



Chapter 4, Monday, September 1, 10:25 AM: A Red Rubber Ball and Patriotic Bastards

Reading Noble Dain's books, I had developed a picture of his life as a series of long, strange trips through government and political landscapes peopled with poltroons, buffoons, baboons, and the criminally insane. What I didn't see was that Noble was also a master manipulator who twisted events to make his trips ever longer and stranger. As Casey and I watched Barack duct-taping the last of a pair of Peavey 1200 Watt peak speakers—kept at the Café for use during street fair promotions—into the open windows of Casey's second-floor office, I felt one of Noble's manipulative webs tightening about me.

"Two hundred dollars?" I asked, not wanting to believe what I was hearing.

"On a good week," Casey confirmed, "most weeks less." Casey had been showing me the Café's books and was explaining how much, as the owner, I could expect to draw per week in profits. It wasn't enough.

"With profits like that, it's easy to see why Noleta wants to get her hands on the place," I said sourly. "It's a gold mine—fools gold."

“Noble wasn’t much interested in profits,” Casey said, “and Noleta just wants the building. It’s going to be worth real money before long.” That was hard to believe.

Facing Miles Street, the three-story building that housed the Chaos Café Bar and Grill sat one building west from the southeast corner of Miles and High. A used-book store, a shoe-repair shop, and an acupuncturist’s office occupied the bottom floor of the three-story building on the corner to the east. The two-story building next-door to the west had a used-furniture consignment store on the bottom floor, with a taxidermist’s shop, a photographer’s studio, and a talent agency on the floor above.

The view from the café’s back door, where I had stood watching Barack and Dagwood unload the items I had requested from my van after Dagwood retrieved it from the Road Master Inn, was similarly uninspiring. Across the alley on the right, a long, dark gray warehouse occupied the corner space on High and Club Streets,

Directly opposite the café’s back door and loading dock was a small parking lot open on the alley side, with one narrow entrance on Club, the opposite street. Most of the lot ran between the alley and the yellow back of what once had been the Clams’ Heaven Restaurant. The Heaven had closed when Kenyon Bay’s clam beds were found to have been permanently fouled by untreated sewage from when the county’s sewage management plan was in the hands of a conservative Board of Supervisors.

To the left of the parking lot, a building with scaling green paint provided office space for a low-cost auto insurance company, the law offices of a company specializing in auto accident claims, and Scooter’s Revolving Door Bail Bonds.

“This is one prime location,” I said. “With a little luck it might become a full-blown slum.” Casey sighed,

frowned, and turned away from the front window. She pointed to the right corner of the room.

“About four blocks that direction,” she said, “is the Port Kenyon Quay development, a tourist attraction filled with shops, street performers, and restaurants—think San Francisco’s Pier 31.”

“It would be doing much better,” Barack said, “if they had built it higher off the water so that starving sea lions couldn’t leap out of the bay and snag the occasional grandmother or toddler. That has made public relations a little difficult, and the ‘Please Don’t Feed Your Relatives to the Wildlife’ signs haven’t helped at all.” Casey glared at him then pointed to the room’s left corner.

“About three blocks that direction is the Ocean Street Warf. It’s like San Francisco’s Fisherman’s Warf.”

“Only with more salmonella, botulism, and E. coli,” Barack added.

“And we are right in the middle the same as San Francisco’s North Point area.”

“Sounds like we could rename the place *Typhoid Mary’s* and fit right in,” I said, but I got the point. Gentrification, that magical Midas spell so loved by city planners, would soon sweep over the area, raising property values all around, and the well-maintained building that housed the Chaos Café Bar and Grill would be gold indeed.

Barack finished plugging the Peavey amp into the speakers and my Sony, 300-CD changer into the amp. The changer was leftover from a marriage that had bent badly when I left the FBI and shattered completely when I started my singing career. It and a big box of CDs had been in the rear of the van.

