. She tells me everything.”

The next day I flew to New York, the gift in my luggage.

My instructions were succinct. I was to go to Victor Charlie’s Café in the East Village and order coffee at exactly 8:00 in the morning. Someone would contact me. If no one showed up by 9:00, I should try again the next day.

I met Rae Ellen on the second day of my vigil, with no sign of Becky the first two mornings. Rae and I had lunch at some incredibly expensive place on the Upper West Side. Fortunately, Simon’s largesse covered it.

The Vireo and I discussed all sorts of things. We talked about the Amazon, our time there together, and how our idyll ended so abruptly. As I remembered it, she just got up one morning and announced that she had the material she needed for her thesis and was going home. She remembered it differently: that she’d talked about leaving for months and had delayed to humor me. I didn’t want to leave, having gone thoroughly native, but without her grant money I had no income. After she left, I tried guiding tourists. That didn’t work. After a couple more months of poverty, I followed the Vireo back to New York.

In New York, I found out she had become a minor celebrity. Discovered on the Cornell late night talk show, she got a job as “nature commentator” for ABC. Whenever the network needed someone with good credentials—and good looks—they called her up.

I felt pleased about her success and more than slightly envious. She looked even better than I remembered, decked out in fancy jodhpurs and photographer’s vest. She was young, famous, good-looking, embarking on a trip for the most renowned group of explorers in the world. I was struggling to get started in a field that didn’t even exist. Several people in the restaurant pointed her out to their companions, no doubt wondering who accompanied the famous Rae Ellen Vacek.

Naturally, she wanted to know why I was in town. I told her. Looking back, I wonder how I could have been so naïve. She didn’t say anything, of course, at least not immediately. She wanted to know everything about Becky, though. How had we met? How many times had I slept with her? I thought it was simply natural curiosity. I reveled in the knowledge that I had made her jealous.

I didn’t realize what a fool I was until later.

I returned to Victor Charlie’s the next morning and ordered coffee. A different waitress brought my order. I scanned the crowd, wondering who was going to contact me, only dimly aware of a woman standing next to me, putting coffee down in front of me. “Do you have something for me?”

I looked up startled. “Hello, love,” Becky said smiling. She sat down at the table. “I have a surprise for you.” She signaled to someone in the back. He came forward, leading a small child about two years old by the hand. Becky lifted the child up into her lap, a beautiful girl, though perhaps a bit thin, with golden hair framing lovely deep blue eyes full of interest in the world around her. I began counting back, estimating the date of conception. Before I worked it out, Becky said, “She’s not yours.”

“Are you sure?” I had done the arithmetic by then. The child might have been mine.

“She’s Simon’s. His and mine.”

“You’re sure?”

“A woman knows these things.”

“Does Simon know?”

“He knows what he knows.”

“Then you don’t know for sure.”

“I’m sure.”

“When did this happen?”

“Isn’t she beautiful?”

“Maybe even more so than her mother. No, I retract that.” Becky had been about to object, but she relaxed. She was quite vain about her looks, which didn’t really fit with her revolutionary outlook on life.

“Do you have my present?”

“Here.” I handed her the package. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Support six people. We’re working on a project. Things are going to get very interesting.” I wanted to know more, but that was all she would say.

I had lunch with Rae Ellen again the following day. Instead of a big splurge, we bought hot dogs from a street vendor and ate on a bench in Central Park. I could see she was upset about something. “I think I’ve done something bad,” she said reluctantly.

“How bad?” I asked, not really expecting much of an answer.

“I told someone about Becky Bell.”

“Who did you tell? What did you tell them?”

“I can’t mention his name, but he’s a big honcho in the News Department at the network. I thought it would help my career.”

She paused to take a bite of hot dog, wiped a bit of mustard off her mouth with the napkin, took a swallow of her drink. I knew what she was doing and said, “Rae, that’s displacement feeding. What aren’t you telling me?”

The Vireo continued her performance for several more seconds before gathering her courage enough to continue the narrative, “Big Honcho demanded to know everything. I

told him about Becky Bell, who you were, how you knew her. He got all excited. I made him promise not to do anything that would endanger you. He said he would wait until you completed your task. However, he said he would have to put someone on the story. It's too good to pass up."

"Oh my God. That means ?"

"Preston, love, please understand. I didn't mean ?"

"I've got to run." I raced for the subway.

I spent the rest of the day in a fruitless search for Becky. I asked everyone at VC's Café about her. Everyone knew who she was ? she was famous ? but no one admitted knowing her. I even took to asking people on the street, "Have you seen a girl, twenty-something, with a child about two..." Nothing worked. At least if I couldn't track her down, I rationalized that no one else could either. I tried not to remind myself that I was a birder, not a trained reporter.

I went back to my hotel and slept fitfully. The next morning, I returned to the café to try my luck again. I arrived at 8:00 and took a seat with a view of the street. By now, the staff recognized me as a regular, and my coffee came without my having to order it. I sat there, discouraged, trying to energize myself for another day of searching.

She materialized beside me. I still have no idea where she had been hiding. "I hear you've been looking for me," she said.

"Becky! Thank God."

"Don't bother to thank Her. She didn't have anything to do with it! And please don't shout my name. It tends to attract attention."

"Becky, I have to warn you. I've done something very foolish. I told someone you were in town."

"Your friend? The one you call the *Red-eyed Vireo*?" She looked at me with a grin.

"Just showing off," she said. "My friends didn't believe you were as innocent as you appeared. They followed you. When they described Rae Ellen, I told them the rest of the story, or at least as much as Simon told me."

"It was Rae Ellen that I told, but ?"

"Don't worry, then."

"But she told someone else, a news executive at the network. He's going to put a reporter on the story."

"A reporter? What kind?"

"How the hell should I know!"

"Think he wants an interview? My life story? On TV?"

I hadn't counted on Becky's reaction. "Well, he works for a TV network," I admitted.

"Well, I think we can give him a good story. Think I should get my hair cut?"

“Becky, don’t be ridiculous. He could lead the cops right to you.”

“I’ll take the chance. Set up a meet. Here. Tomorrow.”

“Becky, please. Wait!”

She was gone.

With considerable misgivings, I did as she asked. I called Rae Ellen and arranged to meet with the reporter at Victor Charlie’s in the morning. I spent a second night without sleep, sensing disaster but lacking the will to stop it.

I was at Charlie’s at 8:00. Rae Ellen and a young man arrived shortly afterward. He was fairly tall, maybe six feet, otherwise about average size, wearing what I took to be his working uniform, jeans and a blue work shirt. He carried a heavy satchel on a strap over his shoulder.

“This is Chase,” Rae said. “He’s just out of journalism school at Columbia. He’s met Becky before.”

We waited. After about an hour, the waitress appeared. I had a phone call. A voice I didn’t recognize said, “Go to Grand Central. There’s a bank of pay phones near the big clock. I’ll call you on the middle one in 45 minutes.” I returned to the table. “The game is afoot,” I said melodramatically. Rae Ellen gave me a quick kiss. “I’ve got to get back,” she said, leaving me with Chase.

We found the bank of phones at Grand Central. The middle one stood vacant. Chase sat in the booth and waited, while I stood out front pretending to be queuing up. He held the phone to his ear but kept his finger on the hook. In spite of his apparent youth, the reporter was obviously more experienced than I at this game. We’d been there about five minutes when the phone rang. Chase listened, then said, “Got it,” and hung up.

“More running around, I’m afraid,” he said. He headed off toward the Lexington Avenue line, with me in pursuit. We took the subway to Bleecker Street, where we got off and walked down Bowery. It was not a good part of town, and I felt more than a bit nervous. My companion seemed to be right at home. When a drunk bumped into him, he pushed him away, then smiled. We walked on a bit more. Then Chase stopped and opened a piece of paper in his hand. I looked over his shoulder and read, “199 Chrystie Street, Tomorrow, 3:00 p.m.”

“Shit! All that for nothing. See you tomorrow if you’re interested, man.” He left me, heading back for the subway.

Chrystie Street had probably once been fashionable and maybe would be again some day. In 1971, it was rundown and seedy. I stood in the doorway of 199 with my back to the wall, scanning the street nervously. No one appeared. I wondered where Chase was. At about 3:30, the drunk from yesterday showed up. “Where’s the other guy?”

“Right behind you,” Chase said. “Are we through playing games?”

We were. Our newest friend took the two of us around the corner to Freeman Street, a one-block cul-de-sac. Rebecca was waiting in front of a building near the end of the street. She handed me her daughter. “Her name is Joan. Take care of her while we talk.” Turning to Chase, she said, “You traitor, you left the Movement.”

Chase smiled and gave Becky a friendly hug. “I had too many responsibilities. We have to eat. You look great.”

Becky forgot her anger and smiled. She and Chase disappeared into the building.

That started a week of agony for me. Daily, I’d meet Chase at VC’s. Then we’d leave for some location he’d arranged with Becky. There, I’d take Joan while Becky and her Boswell disappeared for hours. I liked Joan, and enjoyed time with her. I took her to the Zoo, to the Natural History Museum, to other places where you could go with a child and not draw attention. Meanwhile, Becky and Chase seemed to become more than reporter and subject. I didn’t like the way he looked at her, and the way she started fixing her hair and wearing dresses.

After a week, I was fed up enough to complain. “How much longer is this going to take? I do have other things to do, you know.”

“Chase wants to meet the others in the group. We’re going to go down there today. He’s arranged for a TV crew. Isn’t that cool?”

“Yeah. Great.” I thought it sounded extremely foolish.

I took Joan’s hand and started to walk with her. She didn’t want to leave her mother’s side and began to cry. I gave her a brief tug on her hand and she replied with a loud wail. That’s when I noticed a bandage on her hand.

“What’s this sweetheart? Do you have a hurt?” She relaxed her hand enough for me to look at it. I could feel heat when I touched her finger. Red streaks on the back of her hand told me this was no ordinary wound. I removed the bandage and almost threw up. The tip of her finger was black, badly infected, in need of immediate care.

“Becky!” I shouted loudly as she’d walked quite a distance away. Several people turned to look at me.

“I asked you not to call my name out like that.”

“What do you mean letting this child’s wound go untreated? What kind of a mother are you?”

She was surprised at my attack. It took her a few seconds to regroup. “It’s nothing serious. She cut it on something.”

“Not serious! Look at it! This child needs to see a doctor.”

“Preston,” she began, “I can’t ?”

“Then I will,” I said, turning to go.

The child, Joan, began bawling. I calmed her as best I could and kept walking, expecting Becky to call me to stop, but instead she turned and went back to Chase. I heard laughter. I picked up the child, barely managing to control my anger and turned to look back. Becky waved cheerily to me as she descended into the subway.

Joan wriggled a lot, and I had to put her down. “It’s OK, sweetheart. Preston’s going to take care of you.” She couldn’t understand me, of course, but I think she appreciated that I meant well at least. She stopped crying and let me pick her up again.

I called a birding friend, a resident at a local hospital. You know, Mark, the one who attended to Becky in my apartment. My buddy sent me to a free clinic where he worked part time. I waited hours before he could see me. When the clinic discovered I had money for a *donation* the service improved. My friend, more of an acquaintance really, cleaned the wound, bandaged it professionally and gave me a prescription for antibiotics. “It’s a good thing you brought her in,” he told me. “That’s a serious wound. We need to see her again. There’s a chance we may have to take off the tip of the finger.”

By the time I got out of the clinic, the sky had grown dark and the weather had turned cold. Neither Joan nor I had dressed appropriately. I rushed down into the warmth of the subway and began the long journey to the Village while Joan slept on my lap. I arrived at Freeman Street about five o’clock.

