

On Death and Flying

Tim Martin

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For Dawnya. I'd still be stuck if it wasn't for you.

Since writing this book, I have spoken with an alarming number of people whose lives have been affected by child abuse. Not even a consideration in my childhood, the problem seems to be everywhere ... and growing. Please don't turn a blind eye or deaf ear. Get up and do something.

PROLOGUE

I had just turned sixty. A big age.

Before sixty I had kept busy—too busy to think about dying. At sixty I had time to think about the end being closer than the beginning—a lot closer.

I found myself spending big chunks of my dwindling time, usually at three in the morning, thinking about my disappointing past. And no matter how much I thought about it, it just didn't get any better.

I couldn't imagine the end being good. It would just be *the end*.

So I wanted what most people want, I suppose, as they think about dying. I wanted to do something that would make up for all the things I regretted doing. And even more important, I wanted to do something that would make up for all the things I hadn't done.

I wanted to do something I knew, without a doubt, was right and good.

I decided to kill John and Scarlett Bradley

Part 1 CHAPTER 1

John and Scarlett Bradley were awful people—awful in every way imaginable, and awful in some ways that were unimaginable.

They were doing a lot of illegal things; poaching, stealing, selling drugs. I could imagine all that. They had likely killed John's half-brother and moved into his house. I could even imagine that. But worst of all, they had children and they did bad things to them. That was the part I found unimaginable.

I didn't know them when this all got started. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen them. I probably had. It turned out they lived less than a mile from me. But not knowing someone living that close to you wasn't odd in North Idaho.

There were lots of people who didn't want to be known and you just let them be. You'd help them if they needed it, and they'd help you if you were stuck in the ditch, but you didn't go knocking on their doors.

John and Scarlett Bradley lived up off of Baldy Mountain Road on a dead-end stretch of dirt called Jesus Is My Redeemer Lane. How it got that name I didn't know, but I was certain they didn't have anything to do with it.

John had inherited the land and the house a decade earlier when his half-brother Travis Bradley, a building contractor, was killed at a work site. It had been a bizarre accident involving a framing nail gun wielded by ... John Bradley.

Somehow a 16-penny nail had been driven into his half-brother's head, rather than into the stud on which John had been working. They were alone at the site when the tragedy occurred. With nothing beyond John Bradley's word to go on, the death was ruled accidental. A stupid accident for sure, but you can't prosecute a person for being stupid.

Apparently there was no other living family, so John and Scarlett moved out of their aging double-wide up in Boundary County and into the dead half-brother's house on Jesus Is My Redeemer Lane a few days after the funeral.

Sometime after that they started having babies—three little girls.

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I had not wanted a party for my sixtieth. It was the first of my birthdays that I had really thought about in terms of getting older ... dying, I mean ... and I didn't want to make it a bigger deal than it was already becoming in my head.

I was pretty proud that I was still in good shape. I could spend all day in the mountains hiking and fishing and not get very tired. I'd kept most of my hair, although it had turned white. I didn't take prescription drugs for my heart, or cholesterol, or high blood pressure, or heartburn, or anything. I had weighed pretty much the same since I was thirty. I was still quick on the uptake. I had gotten to the point I didn't have to be the smartest guy in the room.

People seemed to think I knew something valuable about business and communications. I had a few clients who were paying me to share that knowledge with them.

My wife Suzanne was a great partner—the smartest person I ever knew—and she wasn't afraid to piss me off by pushing back. It was pretty hard to appreciate when she did it, but in

the long run she'd helped me look at things from a lot of different angles; a very good thing for me.

I lived on a mountain in North Idaho in a house I had built and it had a view to kill for. People told me I was lucky. All-in-all I couldn't complain ... or I shouldn't have.

But sixty had some significance for me I couldn't shake. One of my grandfathers had died at sixty, and my dad had succumbed to cancer in the last year of his sixth decade. That kind of stuff gets to everybody at some level, whether you want it to or not.

