

Noble's Quest

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A Novel

Sequel to
Brotherhood Beyond the Yard

Sally Fernandez

DUNHAM
books

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*In loving memory of my maternal grandparents,
Orris Irving and Ruth Ellen Ames,
and my great-grandmother Ellen Agatha Jordan.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story is pure fiction, although the locations are authentic and play an integral part in the plot. The principal characters are fictitious as well. On the other hand, there are numerous facts for readers to sort out for themselves. The story may also seem to have a tinge of a conspiracy theory, which it is not. It gestated solely in my vivid imagination—a story concocted in my own mind that needed to be expressed.

Several people were intricately involved in helping to improve the structure of this story. Naturally, they will be recognized appropriately in the Acknowledgements. However, there is one person I must acknowledge from the start. Much love and gratitude goes to Joe Fernandez, my editor-in-residence, business manager, and loving husband, for his patience during my seemingly endless writing, the multitude of hours he devoted to repeated editing, and for other sacrifices of life's events, to help refine my story to make it the best it can be.

THE TURTLE AND THE SCORPION

A turtle was happily swimming along a river when a scorpion hailed it from the shore. A scorpion, being a very poor swimmer, asked a turtle to carry him on his back across a river.

“Are you mad?” exclaimed the turtle. “You’ll sting me while I’m swimming and I’ll drown.”

“My dear turtle,” laughed the scorpion, “if I were to sting you, you would drown, and I would go down with you, and drown as well. Now where is the logic in that?”

The turtle thought this over, and saw the logic of the scorpion’s statement.

“You’re right!” cried the turtle. “Hop on!”

The scorpion climbed aboard and halfway across the river the scorpion gave the turtle a mighty sting. As they both sank to the bottom, the turtle resignedly said, “Do you mind if I ask you something? You said there’d be no logic in your stinging me. Why did you do it?”

“It has nothing to do with logic,” the drowning scorpion sadly replied.

“It’s just my character.”

Attributed to poet Nur ad-Din Abdar-Rahman Jami, known as Jami, the last great Persian poet from the 15th century. The Prophets of Islam influenced his writing. The translation is by William Braude, 1965.

1

USHERING IN A NEW YEAR

As the crowds huddled together trying to fight off December's frigid dampness, they waited eagerly for the French president's arrival. Thousands of Parisians, along with visitors from around the world, had gathered in the Place de la Concorde—Paris's largest public square—offering "*Bonne année*" to all they encountered. Within minutes, President Grimaud would be saying, "*Bonne année*," wishing the masses a Happy New Year, ushering in 2017.

At the south end of the square closest to the Seine River, was a simply constructed stage with a center podium. There was nothing simple, however, about the extraordinary view of the magnificent Eiffel Tower in the background, the site of the impending fireworks display, and the elaborately decorated fountains that dominated each end of the square. The setting provided a clear vantage point to eye one of the most famous fountains situated directly behind the modest stage.

The fountain, designed by Jacques-Ignace Hittorff—a German-born French architect and student of neoclassical design—represents the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. Surrounding this ornate structure are figures depicting daily life of harvesting coral, fish, and collecting pearls, along with statues of geniuses in astronomy, navigation and commerce. Hittorff's other fountain symbolizing the Rhone and

Rhine Rivers with baroque statues harvesting flowers, fruits, and grapes, adorns the north end of the square. Unlike the statues surrounding the south fountain, these are in river navigation, agriculture, and industry. Hittorff's themes of rivers and seas only enhanced the ambiance of the Place de la Concorde on this wintry night.

The hour was near and the partygoers in the crowd were becoming anxious, not only to hear their president speak, but also for the celebrations to begin. Preparations were also in play for the president's private celebration a few blocks away at the Elysée Palace.

Several hours earlier, there was a flurry of activity at the palace with vanloads of food from caterers and flowers from florists, all making their deliveries through the service entrance. Security was unusually tight that evening and it took hours to check all those who entered. Finally, everything was in place, and President Grimaud began to receive his guests. They would also have a spectacular view of the fireworks display from the palace gardens.

As scheduled, precisely at 11:50 p.m. central European time, the French president's motorcade pulled away from his residence at the palace and headed to the public square. President Grimaud, having had to leave his own fête, departed through the front gate. He planned to arrive only minutes before he was to speak at the opening ceremony. Then, after performing his presidential duty, he would discreetly return to his guests. The drive to Place de la Concorde would take only three minutes.