I went up to the third floor and banged on the door. It opened a crack and an eye stared out at me. “I brought Becky’s baby back.”

“Becky? No one here by that name, ofay.”

I didn’t know what *ofay* meant, but it didn’t sound polite.

I left in confusion. Unable to come up with a better plan, I huddled in the doorway, waiting and hoping that Becky would appear. Joan had waked up, of course, and began to fret. I’d reached my wit’s end — though it had been only about ten minutes — when Becky and Chase appeared at the door. They were laughing and holding hands. When Becky saw me, they stopped and we all just looked at each other for a bit. “Preston...” she began.

“Don’t say anything, Rebecca. Please.”

“Preston, please. This isn’t what you think. I need to run upstairs for just a tick. Take care of her just a few minutes longer, will you?” She turned to Chase, kissing him quickly on the lips, a brief peck meant for an old friend. “I’ll be right back. I have to check on something.” She pushed past me and ran up the stairs.

I glared at Becky’s latest paramour. He said, “This is real journalism. It’ll be worth all the trouble, you’ll see.”

Barely able to contain my fury, I stomped out of the building. I felt used, betrayed. I’d forgotten how cold it was. The air whistling down the concrete canyon sliced through my clothing. Joan wriggled in my arm, trying to burrow into the warmth of my jacket. I started hurrying away from the building, barely looking where I was going. A voice called, “Watch it, fella!”

I looked up to see a squad of New York’s Finest walking purposefully toward me, four abreast. I wanted to call, to warn Becky, but something, jealousy, indignation, I don’t know, something stopped me. A small boy darted past me and up into the building. I heard him yelling, “Cops!”

The third floor window was thrown open and a small black man leaned out to get a good look. I think it was Mustapha, one of the regulars in Becky's group. He quickly disappeared back inside the room. The cops started running. I saw Becky at the window. She looked down at me and waved.

I turned around and started walking away, with Joan still in my arms.

A tongue of flame erupted from the window, followed by a huge blast. The entire front of the building simply collapsed. Fire seemed to be everywhere. I turned back and began running for the building. Hands grabbed me. "Don't even think about it, fella. It's suicide." The hands pulled me back as the cops rushed past me.

"So that's how you recognized Joan!" Mark said. "You saw the missing fingertip."

"Well," Preston said, "I also knew her name. I more or less inherited Joan. Simon flew to New York immediately and took charge, arranging better medical treatment for Joan for one thing, tracking down her grandfather, Becky Bell's father, Professor G. W. Santoro, at Yale. It fell to me, though, to deliver Joan to New Haven. She cried when we parted. She'd become attached to me, I think."

"Bellini was my grandmother's maiden name," Joan explained, as if that were the only item in the tale requiring an explanation.

"So, when you saw Joan again..." Mark prompted. There was more to this story.

"Well, I was sure she was central to the drama. I was even more convinced than ever of Simon's murder. When I heard about the will, and Joan's being appointed to run Magus, I was positive. What better motive than control of Magus? It's worth billions, isn't it?"

"So, the new will..."

"Was to include me," Joan said simply. "I told him that I didn't want it, but he wouldn't listen. I pointed out that he couldn't be sure I was his daughter. I said he was going to complicate the estate and make the lawyers rich. Simon could be very stubborn, though."

Mark looked down at the floor. "I guess I always knew about Rebecca, but I didn't want to think about it. I was very young. She probably thought ? "

"That you were only a *boy*," Joan completed the sentence for him. "First loves can be difficult. I was even younger than you, only fourteen. I had a terrible crush on a senior in one of my grandfather's classes. He didn't die in a bomb explosion, though." She reached over and stroked Mark's arm with sisterly affection, while Preston signaled the waiter to give Joan the check.

April 29, 1998
Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park

No visit to the Valley is complete without a stop at this well-known Valley landmark near Mission, Texas. If at all possible, you should plan to camp overnight there to experience the thrill of hearing Common Parauques calling at dusk in the campground. Their loud calls, said to resemble the name, have a ghostly quality, especially as you are far more likely to hear than see the bird. Your best chance of catching a view is to wait quietly in the picnic area until you hear the calls, then try to shine a spotlight on them.

The park is home to almost 300 species of birds, including many of the Valley specialties. Moreover, you may be lucky enough to encounter one of the rarities that occasionally wander over the border from Mexico. Whenever one of these is spotted, birders descend on the area, renting every available car at Harlingen airport within hours of a Rare Bird Alert appearing on the Internet.

The sudden influx of people can strain facilities in the park. This may prove annoying to those of us who come to relax and steep ourselves in this small area of the valley that still looks as it used to years ago. The park is a place where White-fronted Doves call at dawn, a sound like blowing across the top of a bottle; Olive Sparrows skulk in the undergrowth rewarding birders quiet and persistent enough to track them down; and Buff-bellied Hummingbirds feed on abundant flowers.

Suitable accommodations near the park are usually full during peak season. We suggest...¹

¹ Preston Salomon, *Birding the Rio Grande Valley of Texas*, p. 22, Copyright 1994, EcoTours Press, Houston, TX. Used with permission.

25. The Owl from the Styx

The temperature in Bentsen State Park hovered near ninety in mid-afternoon, which suggested relaxing rather than birding. Each member of the trio engaged in a favorite activity: Preston cut vegetables for a stir-fry he planned for the evening meal. Mark worked on his laptop, headphones in place to drown out the noise of air-conditioners running in the mammoth RV's nearby. Joan talked to Mary Lynn, getting a rundown on the latest news from Magus on the public phone by the restroom, which Mark said was safer than using a cell phone.

Mark pulled off his earphones and closed the laptop. "Well, if this letter's a forgery, it's a damn good one. I can't find anything wrong with it. The time of receipt in my mailbox was 21:53 on the night Dad died. He must have been alive some time shortly before that, unless someone else sent the letter for him."

"Interesting. I presume that you're concerned with Simon's mention of the fight with Matthew."

"Exactly. The note appears to exonerate Matthew."

"I agree that it appears that way."

"But you still think Matthew did it."

"If by *did it*, you mean murdered Simon, no I don't think Matthew did it."

"That's news. Who did it, then?"

"Surely that's obvious." Preston put away a chopped up onion into a small Ziploc bag for later. He looked up to see Joan approaching. "Everything OK back at the office?"

"Hmmm? Oh, sure. Mary Lynn's keeping everything on track. I don't know how much longer we can go on this way, though. Sooner or later some crisis will erupt."

"Some would say that it already has," Preston replied.

Joan was lost in thought. "There's something Mary Lynn said."

"Important?" Preston asked.

"Maybe, I need to think about it some more."

"Don't delay too long. I'm afraid we're running out of time," Preston said. "We need to wrap this up soon."

"Yes, of course. This is something different. Personal."

"Let's walk around the loop. Maybe we'll spot a Bobcat or something," Mark suggested.

"A Bobcat!" Joan said. "Are they here? I'd love to see that."

"They're all around here, but you don't see them that often," Mark told her. "I saw one in the daylight at Laguna Atascosa once. It was ? "

"I think a walk sounds like a good idea," Preston said. "I'm getting nervous waiting for something to happen. I wish *Selenops* would make a move."

“Maybe you should be careful what you wish for,” Joan cautioned. “Besides, we haven’t exactly been drawing him a roadmap.”

“As Mark pointed out, that’s exactly what we’ve been doing. Surely he can figure out that we’re birding our way through Texas. All he has to do is stake out the likely spots and wait. He’s probably already spotted us. Even though the Valley has many good birding spots, eventually, we’ll connect.”

“Not everyone,” Joan pointed out, “knows about birding spots.”

“He could easily find out, though,” Mark put in. “The information is on the web.”

“Let’s go walking.” Preston picked up the telescope and set off. Mark and Joan followed him.

As they walked through the campground, a young boy about Trevor’s age, ran after them. Unlike Trevor, this boy was lean, tanned and muscular, though with hair as unkempt as Trevor’s. He wore a T-shirt with a rendering of a Great Kiskadee on it, khaki shorts, sneakers, and a cap announcing his support of the Dallas Cowboys. “Wait!” He caught up to them out of breath. “Are you Preston Salomon?”

“Indeed I am, lad. These are my friends Mark and Joan. And who might you be?”

“Jason. Jason Ekblad. I’ve got your book!” He took off a small backpack and drew out *Birdwatching for Small Human Beings*.

“Wonderful!” Preston exclaimed. “Would you like me to autograph it for you?”

“Wow! That’d be great!”

Preston, basking in unaccustomed celebrity, was happy to oblige. “We’re going to walk around the loop and see what we can find. Want to tag along?”

“Wow! Really!”

“Sure, if it’s OK with your parents, that is. Where are they?”

“Be right back.” He ran off, a blur of motion, T-shirt flapping. “Mom! I was right! It was Mr. Salomon.” He returned in about a minute dragging a woman in her late thirties by the hand.

“This is my mom.”

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Ekblad. I’m Preston Salomon. It’s a pleasure to meet such a lovely person in such an unexpected way.” He took her hand and delivered his customary kiss. Mrs. Ekblad, if that was her name, giggled self-consciously.

“Nice to meet you, as well. Jason says you want to take him birdwatching.”

“Birding, Mom,” Jason corrected, with the condescension only the very young can get away with. “Birdwatching’s for little old ladies.”

“We are planning to walk around the loop. We’d be happy to have Jason come with us, if that’s all right. We don’t expect to be long. We’ll certainly be back before supper time.”

“It’s OK, isn’t it Mom?”

It was. The trio, now augmented to a quartet, set off to see what they could find.

The loop road is several miles around. On the back side, farthest from the main road, near the river, they heard jays making a racket. “Are those jays mobbing an owl?” Jason asked.

“Good possibility, lad. We need to check it out.”

Mark explained to Joan. “That noise often means that there’s an owl nearby. The jays try to drive it away.”

“By yelling?”

“Yeah, that’s a good description. We call it *mobbing*. Let’s find the owl.” He started scanning the area along the road. Preston and Jason had gotten a little way ahead of them, but returned quickly when they saw Mark looking into the trees.

“Have you found it yet?”

“Nope, still searching. Seems like it should be in here somewhere.” Jason crept slowly forward, using his small size to an advantage, looking for an opening in the brush. He dropped to all fours and crawled through a hole in the foliage. *There!* He stood up and motioned the other three to come down. They wormed their way into the brush to the spot Jason had picked out.

Jason explained expertly, unconsciously imitating Preston, “See these two trees here in the front. Look through the “Y” on the left one to the tree behind it. The owl is sitting on a branch close to the trunk. What kind of owl is this, Mr. Salomon? I think it’s a lifer!”

Preston had taken one look at the owl and immediately begun setting up the scope, a difficult proposition under the circumstances. When he didn’t answer, Mark turned to look back at him. Preston stood glued to the eyepiece of the scope, totally absorbed. Mark signaled to Joan to be very quiet. They moved back to look through the scope whenever Preston saw fit to relinquish his position.

Preston sensed their presence near him. He stood up, a huge grin on his face. He waved his hand to indicate that they should take a turn at the scope. Jason went first, of course. It was his bird, after all. Mark lifted him up to the level of the eyepiece. Joan was second. She saw a slim, dark owl, with two tufts that looked like ears, a very dark face, and yellow eyes that stared back at her with a baleful glare. *Who dares to disturb my slumber?* She moved away from the scope to let Mark have a turn.

Mark looked through the scope. He fiddled with the focus knob, trying to make the view sharper. “What the hell are you? You look like a long-eared, but your facial disk is the wrong color.” He stood up, turning to Preston, who was still wearing a huge grin. “OK, damnit, tell me what that is, Preston. Is it just a juvenile Long-eared? That doesn’t make any sense. How could they be here at this time of year?”