My wife had always insisted that special birthdays, usually the ones with a zero, required a party. It could never have been a surprise so thank God we didn't have to go through all that drama. A group of friends came up to the house for food and drinks and games and talk. It had been months since I'd seen many of them.

My friends were many different ages. My closest friend, Steve Albright, who was working and missed the party, was in his mid-forties. My other friends ranged in age from thirty to nearly eighty. I got a kick out of the mixture of ideas and prejudices and futures and memories. And I appreciated people who were willing to learn something from others regardless of their age.

People have children a lot later than they used to, so our gatherings quite often included a gaggle of kids. I kind of liked that too, but I was usually relieved when they went home and the noise level dropped back down to what I was used to.

My birthday fell on a Saturday. It was the first really decent day after a long winter, and at almost fifty degrees we could stay outside in the sun, stand around a bonfire and have a drink.

It was at my party that I got the first installment of the John and Scarlett Bradley story, and what was going on just a short hike from my house.

I found myself alone by the fire ring, hearing that Beatle's birthday song in my head. The wood was damp and the fire was a little slow so the guests had gone down onto the back patio where the view was great and they didn't have to breathe a bunch of smoke. I could hear little kids squealing and playing.

I was fiddling with the fire when Ben Chandler eased up next to me, grinned and handed me a bottle of brown ale from a local brewer. "Here's a little present birthday boy," he said.

"Thanks," I said. "My favorite; how *did* you know?"

My friends knew I had a beer fridge in the garage. Most had brought something to drink and had stuck the stuff they wanted to keep cold out there without any prompting. They also knew they were welcome to help themselves. Ben had given me a bottle from my own stash. It was an on-going gag.

He took a long drink from his own brown bottle. "Happy birthday old man. So what words of wisdom do you have for the younger set?" Ben was in his early fifties. He didn't miss a chance to rub it in.

I said, "Oh, I guess I'd tell everybody they're going to die at some point so take advantage of the day; Carpe Diem."

We clinked bottles and drank, then stared silently into the struggling fire. The death subject usually had that effect on people and I regretted saying it.

Ben broke the silence, side-stepping the smoke that had swung around his way. "Yes, seize the day! It's kind of hard to maintain that thinking at our house right now," he said glumly. "Our new girls are in far worse shape than we had thought they were."

Huh, new girls? I didn't have any idea what he was talking about. I felt like an aging idiot.

Ben and his wife Jessica already had a bio-daughter, Cindy, and had adopted Lulu from Korea a couple of years earlier. Of all my friends' kids, they were my favorites.

I wasn't surprised they'd taken in more children, but was shocked I hadn't known. Ben and Jessica had huge hearts. Their place was a menagerie of cast off animals. They wanted to help every abused, put-to-pasture or homeless creature that came down the road.

I often wished I had half as much to give as they did.

These new girls, and whatever was going on with them, was obviously a big deal for Ben. I confessed my shortcomings as a friend and asked him to fill me in.

Ben gave me the story of John and Scarlett Bradley—the mistreatment and suspected molestation of their three daughters; Beth, Mary, and Dawn. How they had been taken away from the Bradleys by Idaho's Child and Family Services and placed as foster children with Ben and Jessica. "You cannot imagine how messed up these girls are," Ben went red in the face. I'd never seen that side of him. He was a big man, fit and muscular, but never imposing or threatening. He had my attention.

We heard the back door open, breaking his intensity. Ben's wife Jessica, glass of wine in hand, came out and walked up the short rock incline to join us. She was smart and determined. I always thought there was nothing Jess couldn't do.

I gave her a hug. "Hi Jess, really glad to see you. Been too long. Sounds like you've had a lot going on."

"Happy Birthday, Chip! You look pretty good for an old guy." Jessica was about the same age as her husband. They were good together. "Yeah, it's been quite a winter." She sipped her red wine. "Your wood's wet."

"My wood tarp's shot." I blinked in the smoke. "Maybe I'll get a new one for my birthday."