I sat in front of the changer and quickly loaded it with a selection of folk music that included Pete Seeger, the Chad Mitchell Trio, the Kingston Trio, and of course, Phil

Ochs among others. I tossed in a few odds and ends and set the changer to shuffle.

By chance, the changer chose Phil Ochs' "Canons of Christianity" with a spoken introduction in which God wakes Phil and tells him Christianity has gone too far, and something must be done about it. From below came a collective gasp, followed by the demonstrators attempting to drown Ochs out with another round of the "Battle Hymn." The cacophony was enough to ruin a man's ear and drive him to modern, country western music.

The next selection was Pete Seeger's "This Land Is Your Land," which left the demonstrator's below in total confusion. I left the changer to work its magic and went down the back stairs to the Café below. As I stepped into the main room, I saw that the number of patrons had grown substantially. The tables were filling and drinkers lined the bar. Many were eating the "Hot as Hell," chicken wings, "Satan's Own," jalapeño poppers, and deviled eggs that were among the many items on the hastily developed appetizer menu.

Fueled by the appetizers and free Loose Toe Lager, those at the bar and several tables around them were singing along with Pete. The song changed to the Kingston Trio's "Three Jolly Coachmen," and the drinkers settled for sipping along in time. I found a place to stand at the quiet end of the bar, and Casey joined me.

"You've got a happy group here," she said. "But you don't look happy."

"I've got to make a living," I said, "but who knows how long it will be before I can get booked at another fair? Owning this place doesn't pay enough by itself, but it's going to be too valuable someday to let go of now."

"You mean you would sell if you could?"

“Not at Noleta’s price,” I said, “not now that I know she was low-balling me.” Casey’s face stiffened.

“You could work for a living,” she said. “There’s another office on the second floor in front of William’s stamp shop. That’s yours free, and you can have Noble’s apartment on the third floor. He had all his stuff moved out.”

“When?”

“The first of last month,” she said. “Why?” I ignored the question and asked what else was on the third floor. Casey said, “In addition to my apartment, which is part of my compensation package, there’s another little, one-room unit. We could rent that to make you some more money.” She made it sound like making me money was a bad thing.

“We’ll be neighbors,” I said.

“Don’t make anything of that!”

“Why so angry? I’m not selling the place now.”

“And it’s a good thing too. Noble always said you were absolutely throwing away your talent trying to be a singer.”

“Some might say that was making use of my talent.”

“Not anyone who’s heard your work, and Phil Ochs covers? Oh please. He barely made a living back when there was a big anti-war movement.”

“We need a more active anti-war movement.”

“And you think you’re going to start it?” Casey asked. Now I was getting mad, and I didn’t even have a drink to sulk in. I looked over the bar and found another bottle of Bud.

“That’s a bad habit,” Casey said. “You’ll have the customers doing that next.” I twisted off the cap and took a drink.

“We’ll post signs,” I said. Upstairs the changer started the Mother’s of Invention’s psychedelic “Who Are the Brain Police?”

After groaning for a time the group sang, “What would you do if we let you go home, and the plastic’s all melted and so is the chrome?”

“No one reads signs,” Casey said.

“You’re breaking them,” someone shouted from the door. “The demonstrators are beginning to drift away.” Ignoring Casey’s continuing glare, I suggested we go see what was happening. We walked to the front doors and stood looking out.

The younger men, in their dress shirts and ties, had been the first casualties. Only two remained. The other demonstrators, no longer enough to pack the sidewalk, seemed incapable of circling any longer. With pained looks on their faces, they stood in place and swayed drunkenly. The Mothers of Invention, was replaced by the Cyrle and their one sixties hit, “Red Rubber Ball.”

Bright and cheery they sang, “I should have known you’d bid me farewell, there’s a lesson to be learned from this, and I’ve learned it very well.” Half the remaining demonstrators edged away down the sidewalk.