“Think, Owl. Christmas, 1996.”

“Oh, great. You’re going to make me play games now?”

“It’s a lifer for me,” Preston hinted.

“You’re kidding.”

Jason was thumbing through his guide book, as Joan was with hers. Neither found the bird in the book.

“What kind of owl is it, Mr. Salomon?”

“This is a great find, lad, a marvelous bird. It’s a ? ”

“Stygian Owl,” Mark said. He’d remembered what had happened in Bentsen in December, 1996. “Is this the same spot? There was talk that the owl had been seen there before, in 1994. Some guy saved his photographs and field notes, but he’d misidentified it and so didn’t get credit for the first sighting in Texas.”

“I think they did give him credit, actually. It was a marvelous example of the need for good field notes.”

“What kind of owl?” Jason still wanted to know.

“It’s called a Stygian Owl, *Asio stygius*. It’s normally found only in Mexico and other places in Central and South America, and no one knows much about it.”

“What does Stygian mean?”

“It’s named for the river Styx,” Joan answered, “the river surrounding Hades in Greek Mythology.”

“Cool,” Jason said.

“So what do we do now?” Mark asked.

“What do we do? We turn a rare bird alert, of course. Then we stay right here on this spot. Do you realize what this means?”

“Tell me,” Mark replied warily.

“It means that this is part of the owl’s territory! This is something we must report; we owe it to ornithological science.”

“But Preston ? ”

“I am not moving.”

“Well,” Joan suggested, “maybe we could find a better place for the scope?” She took her own suggestion and moved the scope to the gravel at the side of the road. A crowd was already starting to gather.

Joan was astonished with the arrival of the crowd. “What’s this all about?” she asked one of the newcomers.

“That is Preston Salomon, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes, but…”

“I was right!” he shouted to two of his friends farther up the road.

“Shhh!” Mark hissed. “Don’t scare him away.”

“I recognized Preston Salomon and suggested we trail behind him, just in case he turned up something interesting. When we saw you putting up the scope, well…any bird he thinks worth putting a scope on has got to be good. What ya got?”

“Stygian Owl,” Mark deadpanned.

“A what?”

“It’s a very rare owl. Almost nothing is known about it. We’re not even sure about its range. Want a look?”

“Sure.” A line began to form behind the scope. Several other birders appeared with other scopes. A small forest of tripods grew by the side of the road.

“Call in a rare bird alert, Mark. Please,” Preston requested.

“Uh, Preston. Let’s think about that a bit, OK? We may as well wave a flag and say ‘Here we are!’ It’s too dangerous.”

“But—”

“No buts. You know birds. I know what *Selenops* can do. We can’t take the chance.”

“In that case, we’ll have to stay here again tonight.” Preston had spoken. There was to be no discussion. “Why don’t you run back to the truck and get us some food and water? I’ll hold down the fort here. We’ll leave in the morning early and turn in a report after we get away. How’s that?”

“With all these birders, someone is bound to report it before that. Should I run into Mission and see if they have some good champagne?” Mark asked facetiously, knowing that the chance was slim. Preston seemed to consider it.

“No. I they probably don’t have anything worthy of this. Some cold beer maybe?” Irony was wasted on Preston. Mark left in search of the beer. Jason ran off to report back to his mother. He argued with her for an hour before she agreed to let him call the hotline in Houston and report the rare bird. By that time, the hotline had already received three other reports. Jason’s was different, though, more authoritative. He asserted that none other than Preston Salomon had identified the Stygian Owl. With that cachet, the report went out on the TEXBIRDS e-mail list as an urgent update.

Preston awakened before dawn. Mark and Joan woke to find him gone. “Back to check on the owl, no doubt. Guess we should take him some breakfast.” They busied themselves with some bacon and egg sandwiches. Joan seemed to be quite at home cooking. For some reason, that surprised Mark and he commented on it.

“Cooked for Papa all my life,” she explained. “He was hopeless. Don’t know what he did before I came along. He raised me well, though. Guess I have to give him credit for that.”

Mark started to correct her. Grace and Simon agreed that you *raised* cattle, but *reared* children. He decided to let it pass. Joan deftly flipped the eggs on the griddle, pushed the bacon to one side and put some bread down to toast. In a few minutes, the sandwiches were ready. They set off to find Preston.

“Ah, bless you. I foolishly left without eating anything.” Preston took a bite of the sandwich. “Mmmm. Joan?” he mumbled around the food.

“Yes,” she answered smiling. “I cooked breakfast. I thought you might need a break. You’ve been in charge of the food for so long. Is our friend still here?”

“Moved over a bit to a different tree, but still here. You can make out his silhouette against the sky. See.” He waved his hand in the direction of the trees.

“Ah, yes, very nice.”

Preston finished the sandwich quickly. “You continue to amaze me, my dear. Not only are you the most beautiful woman in the state, you must be smart and organized if Simon wanted you to run Magus. Now we discover that you can cook as well. Marvelous.”

Joan nodded to acknowledge the compliment. Mark looked through the scope at the owl.

A van drove up beside them. Preston said something to the man in the van, and then waved in the general direction of Jason and his find. Mark noticed a broad smile on Preston’s face and realized just how important this event was to him. He could imagine the phones at EcoTours lighting up with anxious birders wanting information about where to find the *rara avis*.

The door of the van slid open. Mark expected to see several birders, the first of the day. Instead, he saw a man holding what appeared to be an assault rifle.

“Get in.” The gunman motioned to the door of the van. “Him too.” He waved in Jason’s direction.

“Leave the boy, please,” Preston begged. “He has nothing to do with this.”

The driver rolled down the window and spoke quickly to his companion in a language no one else recognized. “Jason,” Mark shouted. “Run away!”

It was too late. The driver crossed to Jason in two quick steps, grabbed him by the arm and threw him into the van. Then he motioned to the other three to follow. The door slammed shut and they drove off.

Mark heard something that sounded like “Sorry about this. It’s necessary.” He wondered what the apology was all about. He felt a prick on the back of his neck and quit wondering.

26. End of a Lifetime Warranty

Mark woke up in a hunting cabin somewhere. At least it looked like a hunting cabin, with stuffed heads on the walls, White-tailed Deer mostly, and several back issues of *Guns and Ammo* lying around. Moving gingerly, he surveyed the surroundings. He lay on the floor in a large room. In front of him, he saw a stone fireplace, blackened by years of use, with several comfortable chairs arranged in a semicircle in front. To his left, he saw part of a kitchen, the remainder hidden by a partition. A dining table with eight chairs stood in front of the partition. There was no food evident.

Through a door along the left wall, he could hear sounds of someone retching. He hoped the door led to a bathroom.

On the opposite wall two doors led to small bedrooms equipped with two sets of bunk beds. Light and hot air streamed in through open but barred windows on three sides. Preston stood near one of the windows. The only door, securely closed, lay to Preston's left.

"Jeez. There must have been a better way to handle this," Mark said. His head hurt when he moved it. "What was that stuff?"

"Ah, you're awake."

"Joan?"

"She's up. In the loo with young Jason. He's really scared."

"Surprise, surprise."

Joan emerged from the restroom with Jason in tow. "I've told him everything will be all right, haven't I, Jason?"

Jason said nothing. Joan had washed his face, but the tracks of tears still showed against a background of dirt. His T-shirt needed changing where he'd lost the remains of breakfast.

"I think I have a spare T-shirt," Mark offered, crossing to the wall near the door, where his backpack and binoculars were neatly stacked, as though by a thoughtful concierge. "It'll be a trifle too big, but probably better than what you've got on. What ya say, Jason?"

Jason took off his shirt without uttering a word. Mark drew a size extra large DefCon shirt from his pack and draped it over Jason. "There. If we put a belt around the middle, you can pretend it's a tunic and you're a Viking warrior or something."

Jason clung to Joan's hand.

"What do we do now, Preston?" Joan asked. "This *is* all proceeding according to plan, I trust."

"I certainly don't have a plan that includes this," he replied, waving his arm around the room and pulling on his ear. Joan nodded to show that she understood the room might be bugged.

“I would have preferred something more civilized than the animal tranquilizers, or whatever the devil it was. At least they got the dosage right,” Preston continued. “We’ll have to wait and hope everything will work all right. Patience is often the key to a successful search.”

Preston could be irritating sometimes. Mark returned to his backpack on the floor and started rummaging through it. “My laptop’s missing!”

“The two goons have it.” Preston waved his hand in the general direction of the front door. “They’re not having much luck getting it to work. One of them started to smash it earlier, but the other one stopped him. The guy in the gray suit is not in evidence. Nor is the minivan used to convey us here. I surmise the leader has gone to fetch someone, perhaps *Selenops*, leaving the two gunsels to watch over us.”

“They probably triggered the *safe mode* on the laptop. I need to supply a password to get it to work again. Glad they didn’t smash the computer. We’ll need it to be working if...” he hesitated, “if we’re going to retrieve my father’s message.” Preston smiled and nodded cautiously.

“Well, that is one minor snag, but I’m sure we’ll get it back in time.”

“Where the hell are we anyway?”

“Good question. Jason, think you could help us figure out where we are? Come over here.”

Mark, Joan and Jason joined Preston at the window. They looked out at a rocky area shaded by several large oaks, with some hills in the background. Sparse grass and small bushes covered the middle distance, with a grove of larger trees visible in the distance.

“They left us our binocs, strangely enough,” Preston said. “Probably didn’t realize what they were worth.” He held up his own, setting of a scramble while everyone else located a pair. “Now,” Preston said, “Jason come here in the front. What kind of trees are those?”

Jason stared listlessly through his binoculars. “I don’t know about trees.”

Mark looked at the trees. “This close one is a Live Oak. The ones in the distance look like some other kind of oaks. At least two different kinds, not counting the Live Oaks.”

“Good. Unless I’m losing my touch, we have Live Oak, Lacey Oak, and Spanish Oak. Then see those shrubs, Jason? The one with yellow flowers is *Agarita* for sure. I think that’s *Mountain Laurel* over there, with the lavender flowers. They smell like *Kool-Aid*. Now let’s check out the birds. What can you see and hear?”

Mark understood Preston’s method. “That’s a Common Raven flying. Mockingbird singing. Bewick’s Wren. Some kind of Vireo. Bell’s?”

“Right, Bell’s Vireo. How about you, Jason? What can you identify?”

“Turkey Vulture,” Jason said. At least he was talking.

“Can you hear anything else, Mark?” Preston asked quietly.

Mark stepped closer to the window and listened carefully. “You mean besides the two goons talking?”

“Can you hear what they’re saying?”

“No, but...I swear that’s the same language I heard in Guatemala! These guys may be the gunmen from Sierra de las Minas. Damn! That means...”

“Yes,” Preston said, “that means the attack in Guatemala was aimed at you. I’ve thought that for some time, but I didn’t want to alarm you unnecessarily.”

“It makes sense. After Dad’s murder, if I were to die at the same time, then Matthew and Mother would control Magus. Matthew would be running the show.”

Joan perked up. “What’s that all about? Simon’s murder? How’s that connected to Guatemala?”

“What does it matter what birds you can see?” Jason demanded.

Mark gave Joan a quick report on Guatemala, then explained to Jason, “We should be able to figure out where we are if we can identify enough birds and plants. It’s like those Venn diagrams you drew in school. Do you know what they are?”

“Those circles in different colors?”

“Yeah, I think we’re talking about the same thing. We can draw ranges for all the birds we can see, then look to see where the ranges intersect.”