On cue, the limo swiftly pulled out of the palace gates and turned right onto Rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré. A few short blocks later, as the limo driver was about to turn right again—this time onto Rue Royale—he spotted a large white truck stalled at the intersection. Traffic was backing up. Nervously, he glanced down at his watch and noted it was 11:52. Midnight was only minutes away. After waiting a few more minutes, he caught a glimpse of the president in the rearview mirror and noticed that he was also becoming agitated. Refocusing on the cars ahead, the limo driver observed that, fortuitously, the man in the stalled truck had just started its engine and was speeding away. Without hesitation, the limo driver stepped on the gas pedal, much to the president's delight. Finally, he was able to make a right turn onto Rue Royale to continue straight onto Place de la Concorde. The limo pulled up to the staging area at exactly midnight—later than planned.

Suddenly, a loud explosion burst forth and blue and red sparkles

filled the sky. Another explosion simultaneously erupted. The president's limo had just pulled up behind a ball of fire.

President Grimaud looked on in horror.

Earlier that day, the prime minister had urged the president to take extra precautions. All the president agreed to—was to send the first limo as a decoy.



Boom! Boom! Boom! The sounds of explosions were followed by crackling noises echoing through the air. At one minute past midnight, across the French border, the German citizens heard more explosions follow, one after the other, as they gazed at the smoked-filled sky. The onlookers watched excitedly as the red and gold lights streamed down from the black sky, mimicking their nation's flag, and ushering in the New Year. Over a million people witnessed the incredible display above the famed Brandenburg Gate, a gate erected in the 1730s. It is the only remaining gate in Berlin, which had been part of the fortified city. And it has become a national symbol for the Berliners and for the Germans as a whole.

Seconds earlier, the spectators had finished listening to Chancellor Mauer offer hope to the German people, and to the rest of the world for peace and prosperity in the coming year. The chancellor ended by saying, "*Einen guten Rutsch ins neue Jahr!*" And, on cue, those words—meaning "a good slide into the New Year"—set off a series of explosions. But the fireworks in the sky were not the only source of the sounds ringing out. Sounds of gunshots were also heard coming from somewhere in the midst of the crowd. And the festive noise muted the wailing sounds of the sirens speeding toward the viewing stand.

Unknowingly, the partygoers continued to revel in the lights that persisted to burst into the air. They paid no attention to the pictures on the large video screens flanking both sides of the stage. All at once, a volley of voices began to shout, "*Der Kanzler hat gedreht wurde.*" The words, "The chancellor has been shot" resonated over the bedlam in the square. It was unmistakable. The view on the large displays clearly showed the German chancellor lying on the platform, behind the podium, with security officers lying protectively over her. Moments later, the chancellor and her two bodyguards were ushered into the nearby ambulances, which hurriedly sped away from the crowd.

All the while, behind the famed Brandenburg Gate, a 1.2 mile-long

party was about to begin as the multitude of stages, dance floors, and bars lined the boulevard at Straße des 17 Juni that stretched across the Tiergarten, Berlin's public park. The vendors, unaware of the tragic event, patiently waited for their party-loving clients.

Within minutes, however, rumors of the presumed assassination of Chancellor Mauer began to fill the air. And what was a scene of jubilation had become one of dread. Nonetheless, some partygoers with visibly dampened spirits, slowly left the scene and headed for Straße des 17 Juni.



In Florence, Italy, Enzo Borgini, the executive director of police services for Interpol—the International Criminal Police Organization—was attending the New Year's Eve festivities at the *Società Canottieri*. The Canottieri is the prominent rowing club nestled on the right bank of the Arno River, next to the famed Uffizi Gallery. And while the night air was brisk, the gaiety kept everyone feeling warm. The onlookers gazed in awe as they watched the Italian array of national colors stream down from the Piazzale Michelangelo, high up on the hill on the other side of the Arno. The glorious fireworks continued to exhilarate the crowd as they illuminated the dark sky with a rain of green, white, and red lights. Nevertheless, Enzo had turned away from the fireworks as his mind drifted to another time.

Enzo could not help but stare in the opposite direction toward the renowned Ponte Vecchio. His eyes fixated on the bridge, famously lined with goldsmith shops, and the legendary Vasari Corridor stretched across its rooftops. He recalled the time so many years ago when he was a junior police officer at Interpol. It was a time when his supervisor had dispatched him to Florence, his hometown, to work with the American director of the SIA, the States Intelligence Agency. Director Hamilton Scott had requested that Interpol assist him in a sting operation he had organized to capture the notorious terrorist, Mohammed al-Fadl. Enzo remembered al-Fadl very well—but as Simon Hall, the man who got away.