“That’s doing it!” I said to Casey. “Quick, go tell Barack to run upstairs and put this on replay.” Casey left and I watched more and more demonstrators drift away at an increasing pace. Only eight to ten brave souls remained through the last line of the last repeated refrain, “The morning sun is shining like a red rubber ball.” When the song’s first peppy bars of pipe organ music started again, they turned and fled. Broken and demoralized, they dropped their signs behind them as they ran.

Jeremiah, skillet in hand, had left the kitchen, and she stopped me as I walked back into the main room.

“Please,” she begged, “no more, please. I’ll be six weeks getting that song out of my ears.”

“What cannot be changed must be endured,” I said and Jeremiah put her hands over her ears. From the changer upstairs, the music switched to Buffalo Springfield’s “For What It’s Worth.”

“I can handle that,” Jeremiah said, her face relaxing.

“OK,” I said, “but if the demonstrators come back, we’ll have to break out the big guns.”

“Oh no!”

“Yes,” I nodded, “a two-disk set of Neil Diamond’s greatest hits, played back to back.”

“You,” Jeremiah said, “are a fiend incarnate.” She turned and walked back to the kitchen. I found Casey and got the keys to the empty, second-floor office.

Standing in the door to the stairwell, I paused and looked back into the room. At the table nearest me sat three women in their mid-sixties, each neatly dressed in a pants suit or skirt and jacket. I was sure I had seen at least one of them outside with the demonstrators. They were eating wings and drinking light-colored beer. Looking further along the back wall, I saw Dagwood sitting alone, reading at a table.

I found it impossible to estimate Dagwood Shepherd’s age. At the start of the Viet Nam war, fatigues sported white name patches. Sometime during the conflict, the patches were changed to green, like his.

Even though his short beard was tinged with gray, I doubted he was old enough to have been in Viet Nam. His close-cropped hair was entirely black, and he had wide, dark eyes that reflected some deep, personal sorrow. He was very quiet and spoke oddly. Earlier, when I asked him to get my van, I had seen that the book he was reading was a section torn from a Bible. What did that mean? I couldn’t

guess, but I knew I trusted him. He seemed content, so I left him where he was.

“These are damned fine wings,” one of the demonstrator-aged women at the table near me said, her mouth smeared with red sauce. One of the others said the wings were the best she had ever had.

“We’ll have to come here again,” said the third.

“Ah,” I thought, “converts—heathens 3, Christians 0.” I smiled as I walked upstairs. I didn’t smile for long.

The inner stairs led up to the door to Casey’s office, where Barack had silenced the CD changer, and to a plain oak door further down on the other side of the hall. That door led into the inner of two empty rooms. I looked in and felt Noble’s presence like a giant thumb on the back of my head.

To call the rooms empty was not entirely correct. While neither was furnished with pictures, office supplies, typewriters, or computers; each had some furniture. The inner office had a large, oak desk with a side L for a computer, a metal filing cabinet, and a waist-high bookcase. An old-fashioned, wooden swivel chair with a red, floral seat pad sat behind the desk; two straight-backed wooden chairs sat in front. The outer office had frosted glass windows facing the outer hall, a wooden bench against the far wall, a small table for magazines, and two matching wooden chairs at either side. Both offices had large front windows looking down on Miles Street, and both were covered with aluminum Venetian blinds completely furnished with dust.

The office was the end of the trap. Noble couldn’t have known I was going to screw up my road-show business, but he would have guessed I would be too greedy, or too practical, to walk away from the chance of inheriting a building that could be worth millions.

Greedy or practical? I tossed the words back and forth in my mind. Practical, I decided. I was too practical to walk away. While I was going to be young forever, I still might like to retire someday, and owning a building worth millions might help. It just might. It was a practical thought.