“Oh, I get it. So where are we, Mr. Salomon?”

“Wait. Oh, that nails it. Preston can you hear that?” Mark asked.

“No. What was it?”

“Golden-cheek.”

“What?” Joan asked.

“Golden-cheeked Warbler,” Jason answered, looking at Joan in a way that showed she’d dropped a few notches in Jason’s estimation. Joan pulled out the field guide and looked up Golden-cheeked Warbler.

“That would be another lifer.”

“Well, duh...” Jason commented. Joan’s stock was definitely declining.

“What about the Common Raven?” Mark asked. “Isn’t that a lifer as well?”

“That, too, I guess. Lots of lifers here. So where are we?”

“The western edge of the Edwards Plateau,” Preston said. “I saw a Gray Vireo flying earlier. That really narrows the possibilities. I think probably we’re somewhere in Edwards County. In short, only a few minutes from Leakey, as the Raven flies.” He chuckled at his own joke.

“I thought this place looked familiar,” Mark said. “This is the *Widder Smith Guesthouse*. It belongs to a friend of Mother’s. Matthew hunts here every year. We *are* close to Leakey, though at least an hour away by road. If we only had wings...” Mark said.

“Undoubtedly this is all Matthew’s doing,” Preston mused.

Joan listened carefully at the window. “That’s interesting. I don’t recognize the language those men are using, and I know a smattering of several languages. It’s not Russian, that’s for sure.”

“Really?” Preston said. “What else can we eliminate?”

“Well, it’s not Spanish or French,” Mark suggested.

“Some of the words sound vaguely like Greek,” Joan suggested, “but I don’t think it’s Greek. Maybe a Balkan language?”

“Interesting,” Preston admitted. “Can you figure out anything about what they’re talking about?”

“I picked up a few words that sounded like English,” Mark put in. “They were mostly computer terms. I heard *re-boot* for sure, and maybe something that could be *battery*. They probably ran down the battery trying to get the machine to respond. Shit. That means...”

Joan looked up, incipient concern showing in her eyes. “That means that the laptop hasn’t been...hasn’t been working.”

“Afraid you’re right,” Mark said. “Wonder how long it’s been off the air? We need to get the laptop and plug it in. I have the recharger right here.” He pulled a small black box from his backpack.

“What are we going to do?” Joan asked.

“Damned if I know,” Preston admitted. “We’ll have to just wait and see what happens.”

The sun dipped below the tops of the nearby hills before anything happened.

They had read all the *Guns and Ammo* magazines, mainly advertisements and rabid pro-gun pieces, passing issues back and forth. Mark had found a magazine *Advanced White-tailed Deer Hunting* under a couch and was halfway through it. Every so often, he would shake his head in amazement. “I had no idea that hunting White-tails was so involved. I mean, herds of them run around Austin. You could get all you wanted by sitting on the side of the road in Westlake. These guys are climbing up in trees and waiting for hours.”

“You’d be willing to do that for a bird, wouldn’t you?” Preston asked.

“Maybe something like a Harpy Eagle.”

“Well, it’s the same thing for hunters.”

“Except for the guns part,” Joan said.

Mark stood up suddenly. “I think I hear something. Yes, definitely a car coming.” He walked to the window and squinted unsuccessfully into the twilight, looking for a car. A few minutes later, a familiar-looking maroon minivan pulled up and Matthew got out with the guy in the gray suit, who spoke briefly to the guards. Then he and Matthew walked up to the front door. The two guards opened the back of the van and took out a large box, which they carried into the cabin.

“It’s Matthew,” Mark said.

“Interesting,” Preston said. “Maybe that’s what we’ve been waiting for.”

The door swung open and Matthew walked in. “What the hell!” He looked like a caricature of himself, eyes staring wide, mouth open. “What are y’all doing here?” He turned to ask Gray Suit, “I thought you said this was going to be a shoot for one of the movies. What are *they* doing here?”

“Move, you idiot!” Matthew lurched into the room, followed by Gray Suit. Mark got a good look at leader of their kidnapers for the first time. Shorter than Matthew, perhaps 5’ 9” or so, thirty pounds overweight, he had fairly long brown hair gathered into a short pony tail, and soft, doughy features. He wore wire rim glasses and the rumpled gray suit that set him off from the other two thugs. The suit hadn’t been very good to begin with and was now decidedly threadbare. Mark remembered that his mother hated gray suits. “They always make you look half dead.”

Their newest acquaintance got right to the point. “You three have caused me a lot of trouble, I hope you realize that. I hope that our future dealings will be smoother.” As he was talking, the two goons unpacked a large crate, removing a computer monitor, keyboard and game control. They spooled a long power cord and plugged it into an outlet near the kitchen.

“What the fuck is going on? Who’s the brat?” Matthew asked.

Preston answered. “A colleague whom your thugs stupidly kidnapped along with us. Where did you find these guys anyway? And the lad is no brat. He’s an intelligent and polite young man.”

“My thugs? Kidnapping?”

“Who’s your friend, Matthew? Is this the mysterious *Selenops*?” Preston asked. Apparently, it was Matthew’s day to be ignored.

Gray Suit nodded slightly and said, “*Selenops*? Who’s that? You may call me Radoslav. I think we can dispense with formal introductions. I know about all of you. At the moment, our first priority is to return the laptop to full functionality. Would you take care of that, please?” He handed the laptop to Mark.

“Piece of cake,” Mark said. “Did you have some hacking you needed done?”

“Do you have some desire to endure physical pain? It can be arranged if you forget your manners.”

“I’ll pass on that, I think.”

“I suspected as much.” His English was good, even colloquial, but Mark could hear a trace of an accent. Maybe it *was* Balkan. If so, it was overlain with an accent derived from watching American TV, especially the news channels.

Mark plugged the charger into a power outlet and the back of the computer. Some reassuring beeps came from the machine. Mark opened the cover. The screen saver asked for a password. He typed in a password.

“That was quick. What was the problem?” Radoslav wanted to know.

Mark looked up at him, surprise showing on his face. “Battery was run down.” No point in telling him everything.

The ease with which Mark got the laptop working occasioned some quick patter in a foreign language between the two guards. One of them slapped the other on the shoulder and laughed. They both went back outside.

“And what was the password you typed in?”

“You want me to just tell you the password?”

In reply, Radoslav pulled a hefty automatic pistol from inside his coat and pointed it at Mark. “Do not irritate me.”

“As you wish.” Mark shrugged, fiddled with the laptop a bit, then turned it around so it was visible. It displayed the phrase “Squeamish Ossifrage” in large letters scrolling across the screen.

“What the fuck is an *ossifrage*?”

Preston piped up. “It’s another name for a Lammergeier, *Gypaetus barbatus*, also known as the Bearded Vulture. A fascinating bird, it ranges from the mountainous regions of southern Europe to China. It collects bones and drops them from a great height onto rocks. Then it eats the marrow from them, hence the name *ossifrage*, bone-breaker.”

“Isn’t there an isolated population in Lesotho as well?” Mark added.

“Indeed there is! Very good, Owl. I wasn’t going to mention that.”

“The phrase was the secret code in one of the RSA challenges. They used it to prove that current encryption systems aren’t adequate.”

“Shut up, you two. Who asked you anyway?” Radoslav demanded of Preston.

“Well, you did, actually, remember?”

Radoslav waved his gun around and growled, “I shall return shortly. This laptop better have the software on it, or I’m going to be noticeably upset.” He left, taking the laptop with him. They watched through the window. He spoke to the two men, waving at the cabin, probably giving instructions. Then he drove off in the minivan.

Preston looked at Mark, his face asked the question, “Long enough?” Mark shook his head.

“Where did you find this prize, Matthew?” Mark asked. “He isn’t the type you usually run with. I thought you favored cheap women in tight dresses.”

“Get fucked.”

“We seem to have some time on our hands,” Preston observed. “Perhaps you could enlighten us, Matthew. What software does he expect to find on Mark’s computer?”

“Damned if I know! I owe these bastards some money. I agreed to provide them some services, namely getting them a place to shoot porno movies. I thought this would be ideal. I mean, you even have the animal heads to work with.” The rest realized that Matthew knew more about porno movies than the average person.

Matthew continued, “I...uh...ran into a streak of bad luck in Vegas. Some helpful people in Vegas put me in touch with this bunch, said they could help me out. Great help! They financed a deal to create a bunch of online adult entertainment sites. We were all set to go live,

when the web-hosting center burned down. Now, they want their money. I tried getting it from Dad. I could hardly ask Mom for it. I think these guys are Serbian,” he concluded.

“Matthew,” Preston said, shaking his head, “it’s all a setup. They scammed you. All this could have been avoided, everything, the attack on Magus, your father’s murder...”

Matthew hung his head. Then, gathering himself together, he looked up at Preston and said defiantly, “Murder? He died of a heart attack.”

“True,” Preston agreed.

“Now you’ve lost me completely. What are you talking about? Is *she* behind it?” Matthew nodded in Joan’s direction, his face contorted.

“Give it a rest, Matthew,” Joan said. “I didn’t cause your trouble. I never told you to get involved with these thugs.”

Before Matthew could think of anything clever to respond, Radoslav returned. He was putting away a cell phone. “I fail to appreciate the charms of these rustic accommodations, Matthew. Goddamn cell phone doesn’t work. I had to drive to the top of the hill before I could connect.” He turned to Mark, “Unfortunately, we’re going to have to take the laptop with us. My colleague will need to examine it closely. I was not able to locate the information immediately.” He looked at Matthew. “I hope, for your sake, that my associate will have better luck.”

“Shit,” Mark said.

“I thought you would be more understanding,” Radoslav said. The gun came out again.

“Get the master password, you idiot.”

“Who said that?” Several voices shouted at once.

“I did,” said a mechanical voice from inside the large box.

“Ah,” Preston said. “I was wondering when you’d make an appearance. *Selenops*, I presume.”

“Not the real one. I am what Mark would call a *bot*. A software agent. Now, we really must have the master password,” the machine repeated its demand.

“You heard,” Radoslav said. “The password, please, and while you’re at it, disable *all* the passwords.”

Mark plugged in the laptop and started typing. “Wait a minute,” Radoslav said. “I’ll do the typing. You tell me what to type.” He took the machine away from Mark.

“Suit yourself. Click on the key icon, bottom left of the screen.” He waited for what seemed an hour while Radoslav managed to move the cursor over the key and clicked. “Now, click on the first name in the list.” Radoslav struggled some more, but grew frustrated. “I’ve changed my mind. You type while I watch you.”

Joan picked up her purse and started for the restroom. “Where do you think you’re going, my dear?” He waved the gun toward a chair. “Sit down.” Turning suddenly, he caught Mark typing something. “Touch one more key, and those ugly black birds out there will get a nice meal. Understand!”

Jason started crying.

“Oh, for Chrissake. Get the kid to shut up. No one’s going to hurt *him*.”

Jason wept louder.

“You’re frightening the boy,” Preston complained. “He has nothing to do with this.”

Joan got up and whispered something to Radoslav while he was distracted. He looked at her. “OK, but be quick about it.” Joan disappeared into the restroom. Jason kept on crying.

“Let’s get this over with,” Radoslav said. “I need to leave. If you would be so kind, would you deactivate the passwords, and don’t do anything foolish.”

Deciding the situation called for prudence, Mark typed for a few minutes, then said, “OK. I think that’s all of them.”

Radoslav raised his voice and called to the men outside. They came in, took Mark’s laptop—being careful to get the charger this time—and left.