It was a devastating turn of events as he and the director followed a messenger—suspected of carrying stolen funds—through the winding Vasari Corridor, hoping she would lead them to Simon. As he now stared at the corridor from a distance, he recollected all too well how he and Hamilton had to double-back through the Renaissance

hallways, only to discover an empty satchel.

Simon and one hundred thousand euros had vanished!

Enzo's first assignment as a fledgling officer was not a career-building experience on its surface. But the lessons he had learned from the brusque intelligence expert from the U.S. served him well. Over the years, he gained valuable insight into the intelligence community's techniques, much of it from Hamilton. Officially, the knowledge he gained had spurred his career, promoting him up the chain of command at Interpol. Unofficially, the case spawned a friendship that endured until Hamilton's death five months earlier in August of 2016.

"*Cosa?*" Enzo snapped, startled by the abrupt intrusion. He spun around hastily and glared at the hand placed on his shoulder. "*Cosa? What?*" he shouted again over the sound of explosions in the sky. Having been lost in deep thought, Enzo had not seen nor heard his official driver yelling as he ran toward the wall where he was leaning.

The driver, not able to slow down his breathing, began to sputter rapidly. "You've been summoned to headquarters immediately! There have been bombings in Paris and Berlin! A plane is waiting at Peretola Airport to fly you to Lyon!" The driver finally took a deep breath and, more calmly, added, "I'll fill you in on the details in the car."

"*Oh mio dio,*" was all Enzo could muster.



In London, British subjects had been partying for hours in the finest English tradition. The time was 11:00 p.m. Greenwich mean time. They had only one more hour before the fireworks display was to begin.

The 10 Downing Street party, a bit more refined than others, was also in full gear. Inside the gates, the entire length of Downing Street had been converted to an elaborate outdoor dining room. The round tables huddled under heat lamps, and the perfectly placed chairs stretched down the center of the road. The tables had been elegantly set with the finest china for a select group of guests who had been invited to share in the New Year's Eve celebration with the British Prime Minister.

From the street, the guests had an unobstructed view of the London Eye. This iconic landmark of modern Britain, the third largest Ferris wheel in the world, had a capacity of eight hundred passengers per revolution. More important was the view of the clock tower at the north end of the Palace of Westminster, home of the British Parliament. The clock, affectionately named Big Ben, would count down the minutes

to a new year.

All agreed it had been a glorious meal, literally fit for the queen. Now the guests were in the midst of savoring their desserts in preparation for the fireworks display. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Teragram was engaged in conversation with the American ambassador seated next to him. All of a sudden, the prime minister caught a glimpse of his head butler walking out of 10 Downing, briskly heading his way.

Seconds later, the butler interrupted and, in his finest Liverpudlian accent, said, "Excuse me sir, this was just delivered from Scotland Yard."

With a nod of thanks, the prime minister opened the envelope. A slight chill, not related to the outdoor temperature, fell upon him as he unfolded the letter. It read:

At 12:00 a.m. central European time, there was an assassination attempt on President Grimaud at the Place de la Concorde. The president was out of harm's way. However, a bomb explosion killed the driver of the limo sent as a decoy. Simultaneously, shots rang out toward Chancellor Mauer while commencing the festivities at the Brandenburg Gate. The chancellor is unharmed, although one member of her security force was shot and later died in the hospital. Thus far, no one has claimed responsibility. Proceed with caution.

It was signed by Chief Inspector Dary.

With only twenty minutes before Big Ben was to begin the countdown, the prime minister calmly moved through the crowd and requested, "Please move quickly into the residence. I will explain once we are all gathered inside."

Five minutes before 2017 was to arrive, forty guests, and a variety of house servants, clustered in the Pillared State Drawing Room, the largest of the three state drawing rooms at the residence.

"I have just received information that assassination attempts were made against President Grimaud and Chancellor Mauer." The guests gasped as Prime Minister Teragram continued, "Both are unharmed, but each head of government lost a member of the security team."

Without warning, a deafening noise shook 10 Downing and everyone fell to the floor. A short time later, which seemed like an eternity, silence prevailed.

2

THE REBIRTH

Celebrations were in high gear across the United States, especially in the nation's capital. It was Friday, January 20, Inauguration Day. People of all sizes, shapes, colors, and nationalities filled the streets and the restaurants. The bars were packed as well, especially those decked out with high definition screens plastered on a variety of walls. And although the party spirit reigned among those looking forward to this historic event, beneath the surface there was a slight wave of apprehension filling the air, coming on the heels of the devastating events in Europe.