I decided it was also practical to check the drawers in the filing cabinet. They were empty, but in the desk's bottom, right-hand drawer, I found a letter-sized yellow pad; a black pen; a bottle of 12-year-old Macallen Scotch; and a single glass. I knew that from heaven, hell, or—more likely—somewhere tropical, Noble was grinning like a garden toad. I poured a glass of the Scotch and saluted toward the street.

“You got me Noble, you son of a bitch, you got me,” I said and downed the drink. It was smooth and built a warm glow in my stomach. OK, so now it was time for the other shoe to drop. I waited, poured another drink, and waited some more. Nothing. I sighed. I was being silly. Not even Noble could manipulate events to fall that neatly into place.

I picked up the yellow pad. So what was I going to need? I had a computer that would do for both personal and business use. I would leave it upstairs in my apartment. Telephone service. I tried the bulky black phone on the desk. It worked, but what was its number? I wrote “Number,” on the pad.

My private Investigator's license was still valid. I had kept it current so that, when Road Show gigs became too thin, I could pick up extra cash doing legwork for my friend Ned Pierce's agency down in Santa Rosa. Likewise, my carry permit was still valid. Under “Number” on the pad, I wrote “business license,” then “business cards.” Boy

I was sailing now. The phone on the desk rang. I picked it up cautiously.

It was Hillary downstairs. She said she was transferring a call from a man who had a first edition he thought I would be interested in. I told her to go ahead, and I swore at Noble under my breath as I waited.



The house on Cliff Street, in the southwest hills of Port Kenyon, had a deep, green lawn behind a white, split-rail fence that would have kept out marauding cattle, but little else. There was no gate at the front, but there were security monitors along the drive and two sets of remote-controlled one-way spikes. One set would puncture your tires on the way in; the other set would rip them on the way out. The security was as gracious as the sweeping curve in front of the cobalt and white front porch with double security cameras discretely hidden above the steel front door.

The man who said he had the book had asked me to be discrete, so I had borrowed Jeremiah's 2003, silver Jetta, leaving my van in the Café's rear lot and the two brown suits in the tan Malibu parked on Club Street watching it. If anyone else was tailing me, they were better than the guys in the Malibu. I made your basic, dodge into a parking lot, circle and head back the opposite direction, maneuver three times and saw no one behind me. The maneuver won't lose a good tail, but it will show one up. I felt confident as I rang the bell.

The porch was deeply shaded, and when the door opened inward with a sound like a vacuum seal being broken, the dark hall inside was empty.

“Come in Mr. Eider,” the voice I had spoken with on the phone said. I stepped inside and the door closed. From a speaker hidden somewhere in the wall, the familiar voice told me to come on in and not be shy. I walked straight back past a number of closed doors through a wide arch that led into a room the width of the back of the house. The rear wall was constructed of a series of huge, outward-leaning picture windows that looked down through the September afternoon haze to the city and ocean far below.

“It’s a breath taking view is it not?” said a man seated at a bar where he could scan a row of monitors. He set down what appeared to be a keyboard-sized, remote control unit and walked over to offer his hand. He was smiling warmly.

With all the secrecy, I had expected to recognize the man behind the voice. I had never expected it to be the Reverend Amos Oxford, the man who almost sank Senator Duna Adisa’s campaign for the Democratic nomination for President.

“I see you know who I am,” he said. His skin color was a light ebony. His grip was warm and strong; his hand dry and rough as a laborer’s. I nodded. Montana’s warning about becoming involved in national politics suddenly had meaning.

Duna Adisa, now the junior Senator from Michigan, had—as a young man moving up in a Detroit Law firm—joined the Reverend Amos Oxford’s Unified Unity Church. He had credited Reverend Oxford with his full acceptance of Christ and his being called to public service, which ultimately led to his seeking the Presidency.

Less than a week ago, after a long campaign locked in a neck-to-neck race for the nomination with California Governor Margret Essex, Adisa had been declared the Democratic Nominee at the national convention in Denver.

Many of his conservative critics said that his name alone showed that he was too exotic, too risky, to be elected president.