Radoslav stood up to go, but the voice in the box had some additional instructions. “Just a minute, Radoslav. Please push the large red button before you leave.” Radoslav walked over to the box and complied.

Everyone heard the sound of the door being locked from the outside.

Radoslav jumped up. “What the fuck!” That was followed by a string of invective in a language that might have been Serbian. He tried the door, but found it securely fastened. Running to the window, he screamed something loud and ugly after the departing thugs.

A computer generated voice issued from a speaker in the crate. “Please come closer. See what we have here. Sorry, Radoslav, I forgot to mention that you were to be included in the party games.” Mark thought the gray suit probably needed cleaning after that exchange. Muttering something in his own language, he slumped down on the floor by the door. “We are all dead.”

“Did you activate the emergency program?” Preston asked Mark.

“Didn’t have time,” Mark said. “Plus, I was afraid our friend with the gun would hurt someone.”

“That’s not good,” Preston said.

“It’s OK,” Joan said, coming out of the restroom.

“Let’s get out of here!” Jason suggested. He ran for the window and started yanking on the bars.

“No, no! Naughty, naughty. Mustn’t leave now,” said the voice from the box. Jason stopped. “Besides,” the voice continued, “breaking doors or windows only works in movies.”

“What the hell is this, anyway?” Matthew asked.

“A bomb, of course,” came the reply in the maddeningly monotone voice.

They examined the box. “What’s that pinkish shit?” Matthew asked.

“Well,” Mark countered, “if you’d built the bomb, I’d figure it was *Silly Putty*, but under the circumstances, I think we need to assume it’s some kind of plastic explosive.”

“These round things look like blasting caps,” Preston noted, pointing to some items stuck into the pink stuff. “They seem to be wired up to the computer.”

“Bravo,” the electronic voice informed them. “You figured it out! I have sensors just like those your puerile *Ambianca* program uses. I’ll know if you try to leave. You have thirty minutes to disarm the bomb. Hope you’re good at games.” A timer appeared on the screen reading “30:00,” and, with a beep, started counting down.

“Why can’t we just unplug the damn thing?” Matthew asked, walking over to the wall and yanking the cord out.

The computer appeared to hiccup once, then spoke. “Oh Matthew! That’s so *lame*. Did you think that I wouldn’t be prepared for that? Now, please put the plug back in or I blow up immediately. You have ten seconds...Nine...”

Matthew plugged the computer back in.

“That’s better.”

“Battery backup,” Mark suggested. He tried typing on the keyboard experimentally.

“Shit! Be careful. What are you doing?” Matthew said in a taut voice.

Radoslav walked over to Matthew and slapped him on the head. “You idiot! He’s our best chance of getting out of here alive. Leave him alone.”

“*Selenops* implied there was a game. Here. *Modern Partisan*.” Mark took the game control and began. He lasted about 45 seconds before being surprised by a squad of security guards.

“Let me,” Jason said. “I’ve worked up to level five on this.” He took the control from Mark.

“You have to get to the airfield without—”

“I said I’ve worked up to level five. This is level one, dummy.”

Preston glanced nervously at his watch. The timer on the screen showed 28:17, counting down. He paced back and forth. “How long’s this going to take, Jason?”

“He’s almost there,” Mark replied. “Don’t break his concentration.” Mark was correct. The timer read 22:46 when Jason successfully cut the fence surrounding the airfield. Shortly afterward, the hangar was a mass of flames. The screen displayed a scene of total carnage, with decapitated bodies strewn everywhere.

“Bloodthirsty game,” Joan observed.

“Way to go, Jason!” Mark said. “You’ve saved us all.”

“Congratulations,” said the monotone voice. “Unfortunately for you, that was only the beginning. Now for something completely different.” The screen went blank briefly, to be replaced by the opening sequence from *IPO III*. The timer stayed at 22:46 until the credits had run, then began counting down again.

“Damn! Remember I told you he cheats? Wonder how many games we have to deal with.”

“This is the game Trevor asked you about,” Joan said to Mark. “You must know how to win it.”

“Unfortunately, winning it legitimately will take at least four hours.”

“Do be creative, Owl. We don’t have that much time,” said Preston Salomon, master of the obvious.

“Well, if this is the version from the website, then I planted a secret shortcut in it after I hacked my way in. Let’s see. Wait, I just thought of something.”

“What?” Joan asked.

“Maybe this is all a trap to see if I use the shortcut. That’ll reveal that I know it. Then *Selenops* will know that I am *Pulsatrix*. I’ll give away my identity.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Mark,” Matthew put in, “grow up. We have a bomb to disarm.”

“Courtesy of *your* friends,” Joan snapped back. “However, I have to agree with Matthew. Given the circumstances, I think we have to use the shortcut.”

Mark started typing. A few minutes later, the screen showed a picture of a boardroom. An elderly creature with a warty red head, wearing a morning coat sat at one end of the table guarding a huge pile of money.

“That’s the main vulture capitalist,” Jason observed.

“Correct,” Mark replied. “We have to answer three questions, just like in the *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. They even stole some of the questions from the movie.”

“What is your plan?” asked the monotone voice.

Mark typed in “To defuse the bomb.”

“And what is the capital of Abyssinia?” the voice asked.

“It’s supposed to ask about your favorite color,” Jason pointed out.

“*Selenops* must have changed it,” Mark replied, joining Preston in stating the obvious. “Now, where the hell is Abyssinia?”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Joan said. “It’s an old name for Ethiopia, well Ethiopia and some of the surrounding areas, Eritrea, part of Somalia—”

“I get the picture,” Mark replied curtly. “So what’s the capital?”

“Must be Addis Ababa,” Joan answered, “unless they want some old name for the city.”

Mark typed in “Addis Ababa.”

“Amazing,” said the voice, “I didn’t think you’d know that. Now, what is the airspeed of an unladen swallow?”

“What the hell is that about?” Preston asked. “Swallows can’t carry anything. They have tiny feet. Well, maybe they could carry small insects, but...no, I don’t think so. The question doesn’t make any sense.”

“Never mind, Mr. Salomon,” Jason said, “it’s a joke from the movie. See—” Joan shushed him quickly.

Mark typed in “Would that be an African Swallow or a European Swallow?”

“What the hell do you mean by *African Swallow*? Or *European Swallow* for that matter?” Preston asked.

“Just watch,” Mark said.

“I don’t know that. Arrgh!” The old man dissolved into a hideous pile of purple goo. Mark scooped up the virtual money on the table and shoved it through a virtual slot in the wall. The wall disappeared, revealing an idyllic scene, a pasture with an apple orchard in the background. A book lay on the ground. Mark typed in “pick up book.” The screen showed the cover of the book, with the title *How to Defuse Bombs* clearly visible. Mark typed, “read book.”

The screen showed the first page of the book. It read, “First…” with the rest of the page obscured by dirt.

“Damn!” Mark said. He glanced at the timer. It read “5:23.” He turned to the assembled crowd, “I’m open to suggestions.”

“Clean the book,” suggested Jason.

“With what?” Mark demanded.

“Water?”

“Where am I supposed to get water?”

“Oh, dear,” said the computer’s voice, “did you leave the pitcher of water in the board room? Too bad. You don’t have time to go back for it now. Sorry about that.” A few seconds later they heard a cackling laugh, followed by a new screen.

How to prepare for a bomb blast:

1. Drop trousers.
2. Kiss your sweet ass goodbye.

Then the screen went black, with only the timer showing. It read “5:00.”

“Give me that,” Matthew demanded, snatching the keyboard from Mark’s hand. He started typing randomly. That produced another demonic laugh from the computer. Matthew slammed his hand down on the keyboard, popping off several keycaps.

“Oh, that’s great, Matthew,” Mark said. “You’re a big help.”

That was too much for Matthew. He lunged at his brother, grabbing him by the neck in both hands. “You—,” he snarled. Mark’s face turned bright red. “This is all your fault!”

Radoslav seemed to take an interest in the proceedings, drawing his gun and pointing it at Matthew. “Let him go, you idiot. He’s got to disarm the bomb.” His voice started to fade, and Mark’s vision shrank to a small field surrounded by black. Just before he lost consciousness, he saw Radoslav raise the gun and club Matthew on the head.

The pressure on Mark's neck relaxed and he slumped to the floor. As he lay there, he heard a whistling sound, followed by a *thwack!* A third body joined the two brothers on the floor.

"Owl! Are you all right? Speak to me!" Preston knelt beside Mark, holding him in his arms.

"The bomb," Mark managed to say.

"Let's try the game control," Jason suggested. He snatched it and wiggled the stick. The screen came to life with a picture of a bomb and instructions: "Cut the wires in the proper sequence to disarm." Jason manipulated a large pair of scissors on the screen and cut one of the wires, a blue one. The image and sound of an explosion startled all of them.

"Wrong wire," Joan pointed out. "Wonder how many chances we have?"

The screen came alive again. Jason cut the red wire, generating another explosion. The third time, he cut the yellow wire, getting blown up again.

"It's a trick. There is no correct wire," Mark suggested groggily. "Maybe you have to cut all at once, or something like that."

The timer read "0:30."

Jason stared intently at the screen, manipulating the controls, trying to corral all the wires with the virtual scissors.

Mark struggled to his feet. Matthew and Radoslav lay prostrate on the floor, Preston's new, expensive binoculars beside them.

"Very creative use of optical equipment, Preston," Mark observed, "and right before the lifetime warranty was about to expire." He had a vague recollection of something he had promised to do just before dying, but he couldn't remember what it was.

The computer completed the countdown, calling out the final seconds, "Goodbye... It's been fun! Three...two...one..."

27. Edwardian Romance

The helicopter with *FBI* displayed in large letters on the base circled cautiously over the area. Satisfied that no hostile gunmen were lurking in the bushes, they settled down about half a mile from the cabin. Gordo was first out of the door and demonstrated that he hadn't lost the speed that made him famous, leaving the others in his wake as he ran toward the hunting lodge evading imaginary tacklers. Zigzagging across the open field, he reached the shelter of a rock outcropping about 100 yards from the door.

"That you, Gordo? Come get us out of here! We're locked in." It sounded like Mark.

"You alone?" Gordo wanted to know.

"Define your terms."

"Shit! You must be all right." Gordo stood and walked over to the cabin. "You're locked in for sure. There's a big time steel bar across the door."

"I'll take care of that! Stand back, sir!" A young FBI agent drew his revolver and prepared to shoot the lock off. Gordo dove for cover, barely escaping injury as the bullet ricocheted around the stone porch.

"Damn it! You let me handle this, you hear!" Gordo pushed him roughly out of the way. He examined the lock, which was completely untouched. "Jesus! You missed the fucking thing completely. Don't go shooting that again. We got a crowbar or anything like that?"

"I'll see, sir." Anxious to get out of reach in case Gordo lost his temper completely, the young agent sprinted back to the helicopter.

"I've got it," Mark said from inside. "We can use part of the bomb to blow the door open."

"Don't do anything stupid," Gordo warned. "By the way, is a kid about twelve or so in there with you?"

"Jason's here. He's fine. We'll just use a little bit of the plastic explosive on the door," Mark explained.

"Wait! Let me see what I can do first. Maybe we can just pick the lock or something."

"You work on it from your side; I'll tackle it from mine."

"I said wait, goddamnit!"

"I can't hear you."

"Bullshit! Get away from that door. Where's that crowbar," he shouted in the general direction of the copter.

"This is the best we could find. It's part of the tool kit. It's kind of short, but..."

Gordo took the short bar and wedged it between the hasp and the rest of the lock.

"Stand back, Gordo. I'm going to blow the door," Mark called out.

"Wait!"

“Fire in the hole!”

Gordo dove for cover again.