The bombing in Paris took the life of a career police officer masquerading as President Grimaud's chauffeur, and the gunfire pierced the heart of another brave officer as he protected Chancellor Mauer in Berlin. Fortunately, with the advance warning, Prime Minister Teragram was able to save the lives of all in attendance at his New Year's Eve celebration. The exploding tables and chairs outside the residence had blown out many windows of the Downing Street buildings, sending shards of splintered wood and glass in all directions. Miraculously, no one was injured. And with only five hours to go before dropping the storied glittering ball in Times Square, the United States was in lockdown mode, heeding the events a continent

away.

Official celebrations were canceled.

No more attacks followed.

Although the reports of those abortive assaults were demoralizing and pervasive, all those participating in the day's activities set aside their feelings of those tragic events for a moment in history. They were in the midst of celebrating an entirely different sort of event—one the entire world would be watching. On this day, it was evident a ray of hope was sweeping through the swarms.



SIA Director Noble Bishop felt proud to be sitting only a few rows from President-elect Randall Post as he waited to witness the swearing-in of the forty-sixth president of the United States. From his chair on the platform, erected on the west side of the Capitol—officially referred to as the West Front—he had a perfect view of the National Mall.

However, something was definitely awry.

As Noble observed the crowds, he noticed they were set back farther from the stage than in past years. And the increase in security was evident. From reading the program schedule, he concluded that the entire event would be more streamlined and restrained than it typically was. Nonetheless, it was still a glorious sight. His heart swelled with patriotism.

Half listening to the Invocation, he couldn't help but reflect on the events that led up to this historic day. As he sat back, warmed only by the wool scarf wrapped around his neck, he vividly recalled that sweltering day on August 9, the day he held a press conference to expose the former president as a Libyan national. He had provided the press corps with evidence that the president illegally entered the U.S. and falsified not only his identity, but also most of his dossier. The fallout from the exposé forced President Abner Baari to step down and prepare for the legal action that was underway. Within days, he had mysteriously disappeared from public view.

The first lady had cleverly cloaked his exodus, stating that the president needed time alone to sort out his affairs. Out of respect for the First Family, Noble arranged for Baari to have a sufficient amount of time to put his affairs in order. However, it wasn't long until an investigative journalist discovered he had left the country alone—without the first lady and their nine-year-old daughter. How

he arranged to leave the country remained a mystery.

Abruptly, a loud ear-splitting sound snapped Noble back to the events of the day, just as the Washington National Symphony Orchestra finished with a resounding crescendo. The U.S. Marine Corps Band then struck up "Hail to the Chief." Noble instinctively glanced to his left and noted the arrival of the outgoing president pro-tem, secretly referred to as the "president-in-leaving" by those inside the beltway. He smiled as he ruminated, *The Congress must be feeling a sense of relief. After spending months running around caught in their own underwear, compliments of the former V.P., he was now thankfully leaving.*

The most recent crisis that befell Congress began with the swearing-in of the vice president. In August, he stepped into the breach as the constitutional replacement for the president following Baari's untimely resignation. Congress collectively believed the unthinkable had occurred. Neither party ever considered the possibility that the vice president might one day hold the highest office in the land. Most were aware he became Baari's running mate only because of his alleged foreign policy experience, something the presidential candidate clearly lacked. Many considered him a "loose cannon," given to uttering off-the-cuff embarrassing remarks. Stifling his gaffes had become a weekly sporting event. And, with his newly anointed power, there was a tacit agreement among the insiders that it would be impossible to control his loose tongue. To protect their parochial interests from the intrusions of the *accidental president*, an unprecedented number of senators and representatives had cancelled their summer recess plans to remain in Washington. It truly turned into the silly season for politics, even sillier than usual.

Meandering between his thoughts and listening to the magnificent music filling the air, Noble sighed remembering with some pain, *they also remained in the Capitol to interrogate me.* He had been the focal point of a major congressional investigation coined *Saviorgate* by a bipartisan group of four senators and four congresspersons, referred to as the *Octocrats*. In the end, they exonerated him, but not before he had endured a series of biased questions, repetitive cross-examinations, and exhaustive interviews. Those painful months took a toll on him.