“I didn’t know you had moved to the area,” I said. Oxford said the house was on loan from a friend who was out of town for the month.

“I’ve made many friends over the years,” Oxford said, “believers and non believers both. I understand that you are not a person of faith.” Oxford’s smile was still warm and unforced. I had the feeling I amused him in some way.

“I have faith in some things and not in others,” I said. “I don’t believe in God, but you would have to call me an agnostic, because it is impossible to prove a negative.” Oxford chuckled softly.

“I would like to have some time with you,” he said. “Sadly, I will probably not get the chance. He reached down to the cushions of one of the couches that were set across the long room and lifted up a book. “I believe you are interested in obtaining this.”

He handed me a first edition of Noble Dain’s first book, “Patriotic Bastards: the Story of the 1968 Presidential Elections.” Inside the front cover was written, “To my old friend Amos Oxford, who will know how to use this book. I know you need no book to remember.” It was signed, “Noble Dain.”

“I met Noble at the Democratic convention in Chicago,” Oxford said. “I could not save him.” His voice was low and sad. I refrained from suggesting that he might still get the chance.

“Noble never wanted to be saved,” I said, “at least not from himself.”

“Yes,” Oxford said brightening again, “he was rather glad you saved him, however unnecessarily, from

that group of enraged girl scouts in Missouri. I'm sure the story he told me bears little resemblance to the actual events."

"Noble has a way of shifting reality."

"As does youtube," Oxford said. "I watched the complete version of your song, and while it has objectionable elements, it is not the work of a demon. You do not deserve the hate I see in the comments."

"And I watched your complete sermons and even read your book of sermons, 'The Strength of a Tear.' I can't agree with everything you've said, but I'm better for hearing you say it."

"We're in love," Oxford said and grinned. "Ain't that grand?"

"But May-December romances never work out."

"What May?" Oxford said. "Maybe November-December, I see the snow on your roof too."

"It's premature," I said. Oxford shook his head slowly. I asked what it was he wanted me to do for him.

"I need you to recover some notes that Senator Adisa made for a letter to me he was planning to write."

"You'd better take me through it step by step," I said. "I have all afternoon." It was a good thing.

I had followed the public side of the events. When Ferret News had begun playing youtube snippets of controversial statements from Reverend Oxford's sermons, Senator Adisa had tried to distance himself from only the statements at first. But when the coverage—around the clock and unrelenting—moved into the mainstream media, Senator Adisa addressed the issue in a historic speech on faith in America, during which he distanced himself further from Reverend Oxford.

"That was in mid-March," Oxford said, "and as you know, I took a leave of absence from my church to let the

furor die down, but after a month and a half, I was still mad. What has happened to the idea of fair play in America? You look to me like someone who grew up watching Roy Rodgers.”

“More Randolph Scott, Paladin, and the Defenders,” I said. “But the good guys always played fair.”

“Not anymore,” Oxford said. “Where, I asked myself, were the investigative reporters who would go beyond the snippets, who would say, *‘wait a second, there’s more to Amos Oxford than those few words. Look at what else he has said; look at all the good he has done in his community. Why would he say those inflammatory things? And how inflammatory are they really?’*”

“I’ll tell you, my sermons are a journey. I take the congregation from where they are, I show them extremes, and I bring them back to a point of Biblical perspective. I challenge them emotionally and intellectually to grow. *‘God Damn America,’* I say. When the greatest and most powerful nation on earth falls into error that God would damn, how do we live here? The savior says with forgiveness. *‘Judge not: and you shall not be judged. Condemn not: and you shall not be condemned. Forgive: and you shall be forgiven,’* Saint Luke 6, 37. That is the message I want to leave in the hearts and minds of my congregation. I challenge them to grow and forgive.

“What else have I said that should not be heard? That our country’s own actions created the conditions that led to our being attacked on 9/11? That wasn’t my original thought. One of our own ambassadors said that, and he was not alone. Is the United States so delicate that we cannot look at our own failings?