Nothing happened.

“Well?” Gordo said after about a minute.

“That’s funny.”

“Yeah, real funny.”

“It didn’t work.”

“Good. Now sit down and stay out of trouble.” Gordo picked up the bar again and attacked the padlock in earnest, wondering as he did so whether the tool was stronger than the hasp. He strained, putting all his considerable bulk into the work, which finally paid off with a resounding *crack*. He opened the door, wondering what he was going to find on the other side.

He didn’t get a chance to find out—his cousin beat him to it. Delfina pushed Gordo’s huge frame out of the way as though he were made of air and rushed inside. She wrapped herself around Mark, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I was sure you were going to be killed this time! I’m tired of this. You’ve got to agree to quit having adventures.”

“Mama!” Jason spotted his mother and took off in her direction. “Mama! It was exciting. The bad guy had a gun, and there was a bomb, and I defused it and Mr. Salomon saved us all, and…” Suddenly, it was a bit too much for Jason and he grew quiet. “I was afraid for a while,” he confided in a low voice. “Me, too,” was the choked reply. Mrs. Ekblad hugged her son briefly, then led him to the waiting car with the FBI seal on the door.

“How’d you know about Jason,” Preston asked Gordo. “For that matter, how did you know anything?”

“You gotta be kidding. You’re top story on CNN. *Famous ornithologist Preston Salomon and other members of his party were kidnapped in a daring—*”

“They called me a famous ornithologist?” Preston asked. “Really.”

“Really.”

Preston smiled. “That makes it almost worthwhile. But how did you know where to find us?”

“The box worked perfectly. The signal died with you somewhere near Freer. The Fibbies were combing the area near there, which ain’t easy, when the signal reappeared right here in the Hill Country. Then we got the call to come riding to the rescue.”

“But we didn’t have a chance to activate the program,” Mark protested.

“I took care of that,” Joan said. “I activated it using this.” She held up a key chain. “Delfina was afraid something might happen. She had LJ fix this up for me. When I pressed this button it sent a command to the laptop that activated the *bugle call* program.”

“Wonderful!” Preston congratulated her. “So that’s why you needed your purse. What did you say to Radoslav to get him to leave you alone?”

Joan laughed. “I told him my period had just started and I needed to take care of it. Men are so sensitive about some things.”

Two FBI agents emerged from the cabin carrying Matthew on a stretcher, another dragged Radoslav. They loaded the stretcher on the copter, and took off. Yet another agent approached Mark, walking with a swagger that said, “I’m in charge here.”

“I’m afraid,” Gordo informed them, “that you’re going to have an opportunity to converse with his lordship, Special-Agent-in-Charge Kelliher. I got to go take care of something. When I figure out what it is, I’ll let you know.” He strode off toward the back of the cabin.

“Which one’s the brother?” asked SAIC Kelliher.

“I am,” Mark said, extricating himself from Delfina’s clutches.

“Your brother’s has a concussion. Whoever hit him packed a wallop. The medics say he’ll be OK, though.”

“Good,” Mark said. “We have to tell my mother.”

“We’ll take care of it.” He pulled a radio from his belt and issued some orders, then continued. “We’ve been after Radoslav and his cronies for some time now. They’re part of Milosvec’s crowd. Been trying to buy arms here in the states to retake Yugoslavia. Seems they were interested in a company called XenoDyne. When we learned that Magus was buying them out, we contacted Simon Magus himself and set up a sting. Then he went and died. Complicated the hell out of everything, I don’t mind telling you that. We didn’t know who to trust, so we kept quiet about the sting. We’ve been following you, sure that Raddy would show up. My agents lost you in Brownsville, though. Said you pulled some cute trick after leaving the restaurant. Anyway, it’s all over, now. Everything’s under control. I’m going to leave you with Sheriff Salazar. OK?”

“That was you in Brownsville? We thought it was the baddies,” Mark said. Then asked, “Can I get my laptop back? Where are they taking Matthew?”

“Your computer? We may need it for evidence.”

“What evidence? I thought this was about kidnapping. They didn’t kidnap the damned computer!”

“OK. I’ll have someone send it over after we fingerprint it.” Apparently SAIC Kelliher had been warned about the clout of the Talbot family.

“They’re taking Matthew to San Antonio. I’ve got all the details, Mark,” Gordo said, reappearing as soon as Kelliher was safely away. “We’ll head that way a bit later.”

Joan spoke up, “Have they caught those two other thugs, then?”

“Oh sure,” Gordo said. “Like I said, the box worked perfectly. When those two took it with them, it told us right where they were. Besides, there ain’t many maroon minivans out here in Edwards county. Kinda stood out. If we’re asking questions, though, I’ve got one. What’s this about a bomb?”

Mark answered him. “*Selenops* left us a bomb. Jason defused it right before it went off. It was packed with enough plastic explosive to turn us into vapor.”

“You mean this stuff?” an FBI specialist standing near the cabin door asked. He held something pink in his hand.

“Yeah,” Mark said. “That’s the bit I put on the door to try to blow it open.”

“Two things: First, this is *Silly Putty*, not plastic explosive. Second, if it were plastic explosive, it would have blown the entire wall apart. Next time, leave the explosives to someone who knows what they’re doing, OK?”

Mark didn’t comment on the agent’s grammar, using *they* with *someone*. He simply said, “OK.”

“So the bomb was a fake all along? I don’t get it,” Joan said. “And this whole business with XenoDyne—”

“I suspected a fake bomb,” Preston said. “What was the point of the game and all that nonsense? Why not simply blow up? And why make it possible to defuse? It didn’t make any sense. *Selenops* didn’t want to kill us, only to delay us. It was a double cross. He sold out Radoslav and his boys.”

“But what about the gunmen in Guatemala? What about blowing up my truck?”

“Yes, that’s an interesting point...something we have to figure out,” Preston said. “Some of the answer is obvious, but I don’t see all of it clearly.”

“Maybe it’s obvious to you, but I don’t have a clue,” Mark said, echoing the general sentiment of the listeners. “Speaking of being clueless, our esteemed Special Agent in Charge doesn’t seem to have a good grasp on what’s going on. This affair is not over by a long shot. We still have to deal with *Selenops*.”

“Are you sure Radoslav isn’t *Selenops*?” Joan asked. “Maybe he was feigning ignorance.”

“No way,” Mark said. “*Selenops* would *never* have asked me to give him the password. A real hacker would consider it a point of honor to figure that out by himself. Besides, he could barely work the stick on the laptop. I’m afraid, Preston, that your trap didn’t work.”

“Not the way I’d hoped, that’s for sure. Though it did snare Matthew, and I think this provides us with some ammunition to use against *Selenops*.”

“Care to explain that?” Mark asked.

“Later, maybe” Preston agreed.

Another young FBI agent appeared with Mark’s laptop. He wiped off the fingerprint dust as he brought it. “I’m supposed to give this to Mark.” He held out the computer.

“Thanks,” Mark said as he took it. He immediately sat down and started fiddling with the machine.

“What are you doing?” Preston asked.

“Resetting all the passwords, of course.”

“Can’t that wait?”

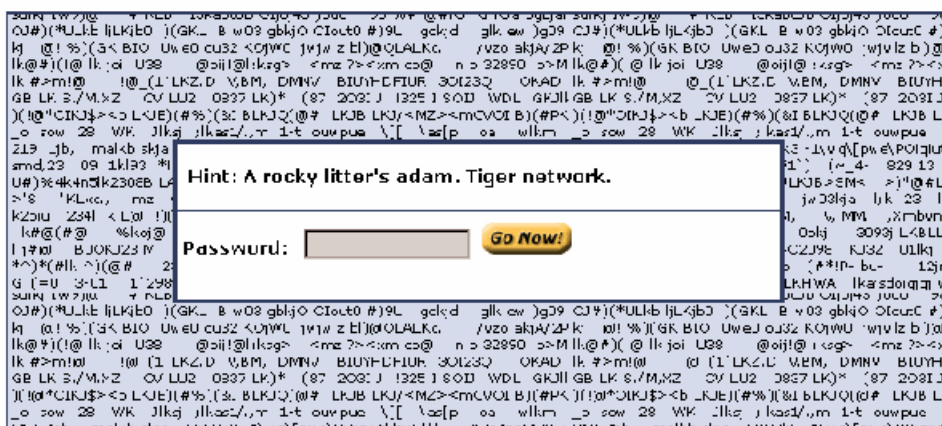
“What? Leave the information unprotected? It won’t take long.” He hummed to himself as he typed, ignoring everyone else. “Hey! Here’s e-mail from LJ. He retrieved some more info from the damaged disk. It’s another secret e-mail from Dad, only this time it’s addressed to Joan.”

28. Chinese Puzzle

“Let me see that again,” Preston said. “Maybe we’re missing something obvious.”

“Here.” Mark showed him the screen.

Please Enter Password:



“What was your father thinking? Why send all these puzzles?”

“Can’t this wait till tomorrow?” Delfina asked. She leaned her head on Mark’s shoulder. “It’s been a long day. Time to get some sleep, right?” They had left San Antonio after checking on Matthew and were on the way to Delfina’s cabin.

“But the message is going to expire tomorrow morning at 6:00,” Mark reminded her. “We have to break the code tonight.”

Delfina drew in a deep breath and let out a long sigh. She rubbed her knee up against Mark, who stared intently at the screen.

“Notice that the form of the clue is the same as before,” Joan pointed out. “Can we use that knowledge?”

“What is this damn thing anyway?” Gordo wanted to know.

“It’s a puzzle Simon sent before he died,” Joan replied.

“You concentrate on driving,” Delfina said. “We’ll work on the puzzle.” She proceeded to lay her head in Mark’s lap, covering up the computer screen. “Maybe it’ll come to me in a dream.”

Mark took the hint and put the machine away. Gordo drove the big truck on through the night.

“I’ll be up in the sleeping loft,” Delfina said as she climbed the spiral stairs, “in case anyone wants to join me.”

“I’ll be there soon,” Mark promised as he disappeared into the computer room.

“I’ve been thinking,” Joan began. “The solution to the other puzzle was based on a series of puns. The first part identified a person; the second half provided a twist. Maybe this is similar. If we can figure out the person, then should be able to get the rest.”

“Good plan,” Mark called from the computer room. “Meanwhile, I’ve got the machines searching for anything resembling *Tiger Network*. Haven’t turned up anything so far.”

“Tiger network,” Preston mused. “I guess that would involve India, though there is the fabled Siberian tiger to deal with.”

“It may be completely symbolic, Preston.”

“Yes. Of course. I still wonder why Simon left all these puzzles. Did he often send you puzzles, Mark?”

“Yes, damn him. He loved puns. But I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“I think he must have done it for a reason,” Preston said, more to himself than anyone else. He carried four mugs of coffee from the kitchen, giving one each to Joan and Mark, then looking around in puzzlement. “Where’s Gordo?”

“Said he had some business in town. He’ll be back soon.”

“Well, let’s get to work,” Joan said. “What’s the plan of attack?”

“Some good guessing seems to be the best we’ve come up with,” Preston admitted with a sigh. “Let’s analyze the clue. What could *rocky litter* be?”

“I thought of *gravel*, or maybe *pebbles*,” Joan said.

“Pebbles!” Mark shouted. “That’s it! *The Flintstones*. Pebbles was the baby. Her *adam* must refer to Fred Flintstone.”

“So far, so good,” Joan commented, “but how does that work with *Tiger network*?”

“Maybe the clue refers to Hanna-Barbera, the studio that made the cartoons. Let’s see, Hanna, Anna, Anno, Anno Barbara, Anna Barbara, *Santa Barbara!*” He raced to the computer and typed furiously.