At age 47, Noble still possessed his somewhat boyish face and tall lean physique, but his dark brown hair was now predominantly gray. Moreover, after the death of the former SIA Director Hamilton Scott—his mentor and surrogate father—Noble began to contemplate his own

mortality. While in the midst of reflection, the cymbals clashed without warning, emitting a powerful ring. The music came to an abrupt close, ending Noble's reverie. It was exactly noon. The current *appointed* president officially became part of Washington's checkered past. An amazing silence permeated the crowd. The moment had arrived. After two hours of prayers, readings, and music, it would be the next thirty-five spoken words that would change the course of history.

Randall Post stood tall with his right hand on the bible and his left hand held high, palm facing the audience. He repeated, "I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Immediately, an enthusiastic applause erupted. One could almost hear the spontaneous ovations emanating from across the country. For many, the applause was a nervous release from years of anxiety. In the past decade, Americans were fixated on their country seemingly stuck in a state of constant volatility, albeit the nation was slowly recovering. At the same time, they felt the effects of Europe's sovereign debt crisis that threatened the soundness of the world economy. Behind the curtain of the world stage, the Middle East turmoil added to the volatility stew. The "Arab Spring" of 2011 appeared to be a permanent fixture with spring always in the air. U.S. attempts to find a winning formula for peace in the region failed repeatedly.

Absent a stable economy and a coherent foreign policy, it was no surprise that the electorate, by a vast majority, elected a former state governor in the recent election. Inexperience and glibness were no longer in vogue. Having been exposed to a decade of political infighting, with no recovery in sight, the voters were frustrated and exhausted. And, after seeing the downfall of their president, the electorate unhesitatingly pulled the lever differently when they went to the polls. Amazingly, almost overnight, calm befell the country and confidence slowly began to emerge—not only on Main Street—but also on Wall Street.

The subdued crowd was riveted by President Randall Post as he delivered his Inaugural Address, "The Rebirth of America." It was as powerful in words as it was in substance. From the reaction of the crowd it was clear that they agreed wholeheartedly, recapturing some of the traditional American spirit.

I now feel the decisions I've made have merit. The president's message has given me the resolve to continue to serve my country.

Noble reflected as the president's words continued to reverberate.

It was clearly a time for the rebirth of America, a message many considered long overdue. But the swearing-in was only a formality. Now, the electorate would stand by waiting for the words to evolve into actions—a missing link in the past.

3

THE DEAD ZONE

The swearing-in ceremony flowed seamlessly as it continued throughout an extraordinary day. Then, after making cameo appearances at five of the eight parties around town, Noble was finally able to maneuver himself out of the boisterous crowd and back to the comfort of his office.

Seconds after settling in, Max burst in shouting, “More missing persons reported in the *Dead Zone*!”

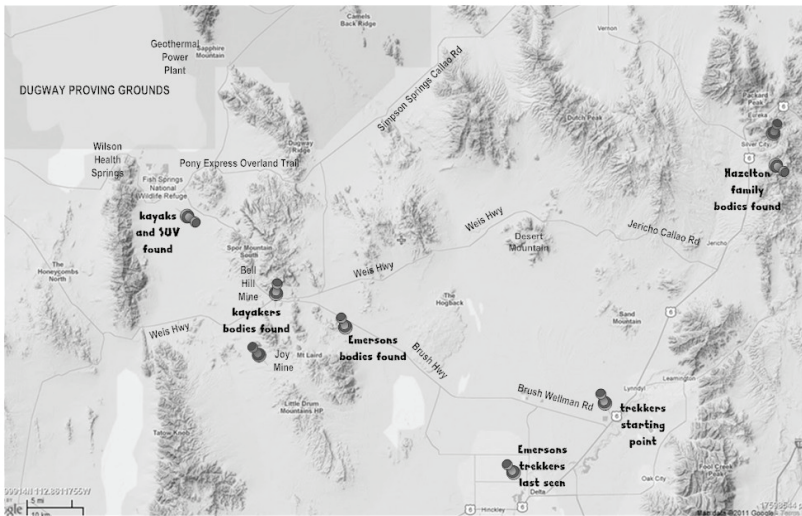
Having just returned from an inspiring day and after observing the inauguration, Noble wasn’t quite ready for the abrupt shift, but he trusted Max’s instincts. It had to be serious.