“Did you know that the first warning that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would escalate the level of acceptable violence and that we would eventually

feel the effects of that escalation was sent by scientists to President Truman, before he dropped the bomb? Spat Duncan, one of the conservative commentators blasting me, himself wrote an article that called the use of atomic weapons in Japan acts of terrorism.

One famous comedian, using humor to point to our faults, calls bombing brown people America's hobby. I am in no way alone in my criticisms. My views may not agree with yours, but I do not speak out of ignorance or hate.

“Where was America's sense of fair-play when the Swift-boaters attacked John Kerry? Joseph Welch simply asked Senator McCarthy, *‘Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?’* and the American people saw McCarthy for what he was and turned their backs on him. Where is that instinct in America today?

“That and more was on my mind when I spoke at the United Unity Church National Convention in San Francisco, and in my anger and in my pride I went too far. I inflamed the mindless passions of those who cannot tolerate intellectual dissent. Those who see the world as black or white, right or wrong, good or evil, and those who practice guilt by association. I left Senator Adisa no choice but break with me harshly and completely. It was the only way to silence the gathering mob.

“The night Adisa made that decision, his heart was torn, and he did something stupid. You may have noticed how during debates he is constantly making notes? It is a habit of his, and that night, he sat down to gather his thoughts for a letter telling me how badly he felt about having to break from me. That may sound hypocritical, but he is a complex man, capable of seeing the good in others, who are invariably flawed. But to do the good he can for

this country, he must present an image acceptable to those who do not tolerate complexity.”

This was all fine and good but it wasn't getting me any nearer to knowing what Oxford wanted me to do. I tried a prompt.

“So Adisa made notes for this letter to you?” I said. Oxford nodded.

“But time ran out, and he turned to working on his speech for the press conference. He worked in the same yellow pad, and when he finished, he tore those notes out from under the ones for the letter. He carried those notes into another office, where he and his campaign manager polished his speech on a computer. The next night, after giving his press conference, Senator Adisa discovered that the yellow pad with the notes for his letter to me was missing.”

“And those notes would drive a stake right through the heart of Adisa's campaign. Obviously no one from Governor Essex's campaign got their hands on the pad.”

“It's certain that Essex's campaign would have released the notes prior to the convention, since scuttling Adisa would do her no good now. And for a time, it looked as though the notepad had simply been destroyed. The first few pages were old notes, thoughts about modifying speeches, dates for events that had passed—that sort of thing. The senator had left the pad on the desk in a small office he used at campaign headquarters. It was a room with restricted access, but not high security. Adisa hoped that one of his aides or interns had thought the pad used up and had shredded it. All that kind of material is shredded.”

“Seems like dangerous, wishful thinking for a politician.”

“Wishful thinking is the very essence of politics,” Oxford said. “Without it, democracies couldn't function.

And, after a month, the pad's inadvertent destruction seemed likely. Whoever has it waited until Friday to call."

"Last Friday," I said, "the day after the convention."

"Senator Adisa received a text message on a cell phone, the number known only to a few close aides and interns. It left instructions for calling a pre-paid cell phone. There is no way to trace it."

"So what do they want?"

"Five million dollars," Oxford said, "in hundreds in two suitcases. The blackmailer has no fear of the bills being marked or traced. There is no way Adisa can prosecute. The Senator was given 24 hours to consider the demand."

"When did you get involved?"

"I heard about the missing notepad from Adisa back during the first week in August, two days after the news conference at which he severed our relationship. He and his staff had made a thorough search. Everyone had been questioned. He was very worried about the missing pad, but he was more worried about how I was feeling. He is a good man and was very conflicted."

"And he went to see you, even though he had told the world he was severing all ties. That was risky."

"I haven't seen the senator for months," Oxford said. "He calls my private cell from public phones. He did the same after he got the blackmailer's demands. He knows I have a wide variety of acquaintances, and he asked if I had any resources that could help."