“That’s too obscure for me,” Preston said. “It lacks the beauty of the other puzzle. Besides, how do we get from Hanna to Santa?”

Mark came back wearing a dejected expression. “Didn’t work. I tried lots of variations.” He slumped down into a chair. “Mark,” Delfina called from the loft, “Don’t you want to try sleeping on it?”

“I thought you were already asleep.”

“Who could sleep with all that shouting? This is starting to resemble your other projects, you know, the ones that never get finished.”

“It’s a tar baby, all right, but at least it’ll be over by 6:00 tomorrow morning.”

“Tar baby!” Preston shouted. “That’s it.”

“What?” Joan cried. “The solution to the puzzle?”

“Partly. I think I know why Simon sent these puzzles. He knew that *Selenops* couldn’t resist trying to solve them. The puzzles were supposed to lure him out of hiding. That means...that means I’ve been wrong about this whole affair. Damn!” He wandered off in the direction of the kitchen, where he started a pot of coffee brewing.

“I’m gonna pound the keys,” Mark announced, heading for the computer room. He detoured to the kitchen to get a pound size bag of *Skittles*.

“Looks like you’re out of luck, Delfina,” Joan said with a smile. “I’m going for a walk. Want to join me?”

“No thanks, Joan. Maybe with Preston and Mark in the computer room I can really get some sleep.”

Gordo banged open the door at 5:40, carrying a large box. “Sorry,” he said. “Hope I didn’t wake everyone.” Preston lay snoring in a chair. Joan had taken the couch. Through the open door to the computer room, he saw Mark typing furiously.

“Hey, Gord,” Mark said. “Hope that’s food.”

“Some of *Abuelita*’s homemade breakfast tacos. When I told her what was going on, she got out of bed to fix the food. I’ve been smelling them for thirty miles.”

“Don’t have to ask twice,” Mark said in a low voice, as he joined Gordo by the kitchen bar. They each took a foil wrapped taco and a cup of coffee. From the way Mark’s hand shook while he poured the coffee, it was obvious he’d already consumed quite a few mugs of his favorite legal drug. “Let’s go outside,” Gordo suggested.

Mark unwrapped an egg, potato and *chorizo* taco, and took a bite. “Nice. Thanks, Gord. I’ve been up all night. Looks like I’m going to miss a deadline.” He glanced at his watch, which read “5:46.”

“Won’t be the first time,” Gordo commented.

“No, but this may be one of the more important ones. I’m still working on the puzzle we talked about in the car.” He took another large mouthful of food and chewed carefully.

“Tell me the puzzle again,” Gordo said. “Maybe I can help.”

“A rocky litter’s adam. Tiger network,” Mark mumbled.

“What? Saddam has some tiger network?”

“Huh?”

“What’s the bit about the tiger network?”

“You said *Saddam*.”

“Yeah, *Iraqi leader Saddam*. Isn’t that what you said?”

“Of course it is!” Mark jumped up and rushed back inside. “Wake up everyone! Gordo’s figured it out!”

“What did I figure out?” Gordo asked.

“The password clue. At least the first part of the clue, the person. I think I know the rest, but I need to check something.” He rushed back to his computer and started a web search.

“Ha! That’s it!” He typed madly. “I’ve got the document. It’s another of Dad’s one-page memos.”

“What’s the answer?” Joan asked sleepily.

“What’s that smell?” Preston wanted to know.

“Food!” Delfina said, rushing down the stairs.

Mark explained. “The first part is an aural pun, just like the first clue. If you don’t say it carefully, it sounds like *Iraqi leader Saddam*, especially if you pronounce *Saddam* the way George Bush did, with the accent on the first syllable. That means that the answer should be something like *Husein*. I just ran a quick search. The Chinese word for Tiger is *Hu*. This is the year of the tiger. Maybe that’s how Dad came up with that.”

“Then a network...” Preston began.

“Is a *seine*,” Joan said, clapping her hands in delight.

“*Hu seine* unlocked the document,” Mark affirmed. “Here. Read it.”

From: TheMan@Magus.com
Sent: Tuesday, April 14, 1998
To: JoanSantoro@SecretMessage.to
Subject: About XenoDyne

I’m canceling the XenoDyne deal. I know that you think it’s a good one. On paper, everything looks great. I can’t explain it. Take my word for it.

I drafted a letter exercising our right of rescission. That needs to get to them by tomorrow, 17:00 Pacific time. Shouldn’t be a problem. I’m going to send them e-mail as soon as I finish this, just to be sure.

Now, of course they’ll want to know why I’m backing out. We can’t say that Simon just reneged. Help me find some better excuse. If necessary, we’ll just say that we needed more time to examine some issue. Look through the plan. You and I know there will be something we can use. Find it.

I’m counting on you.

Not a word to ANYONE about this.

Simon

“Well,” Preston said, “that’s even shorter than usual.” He thought for a minute. “Wait a minute. Let me see that again.” He took the note from Mark then started pacing back and forth, ignoring everyone. “I’ve been a complete fool. The answer’s been staring us in the face all along. Quick! There may still be time. Let’s get moving.”

“Where?” Delfina asked.

“Houston. Simon’s office. Gordo will drive. We need to call Grace, and Mary Lynn.” Preston moved toward the door. “Well, come on! We don’t have much time.”

Delfina demanded, “What does this note have to do with anything?”

“Ah, it provides the motive. The letter. Don’t you see? What happened to that letter he mentioned? Now, I think I see the picture clearly. Perhaps we can catch *Selenops* before he gets away.”

“This is all about me, isn’t it?” Joan asked.

“No,” Mark argued. “It’s about me. I was the one they tried to kill in Guatemala. *Selenops* is a game player. This is some absurd game he’s been playing with me, and the rest of you.”

“Bullshit,” Gordo said. “I always look for the obvious. In this case, that’s money, lots of money. This is all about Magus.”

“Well, which is it, Preston?” Delfina asked.

Preston thought about it for a moment. “All three, strange as that may seem. Now, we have to get moving.”

29. Public Relations

“How nice to see you again,” Grace said formally, shaking Joan’s hand. She gave Mark a quick hug and kissed Delfina on the cheek. Turning to Preston, she said, “Now, Preston, you’ve dragged me away from my son’s side. This’d better be good. As my daddy used to say, it’s time to talk about how the cow ate the cabbage.”

“Yes, Mrs. Talbot, but—”

“Please. Call me Grace. Mrs. Talbot sounds ancient.” She smiled at him and winked.

“All right, Grace. Mary Lynn,” Preston said, “are you sure no one has been in this office since Simon’s death?”

“No one, except that day when you and Mark were here.”

“Not even the cleaning crew or something like that.”

“It didn’t really need cleaning; no one used it. I kept it locked the whole time.”

“Excellent!” Preston said. He had one more question for Mary Lynn, “Have you located Adrian Sloan yet?”

“Not yet. He didn’t say where he was going when he left. I’ve paged him twice already.”

“Well, let’s hope he responds.”

Preston walked back and forth in front of them, composing his thoughts. Mark recognized the pattern from the many times he’s seen Preston talk to clients about birds they were likely to see on a trip. Finally, Preston turned and spoke. “This is a long story. I’m not sure where to begin. In one sense, it started years ago, when Mark, Becky Bell and I visited your home in 1968. In another sense, though, it starts here in Houston about three years ago. But the critical incident, the one that caused all the trouble was Joan’s arrival at Magus. The explanation for these events centers on our mysterious nemesis *Selenops*. Ironically, the name he chose to conceal his identity reveals some crucial elements of the plan. *Selenops* spiders rely on stealth and camouflage rather than webs to catch their prey. Our enemy also relied on concealment. In fact, he’s been hiding amongst us for years.”

He paused to let that soak in.

“Was he,” Grace asked after a bit, “responsible for Simon’s...his...end?” She still couldn’t bring herself to say “murder.”

“Correct. Matthew had nothing to do with it, though all the evidence seemed to point to him. You see, Simon was about to cause *Selenops*’s plans to unravel. That’s why he was killed.”

“So Simon *was* murdered,” Delfina said. “But how?”

“I was stumped for a while. I knew it had something to do with the degaussing of the disk drive, but I couldn’t figure it out.”

“Wait, wait” Delfina complained, “What’s the degaussed disk drive have to do with his death?”

Preston smiled. “I asked myself a simple question: when was the disk drive zapped? It couldn’t have been before Simon’s death. Then he couldn’t have been working on the computer. Likewise, it didn’t seem reasonable for it to happen after he died. That would mean that someone first killed Simon, then took the trouble to erase the disk. Why? Finally, I came to the obvious answer: they happened at the same time.

“That morning at the cabin after Mark’s impromptu swim, I was heating up water in the microwave when I remembered something. You used to see notices in restaurants everywhere *Microwave in Use*. Those notices were there to warn people who might be endangered by a microwave, people who had *pacemakers*.”

“Of course!” Mark said. “A burst of high energy electromagnetic waves would zap the pacemaker and the disk in an instant. But how—”

“Exactly. That’s why I asked you whether someone could have beamed energy into the room. I must admit that I found your information discouraging. I assumed that the pulse came from outside. I had to reassess that notion. I finally came up with an answer, but I still lacked any idea of a motive for the killing. That came to me only when we found Simon’s note to Joan about canceling the Xenodyne deal. Curiously, it was all part of a game.”

“A game!” several of them shouted at once.

“*Selenops* was, above all else, an inveterate games player. I think that he selected Magus as his target for several reasons, but two in particular: first, Magus is a premier computer security company, so breaking into it would be a great challenge. Secondly, *Selenops* somehow found out that Mark was his opponent, *Pulsatrix*.”

“So I was right,” Mark noted. “This is all a game, about me.”

“Partially,” Preston agreed. “Recall how you told me that when you surfed the net the traffic appeared to originate from Magus? I suspect *Selenops* figured that out and decided that he needed to come to Magus to conclude the game. However, Gordo’s instincts were also sound. This was about money, about control of Magus. This was a game with a billion dollar prize.”

“Now, let’s consider *how* it was done,” Preston said. “We know that Simon was alive after Matthew left. His e-mail to Mark showed that. We also know that the pulse, whatever it was, had to be triggered from inside Simon’s office. The Faraday watchamacallit would prevent any outside signal from penetrating the room. Moreover, Simon had to be in the right position for everything to work. The only way *Selenops* could know for sure that Simon was in the right place was when he was working at his computer. There must be some device, something that would cause a pulse, in this room. I think we’ll find this is activated by a specific sound, or sequence of sounds. Maybe even a musical tune.”

“Of course!” Mark said, moving toward the computer, its cover still ajar from the last visit to the office.

“Ambianca!” Joan exclaimed. “The parasite triggered the device. That’s what it was for.”

“Yes, I think so. It would be a simple matter to teach it to play a special sound under the right circumstances, say when the microphone in the Simon’s computer picked up the sound of typing. Right, Mark.”

“A walk in the park,” Mark agreed, looking up distractedly from the computer. “All you’d have to do is—”

“But we still don’t know who *Selenops* is,” Delfina protested, interrupting Mark before he could launch into one of his long-winded explanations. “Even if we know how he killed Simon, we can’t do anything about it.”

“That’s partially correct,” Preston agreed. “However, we *can* identify *Selenops*. It’s just like identifying a bird. Unfortunately, there’s no single *field mark* that suffices. Rather, we need to use a series of small indications. *Selenops* left us some clues to his identity, the main one being the document he sent Mark, the one about the affair between Becky and Simon. I fear,” Preston said, turning to address Grace, “that some of the assertions in the document were true. Becky and Simon did have an affair. I think you knew that.”