Maxine Ford accepted her position as SIA deputy director in 2010. Noble’s selection was easy. Years before, they were colleagues at the CIA. They were also friendly rivals. Max was undoubtedly the best among the undercover agents and possessed the precise qualifications he was looking for. She was tall, slim, with straight blond hair and dark hazel eyes, and considered by many to be extremely attractive. Her beauty, however, was deceptive, disguising the tomboy within. Competing with four older brothers created a toughness that became her major asset, occasionally placing Noble on the defensive. But aside from their obvious physical differences, Noble and Max were very

much alike intellectually. While Noble was brilliant, Max wasn't far behind. Most important, they were equally dedicated to their careers.

Max's outburst rattled Noble. Reflexively, he clasped his hands over his face as if he was screaming to himself. Then, unexpectedly, he stood up without saying a word and walked toward the conference room.

Max followed. Then she hurriedly sped past Noble at the entrance to the room and headed to the large multi-touch monitor. The screen mounted on the wall displayed a map of the *Dead Zone*.



“Two male trekkers were last seen here.” Max pointed to the area in the mid-western section of Utah. Then she tapped the screen several times to zoom onto the town of Delta, and then tapped again to focus in on the Quality Market on East Main Street. “They were reported missing on Tuesday by the father of one of the trekkers.”

“It’s Friday night. That’s over three days ago and we are just hearing about it now!” Noble snapped, noticeably peeved.

“The local authorities evidently didn’t feel the need to notify the FBI until yesterday,” Max said. She was also angry, but responded marginally in a sympathetic tone. “They didn’t know about the overall investigation and that the feds have taken over all missing person cases in the area you’ve dubbed the Dead Zone.”

Since April of 2016, there had been three separate cases of missing persons in the same part of the state. Now there were four. The FBI had

been unable to solve the first three cases and was unable to find any connections among them. For that reason, they enlisted the assistance of the SIA in September. At that time, Noble was enmeshed in the congressional hearings, so Max assumed responsibility.

“As you know, the feds are involved because the missing people disappeared on federal land,” Max reminded him.

“I know. It seems as if all the land out there has mystically morphed into government land,” Noble observed, in a mildly calmer manner, but no less sarcastic. He went on to note, “Reportedly, the government had claimed ninety percent of the land through eminent domain and the other ten percent by various methods. In fact, the federal government owns upwards of six hundred and fifty-three million acres of land, approximately thirty percent of the land in the United States. Those apparent land grabs are still hot topics in Washington today.”

Max was aware the government land grabs were one of Noble’s hot buttons and he would wax on the subject for hours. So she attempted to take back the floor, but not before he raised his right index finger in the air and said, “Hold that thought—you’re also aware that the state of Nevada retained only fifteen percent of its land for private use. For all practical purposes, the state of Nevada is government owned. Records also show the federal government owns seventy percent of Alaska, and their third largest government land holding is—*voilà*—Utah, possessing approximately fifty-eight percent of the state. How’s that for real estate holdings?”

Not hesitating this time, Max jumped in fast and announced, “That brings us back to Utah. The one problem, however, may not be the feds but the Bureau of Land Management, which happens to be the caretaker of the area within the Dead Zone.”

Noble glanced at his watch and noted the time, then sat back eyeing the map, urging Max to continue. “That could be an obstacle, but review what we know so far.”

“In April of last year, the Emersons, an elderly couple in their mid-seventies, were reported missing. We found their bodies—here.” Max pointed again to the map where she had previously added a pushpin and scribbled their names. The marker placed off the side of the Brush Highway was approximately six miles from Joy, an old mining settlement that had been deserted for years. “They had been traveling from their home in Sunrise Manor, a suburb of Las Vegas, to visit their daughter in Provo.”

“That’s what, a six hour drive?”

“Roughly, but I suspect they were probably driving more slowly than either you or I.” Max grinned, and then continued. “We were able to trace their whereabouts from several credit card receipts their daughter had provided.” Max confirmed that they made two stops after they left home. “Three and a half hours into their trip they stopped at a Dairy Queen in Beaver, just off Interstate 15. One and half hours later they purchased gas from the Chevron station in Delta.”

“That explains why they turned off the interstate.”

Max nodded in agreement. She then pointed to a location just north of the abandoned ghost town. “The bodies were discovered here, thirty miles northwest in the opposite direction from Interstate 15, which would have been a straight shot to Provo. A passing car found them the next morning.”

“What was the cause of death?”

“The coroner determined the cause to be hypothermia. The night before they were found, the temperature had dropped below freezing.”

“Why did they stop there, in the middle of this godforsaken country?” Noble asked, shaking his head.

“Evidently, they ran out of gas. Their fuel gauge registered empty.” Max waited for Noble’s reaction.

“But the tank had been filled thirty miles earlier.”