"And you had me."

"A gift from the angles," Oxford smiled.

"Wednesday of last week, I received a package with Noble's book, instructions on how it could be used, and a note about the kind of skills you have. He didn't mention that he was contemplating suicide, and at the time, I couldn't see how I would ever use you."

I thought that the gift had come from a level well below the angles, but I kept it to myself. I asked, “Did Noble know about the missing notes?” Oxford looked uncomfortable. After a second he spoke.

“Noble was visiting the week the notepad went missing, and he saw I was worried. He wanted to know why, and you know how Noble was, he kept gnawing at it until I relented. After Noble promised to keep it off the record, I told him everything.”

As a Banzai journalist, Noble’s greatest talent was his ability to predict where the next shit would fly. He had once noted that, “It is the shit that is not nailed down, that floats around and hits fans.” He would have recognized the missing notes as shit without a nail in it, and it would have worried him.

“Did he know that the person you suspect is here in Port Kenyon?” I asked.

“Noble died before the blackmail attempt, but he had stayed in touch. That’s part of why his suicide came as such a surprise. It seems like I should have noticed something.”

“Only if he wanted you to,” I said. “And the suspects?”

“He knew that, since the pad’s disappearance, the only staff who had raised security concerns were two interns who had returned to Port Kenyon. How did you know?”

“You’re here,” I said, “and I’m here. Your suspect must be here. If your suspect was in Dayton, you’d be in Dayton, and you’d be talking to someone in Dayton—or you would have sent me a ticket, and I would be in Dayton. So who do you suspect? “

“Two best friends, Chelsea Burgess and Betty Drake. Both took a leave of absence from their senior year

at Kenyon Bay State University to work on Adisa's campaign. One was a political science major; the other majored in journalism. Both were wildly idealistic when they started, but politics involves many coldly calculated, practical decisions that can be hard for idealists to accept. A year on the campaign had left Chelsea and Betty feeling sour, and a little over a week after the notepad turned up missing, both gave two weeks notice that they were leaving the campaign and returning to school.

"Most of their co-workers had expected the girls to remain with the campaign through the convention. That's what everyone works for, the grand finale. But, given Kenyon Bay State University's start dates and the girls' jaundiced attitudes, their leaving made sense. They, of course, were questioned closely and their luggage searched. They seemed clean."

"But now you think Adisa's security missed something?"

"They are the only staff members who have left the campaign and who had access to Senator Adisa's private office and knew his private cell number. In fact, Jay Knox—an opposition researcher who had neither access to the office nor a knowledge of the cell phone number—is the only other member of the headquarters staff who has left. We don't think he was involved in the theft of the material, but we think he may wish to become involved. His motives are unclear."

"I wouldn't want anything about this to be unclear," I said. Oxford explained that Jay had known Chelsea slightly. He had a car, she didn't, and sometimes he would help her run errands. Chelsea has a boy fiend named Keith Taylor here in Port Kenyon, and her relationship with Knox appears to have been Platonic. When Chelsea and Betty left, he stayed and continued his work.

“But now he’s a concern?”

“Knox was in Denver at the convention the day Senator Adisa was officially nominated. He called his section head that evening and resigned. He said he had been offered a better position and was leaving immediately. That, of course, sent up an abundance of red flags, which led our security chief to discover that Knox had spent Thursday evening with one Opal Faber. Ms. Faber is an administrative assistant in campaign security and had helped in the search for the missing notepad.”

“And Thursday night she told Knox about it,” I guessed. Oxford nodded. His expression was forgiving.

“In her mind, the danger had passed after the nomination was secured. Alcohol was involved, and Ms. Faber’s relationship with Knox appears to have been more Plutonic than Platonic.”

“Did she tell him about the senator’s notes?”

“Yes, but not what the notes were about. She didn’t have that information.”