Grace nodded, “I saw the signs too late. She rubbed up against him when she took his arm. Did she think I would miss that? She went after him from the very beginning. I just didn’t think Simon would be so foolish as to fall for her. I never understood why she wanted him, though. She certainly had her choice of men. Why did she want mine?”

“Caesar and Cleopatra,” Joan said. “She seduced him for power.”

Grace looked at Joan appraisingly. “Maybe so. I see the benefit of a classical education. You are as smart as everyone said, as well as beautiful, child.” Mark wondered whether Joan would ever shed the appellation *child*. There was a certain poetic beauty about it.

“Let’s turn to that document. What does it tell us, besides offering further evidence that programmers can’t write well? Consider this. How did *Selenops* get his information? Was he there?”

“No,” Delfina said. “Becky must have told him. He was probably one of her paramours.”

“Perhaps. However, there is a simpler explanation.”

“What?” Delfina asked.

“*Selenops* got his information second hand. Recall that there were several errors in the description of events. Two in particular were the failure to even mention my presence at dinner that night, and Becky’s dress. As I recall, Becky wore jeans to dinner that night. In any case, there is no way she could have worn one of Grace’s dresses. She was considerably shorter than Grace and... without her slim physique.” Preston waited for the polite chuckle from his audience before continuing.

“Undoubtedly, *Selenops* knows a great deal about the way the Talbot household functions, even down to knowing about Grace’s habit of lending out her clothes. However, just as in the childhood game of *Gossip*, the information he, or she, had was not quite accurate, it came filtered by someone, someone close to the family.” Preston looked around the room, taking in everyone.

“But who—” Delfina continued her role of straight man.

Preston held up his hand. “We’ll get to that. First, though, let’s consider the events of last April. Although *Selenops* main goal was getting control of Magus, he was not one to pass up a target of opportunity. He saw the XeonDyne deal as a chance to raise a bit of, shall we say, *working capital*. The deal to spin off part of XenoDyne, the large defense contractor appeared straightforward, a classic Magus operation. *Selenops* appreciated the hidden asset, software to access the military GPS signal. He agreed to sell that software to Radoslav and his boys as soon as he got his hands on it.”

Preston paused and considered how to proceed. “Here it gets complicated. Simon changed his mind. I think he suspected Matthew’s involvement and hoped to save his son from prison. For whatever reason, he planned to back out of the deal. He even drafted a letter to that effect, and sent Joan an e-mail telling her about it. But the deal went through anyway. The letter disappeared. Didn’t it, Mary Lynn.”

“I...I don’t know,” Mary Lynn said. “I must have forgotten to mail it. I know Simon gave it to me. It was on my desk, but...”

Preston didn’t reply for a several seconds. “That letter was the reason Simon was killed. *Selenops* couldn’t afford to have the deal fail. Too much was riding on it. *Selenops* had planned for this eventuality; he was a consummate gamesman. He put the plan into action. The parasite did the rest. The letter went into the shredder.”

Preston paused to sip some coffee.

“I think that *Selenops* timetable was rushed a bit. The attack on Mark in Guatemala was slipshod, and failed due to some good luck, or bad luck from *Selenops*’ point of view.”

“But why attack me,” Mark demanded? “What did that have to do with the XenoDyne deal?”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Owl. Without you, we’d never have figured out the parasite, or deciphered the e-mail from Simon. *Selenops* was trying to protect his rear.”

Preston gestured in Joan’s direction. “Another development complicated everything for *Selenops*. As we all know now, Becky Bell had a child, who grew up to be this lovely and gifted young woman. Rebecca got Simon to support her and the child. I’m still not sure whether it was blackmail on Rebecca’s part, or more likely Simon’s genuine wish to do what was right. When Joan discovered Simon’s part in her life, she came here, to Houston and Magus, seeking to learn more. That started all the trouble. Simon had plans for Joan.”

“I tried to talk sense to him,” Joan said. “He was determined to recognize me as his daughter, including making me an heir. I tried to talk him out of it, but he had his mind made up.”

Grace looked at Joan with new interest. “Yes, he could be quite stubborn.”

“Simon planned to recognize Joan as his daughter, but more importantly, he put her in charge of Magus.”

“There,” Mark said with satisfaction, holding up a metallic object a bit smaller than a brick. “I remembered when we were here before that the power supply looked funny. I never got a chance to check it out. This must be what triggered the pulse.” He turned it around to show it to everyone. Paint on one end had bubbled slightly from heat. Mark rubbed his finger across it

thoughtfully. “You know what,” he said, “this means that there’s only one person who could be *Selenops*.”

“Exactly,” Preston said as he walked over and stood in front of Mary Lynn. “Mary Lynn, I think it’s time for you to come clean.”

Mary Lynn looked up at Preston, her face pale, her eyes wide.

Preston continued, “You must realize by now that we’ve figured it all out. You knew about Becky and Simon. You knew about their affair from Grace. You suspected that Joan was the daughter of that union. And only you could have known that Simon was backing out of the deal with XenoDyne.”

Mary Lynn hung her head. She opened her purse, took a tissue from the box that was her constant companion the past two weeks and dabbed at her eyes. Her voice was husky when she finally spoke. “It’s not like you’re making it out. It was so hard to take. I’d worked there for over 20 years. Did I get rich? All those acquisitions. Every dot-com company was full of snot-nosed kids, suddenly wealthy. What about me? Didn’t I deserve something for all my time? He took me for granted, treated me like a bowl of guacamole.”

“So, when *Selenops* approached you with his plan, you were ready to help him out, weren’t you?”

“No, no! It wasn’t like that at all. I wouldn’t have hurt Simon. Never! It was just...just supposed to wipe out the disk, so we’d have a reason for not canceling the XenoDyne deal. It wasn’t supposed to kill him!” Mary Lynn began to sob into the tissue, stopping only long enough to blow her nose.

“Who?” Delfina demanded. “Who is *Selenops*?”

Preston answered for her. “The only person in the office, besides Simon, that Mary Lynn cared for.”

Mary Lynn choked out a reply to Delfina’s question, her voice barely above a whisper. “He was so nice. We had such good times together. I thought he loved me.”

“Who, damnit!” Delfina growled.

Preston nodded his head in the general direction of the door. “Our missing friend, Adrian Sloan. I doubt we’ll find him. If only I’d realized sooner. Well, Gordo, I think it’s time to let the cavalry loose. Maybe the FBI can stop him. Otherwise, I fear we haven’t heard the last of *Selenops*.”

“How could he have known we were onto him?” Mark asked. “Wait a minute.” He walked quickly over to his backpack, removed the laptop computer and typed furiously. “I’m checking the computer logs to see when he left. He was here all night. Left at 6:05 this morning. That’s right after...damn!”

Mark engaged in another round of furious typing. After several minutes, during which no one uttered a word, Mark informed the group, “He bugged my laptop. Installed yet another variant of the virus on the machine, one that kept him up-to-date on our movements. That’s why what’s-his-face took it away. All that business with the passwords was just blowing smoke. *Selenops* has been listening to us for hours, thanks to the magic of satellite communications...He

probably also knew our every move from the GPS coordinates. Shit! That means..." He raced for the door, stopping only when Gordo grabbed his arm and restrained him.

"Take it easy, *compadre*. I've got a deputy watching the place."

"What place?" Delfina demanded.

"Your cabin," Gordo told her. "Let's hope that *Selenops* is dumb for once and tries to get in there, now that he knows where it is for sure. If he does, we'll catch him. I wouldn't count on it, though. Our nasty friend hasn't made many mistakes lately."

"I feel like a complete idiot," Preston said for something like the fiftieth time. He sat on the sofa in the library of the Talbot house, holding his head in his hands. *Ambianca* played Chopin nocturnes softly in the background. The group sat around, exhausted from the events of the past two weeks. Idelle moved among them, refilling glasses, depositing a plate of cookies on the coffee table before leaving discreetly.

"They'll catch him, Preston," Mark assured him. "He won't get away."

"How did you figure out it was Sloan?" Delfina asked, trying to focus on the positive elements.

"Process of elimination," Preston replied, brightening at the chance to lecture some more. "*Selenops* had to be someone with access to the family, someone with programming skill, someone with knowledge of the *XenoDyne* deal, someone who knew about *Ambianca*, well, you get the idea. When it dawned on me that Simon had an idea who *Selenops* was, I realized it had to be someone at Magus. Sloan was the only one who fit."

"I see how you figured out it was Sloan," Mark said, "but how did you guess that Mary Lynn was involved?"

"A couple of things," Preston continued, turning to gaze on Mary Lynn. "I noticed that she referred to everyone in the office by last name, except for Sloan. She consistently called him *Adrian*. It was a little thing, but when I put it together with everything else, it all fit."

"Everything else?"

"Well, who else knew about the letter for one thing. She must have mentioned it to Sloan, who put his plan into action. No telling how long the device had been hidden in the office. When was the last time anyone looked inside the computer? Moreover, when our Serbian acquaintances showed up in Bentsen State Park, they didn't know about the Stygian Owl. That struck me as strange when I thought about it. *Selenops* must have learned we were there *before* the message about the owl went out. The only possibility I could think of was Joan's call to Mary Lynn. She must have let slip where we were."

Mary Lynn dropped her eyes and fumbled for another Kleenex. "I was such a fool. I thought he really cared for me."

"Ambergris Cay?" Preston asked.

Mary Lynn nodded mutely.

"Then, what about the rest?" Mark asked. "The reporter, the truck bomb, the fake bomb in the cabin."

“Partly window dressing. *Selenops* was, after all, a game player. He enjoyed tweaking you, especially sending the reporter. Besides, it was a great way to divert suspicion. Then, he was anxious to locate your hacking lab. He knew approximately where it was, but he needed to zero in on the actual cabin. The truck bomb was part of the original plan to get rid of Mark. That was before Sloan learned of a crucial new fact: that killing Mark threatened someone else, someone Sloan cared for, someone he wouldn’t think of killing.”

“So, it *was* about me after all,” Joan said. “but I still don’t see—”

“Yes,” Preston agreed, interrupting her before she could steal the floor. “We could all see how Sloan felt about you.”

That was more than Mary Lynn could take. She began sobbing into yet another Kleenex.

“Very good, Preston,” Grace interjected. “What I don’t understand, though, is the doubt over Joan’s paternity. Surely today, DNA tests...”

Everyone turned to Joan, who seemed lost in thought. With a start, she realized they were waiting on her to answer. “Sorry, I was just thinking...” She shrugged and said, “It took some work to get DNA tests done. Simon was hard to convince. Kept repeating Becky’s assurances. I pointed out that she was not a reliable witness. Finally, we agreed to put the doubts to rest. The results came back the day after he died. I was going to meet him that morning, the morning when...” She had to stop talking to regain her composure. “I know everyone thought I was just a tramp, his trophy. It wasn’t like that. He really loved me—like a daughter. I loved him.”

Joan nibbled on a homemade ginger snap from the plate Idelle had left. “I remembered the DNA test after Mark recovered Simon’s first e-mail. I called Mary Lynn from Bentsen State Park to get the results. Then, when everything happened, I forgot to tell you the news. Simon’s DNA and mine matched at about 25% of the probe sites.” She paused to let her revelation sink in. “He was *not* my father.”

A hush descended. Delfina was the first to break the silence. “Wait a minute. That’s too high a match. That means...”

Joan took a couple of steps and put an arm around Mark. “That’s correct,” she said. “Simon wasn’t my father, he was my grandfather. Mark is my father.”

She kissed him tenderly on the cheek.