“Exactly! That is the one piece of the puzzle still unresolved. But wait—the next case is stranger.”

“In June, the Hazelton family of five was discovered here.” Max then pointed to another pushpin she had placed on the map, indicating a dirt road about two and a half miles south of Eureka. “Their van apparently skidded into a steep ravine off the Silver Pass Road. The autopsy determined the parents were killed on impact, although there was only slight bruising to their foreheads. Three young children between the approximate ages of three and seven were in the rear seat, ostensibly unharmed by the crash—all still buckled into their seatbelts.”

Noble recoiled with anguish. “Cause of death?”

“The children’s deaths were attributed to a combination of heat exhaustion and suffocation. The temperature was in the mid-eighties, but all the windows were closed and only the windshield had been shattered in the crash, allowing a minimal flow of air. We know again from the receipts that the family had stopped for lunch at the Summit Restaurant in Eureka. According to the waiter, the family was headed to Salt Lake City, an hour and a half drive north in the opposite

direction.”

“So how did they end up going south?”

“Again, it’s another puzzle to be solved.”

Noble let out a deep breath. “Who found the bodies?”

“A group of hitchhikers between rides.”

Noble noted the time again as he shifted in his chair. It was 6:30 p.m., but it was important to hear the rest. “What happened to the missing kayakers?”

Max tapped the screen and refocused the map on Utah’s Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge. “The wife of one of the kayaker’s called the rangers at the National Park Service when her husband hadn’t returned home the next day as planned. One of the rangers found their SUV here—just off the Pony Express Overland Stage Trail near Avocet Pool Road, approximately at this location. Another ranger found the four kayaks—here—on the banks of the Avocet Pool.”

Using the highlighting function, Max moved her index finger across the map and drew a yellow line from the location of the SUV to the point where the ranger found the kayaks. Then she continued to draw the line moving south to her next pushpin. “Here is where the bodies were found off the Weis Highway just west of the Brush Highway.”

“Max, slow down. The map is beginning to look like a football game as described by John Madden.”

“Stay with me. What’s curious is that the kayakers’ bodies were recovered twenty miles south, away from where they left their kayaks, near a body of water.”

“So what do you think happened?”

“They could have left their kayaks and decided first to walk out into the desert. I understand there are some awesome rock formations south near the Garnet Basin,” Max conjectured.

“It’s plausible, but why would they wander off into a desert and leave their supplies behind?”

“I’m not sure, but the feds checked the kayaks for any traces of evidence: fingerprints, hair, etcetera—any clues they could link to foul play.”

“And?” Noble probed.

“They discovered the kayaks never entered the water. The spring-fed lakes are brackish and there was no trace of salt anywhere!”

Studying the map further, Noble grilled himself as well as Max. “What’s going on? There’s nothing out there except an old abandoned mine that looks to be about four miles north of where the bodies were

found.”

“I have no clue.” There was clear frustration in Max’s voice. The same frustration was reflected on Noble’s face.

Heaving a sigh of displeasure he pressed, “And the cause of death?”

“This is another case of hypothermia. On that particular day in October, there was a wide range in the temperatures. During the day, the temperature hit ninety degrees, but that night it dropped below twenty-four degrees. It can’t get more extreme than that!”

Noble was becoming visibly flustered. “Move on to the trekkers.”

“A week ago today, two men in their mid-twenties began a seventy mile trek along Route 174, starting from Delta.” Max pointed to the map. “They were to head north toward Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge.” She drew her patent yellow line with her finger along the route, highlighting their trail. “They were heading to the same location as our kayakers,” she noted.

Noble acknowledged the coincidence, but remained skeptical. “What, are they crazy? That makes no sense. It’s January! In that part of the country both the day and nighttime temperatures are brutal,” he stated in a voice of disbelief.

“I agree.” Equally amazed, she added, “Yesterday, they ranged from a maximum of thirty-eight degrees to a minimum of thirteen degrees.”

Noble rolled his eyes. “What’s their story?”

“The feds reported that the two men are recent graduates of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, with mechanical engineering degrees. In March, they’re scheduled to leave for—of all places—Antarctica, to work for the IOAC, the Ocean, Atmosphere, and Climate scientific program. One would assume they’d be acquainted with local weather conditions.”

Max paused. Noting that Noble was becoming antsy, she continued, but picked up the pace.

“According to plan, the father of one of the men went to pick them up today at the junction of Route 174 and the Pony Express Overland Stage Trail. He waited the entire day. They never arrived.”