“So it’s possible that Knox has guessed that Chelsea or Betty have something that could damage the Senator, but he doesn’t know what, and he couldn’t know about the blackmail. Still, he may be coming here to get a finger in the pie somehow.”

“He hasn’t been back to his apartment in Detroit.”

“So Knox may present an additional complication,” I said, “but the central question remains. Will the Senator pay to get his notes back?”

“No,” Oxford was definite. “Senator Adisa doesn’t have that kind of money, and he can’t take it from the campaign. He could go to certain sources to raise it, but that would leave him with obligations he has vowed to avoid. For now, he is stalling.”

“When the blackmailer texted him again on Saturday, he asked for proof that he or she had the material and received a text directing him to a 2006 copy of the Michigan Penal Code that he didn’t even realize was in the office. Folded inside that book were the miscellaneous notes that had been ahead of the others on the pad. Adisa texted back that he needed more time to raise the money, and the blackmailer gave him until Wednesday morning. After that, other buyers will be consulted.”

“The Senator may be able to stretch the time limit a little further,” I said. “Whoever the blackmailer is must know that if Adisa pays, he or she can deposit the money in any bank and go on with life. Adisa could never let this come to light. If the blackmailer sells the notes to some news agency or to the Republicans, he or she could easily get caught up in the story. That makes Adisa the safest mark. How is he supposed to make contact once he has the money?”

“He will receive a text Wednesday morning. The blackmailer keeps changing pre-paid phones. After a day there is no call-back number.”

“So I have to get the notes back without paying. That’s a neat trick. How do you want me to do it?”

“Discreetly,” Reverend Oxford said, “and quickly. If we’re right, these are young women in over their heads. Talking to them may be enough. Beyond that, you can con them, or seduce them, or set up a fake drop and take the notes from them. Do not hurt them. Senator Adisa does not want any strong-arm tactics. I could have brought people out from Detroit for that.”

“The girls are lucky it’s Adisa they’re dealing with and not Vice President Macduff.”

“They would be in Gitmo right now, gaining insight into the merits of waterboarding,” Oxford said. He gave me

a slim file with pictures of both girls and Jay Knox and all the background information available on each. He also had a contract for me to sign.

“You are being hired as a private investigator by Roald Cherry. He is an attorney but not connected to Adisa’s campaign. If you get an official request for information about your client, you may give them Mr. Cherry’s name. He will claim attorney client privilege and if pressed say that you are attempting to recover a personal item for me.

“Under no circumstances will Mr. Cherry tell the authorities about Senator Adisa. He may, however, pass instructions to you, and he can answer any question you may have. This expense money comes from him.”

He handed me a letter-sized white envelope stuffed with bills. I riffled through them and saw fives, tens, twenties, and fifties. It was several hundred dollars. I signed the contract, and Oxford said to let Mr. Cherry know if I needed more expense money. He said Mr. Cherry’s cell-phone number was in the file.

“You may have one problem you don’t know about,” I said and told him about Reverend Montana’s warning. “I doubt he knows everything, but he knows something is up.”

“He shouldn’t even know that,” Oxford said. “We’ve got a leak somewhere.”

“Or of some kind,” I said. “Don’t use e-mail to discuss this, and if you have to use a phone, either cell or conventional, talk around the subject. Act like someone is listening.” Oxford shook his head.

“That makes everything so much harder,” he said. “I would have liked to contact you last Saturday, but it took this long for us to get me here and make all the necessary arrangements while maintaining security.” I nodded my

understanding and didn't tell him that had he called the Chaos Café on Saturday no one would have known me from a gopher snake. Maybe it was part manipulation and part chance, at some level it was Noble's will that brought all the pieces together.

I stood at the bar while Reverend Oxford checked the monitors. No cars seemed to be lurking on the street outside. He said he would let me out by remote control, and we shook hands again.

“It was nice to have never met you,” he said.