“Why did the father report them missing on Tuesday?” Noble questioned.

“Supposedly, the trekkers were scheduled to call in each night and report their location. The father received the last call on Sunday.”

“So what was this adventure, an endurance test for their new occupation?”

“According to the father—yes!”

Noble simply nodded in amazement and then instructed, “Remove your artful yellow lines from the map and then zoom in so we have just a view of the Dead Zone.”

Max complied.

“Okay, now start at the northwest corner near the south end of the Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge. This time, use the red highlighter. Mark off where the ranger found the SUV and the kayaks.” Noble waited briefly for Max to tap the appropriate icon and then mark the spots. “Now move south down Route 174 to where the kayakers’ bodies were found.”

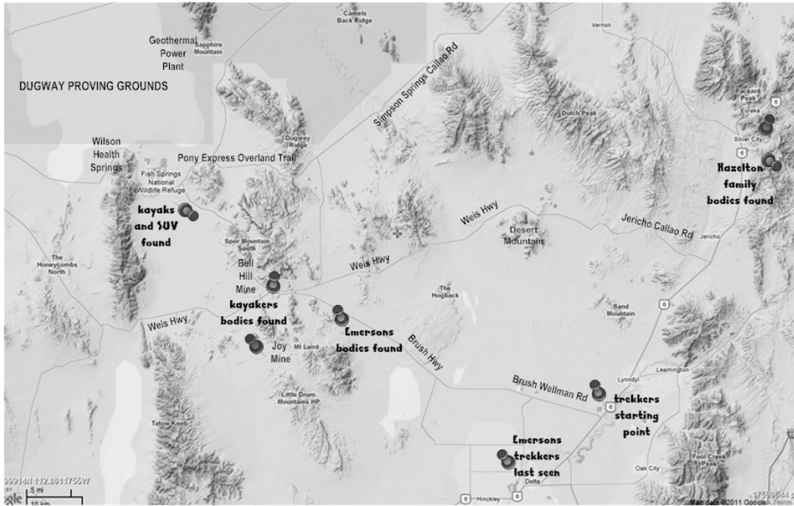
“Got it. You want me to continue south down Route 174 to where the bodies of the elderly couple were found and also mark that location in red.” Max spoke while simultaneously drawing the line with her finger, clearly getting the gist of Noble’s little exercise.

Noble sat back and remained silent as Max continued to move her hand to Delta, leaving another red mark. She then moved her hand northeast up Highway 6 to Silver City to the location where the car and the bodies of the Hazelton family were discovered. After completing the trail, her red line appeared to resemble a half-circle.

“You didn’t include the trekkers?”

“They’re still missing, but this is the trail they were supposed to have followed.” Max motioned her index finger up the Brush Highway.

Noble sat in silence for a moment of contemplation. Then, once again, he requested that Max remove all of the trail markings but leave all the pushpin markings in place. As Max followed orders, Noble sat back and gazed at the massive screen with a view of the Dead Zone—staring at the rugged terrain—searching for a pattern.



Without taking his eye off the screen, he asked, “What are the feds doing to find the trekkers?”

“They’ve been conducting ground searches daily since Wednesday, but each day they have to stop around five o’clock in the evening because the temperature begins to drop precipitously. Thus far, they’ve uncovered nothing.” Max, openly frustrated, added, “I’ll be receiving an updated report in the morning.”

“I hope these are two smart guys who can hang in there,” Noble said wistfully.

Max, trying to sound upbeat, informed Noble that the owner of the Quality Market in Delta reported that the two men had stocked up on provisions, and that they were carrying bags from the Delta Sports Center located on Highway 6. “So, if they know what they are doing, they’ll be able to hold out for a few more days.”

“Let’s pray.” Noble glanced at his watch for the third time. He stood up from the table and announced, “It’s time to call it a night. Let’s put our thinking caps back on tomorrow morning at eight o’clock sharp.”

“Speaking of eight o’clock, isn’t Amanda cooking for you tonight?”

It was seven-thirty.

“I can’t be late. I cancelled our last date and was miserably late for the one before. I’m still trying to adjust to this relationship thing which, according to Amanda, is the next stage that follows dating.” He admitted, “I’m petrified to think about what is in store.”

“Buy her some flowers; it works wonders,” Max suggested.

“Is that based on firsthand knowledge?”

“I’m out of here.” Max retreated and headed for the door.

“Tomorrow.” Noble waved Max on as she left the conference room. He returned to his office to grab his briefcase, which was never far from reach, and left for home.