"I was just starting to tell Chip about the girls," Ben said, putting his arm through his wife's.

"Oh," she said, her voice going up a notch and her smile fading. "Oh Chip, the poor little things. I'm not sure you want to hear this."

Ben was silent, hard as granite. My friend replaced by a stranger with up-close, irrefutable knowledge of something unthinkable. The stricken stranger looked up over the house toward a spot on Baldy Mountain, then back at me. "You have no idea Chip. No idea."

How bad could it really be, I thought. "I'm here to listen," I said, forgetting about my other guests.

The Ben-stranger looked at Jess. She nodded.

"What would you say to a six-year-old girl who, after you read her a bedtime story and tucked her in, asks if she should suck your cock?"

NO. NO. NO! The horrible words coming from my friend's mouth were solid, grinding me between them, breaking me into useless pieces.

Ben and Jessica Chandler spent the next twenty minutes sobbing and unloading. I put up my armor and tried to get the rest of it to bounce off, but it was too late. It got through and stuck.

The Bradley girls had put Ben and Jess way off balance. They were sweet and cuddly one moment, hateful and striking out the next. Always watching—men in particular—with scared rabbit eyes.

The youngest, Beth, was blonde, pretty and the meanest person Ben had ever encountered. He was fearful she would hurt their animals, their other girls, or maybe even Jess.

Ben, sounding a long way off said, “They’re afraid of me. They don’t know what to do with Jess, but they’re scared shitless of me.”

Jess talked through angry sobs as she related how Dawn, the oldest and just eleven, held it all in during the day and screamed in her sleep all night—every night.

How do you convince an eleven-year-old girl that you’re not going to come into her bed while she’s sleeping and hurt her?” Ben lowered his chin onto his chest and sucked in a deep breath.

He went on to describe how the middle girl, Mary, was reclusive and tended to hurt herself if she thought she had done something wrong. “The other day she spilled a glass of juice at breakfast. She was so scared she grabbed a kitchen knife and locked herself in a closet. When we finally got her out, her arms were covered with blood.”

I couldn’t conceive of a nine-year-old so distraught that she’d cut herself.

Nobody in the Chandler house was sleeping. The entire family, even the animals, was acting strange, getting sick. There was the stultifying realization of how damaged the new girls really were, but Ben and Jess were determined to help no matter what it took.

“What about the parents, these Bradleys? What happened to them?” I saw murder in Ben’s eyes before I finished asking.

“That’s the part I just can’t figure out,” Ben said. “Those scumbags are still free. Nothing happened to them at all. They’re running around loose up there.” He pointed over the top of my house. “Probably less than a half mile from here.”

“What, a half a mile from here?” How could I not have known?

“Yeah, up on Jesus Is My Redeemer Lane.”

“Jesus! How can that be if the state took the girls away from them?” A few seconds ago I had lived in my safe, beautiful place where this horror wasn’t even a possibility.

“I can’t get a straight answer from anybody as to why they aren’t in jail. I’d like to put a bullet in those sons of bitches’ heads.”

Jessica didn’t interrupt. She stared grimly into the fire and sipped her wine.

And at that moment, I thought Ben would have done it and slept soundly.

At least until Dawn’s screams woke him up.

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After the party I lay sleepless. I was looking at the time being projected in red up on the ceiling by my wife's elaborate clock. It also belched out surf and ocean sounds that actually were kind of pleasant. She got in, pulling the blue blanket up under her chin.

"Hope you had a happy birthday," Suzanne whispered. "You good?"

"Just a little restless from the excitement I guess," I whispered back.

She was warm and asleep almost as the words left my mouth; safe in our bed.

I thought about what Ben and Jessica Chandler had told me; the look of despair on their faces as they had told it. I thought about Cindy and Lulu, their original daughters, now witness to things no child should ever have to see.

I thought about the Bradley girls. During the party I had watched them running in my tiny backyard. Innocent, happy angels playing in sweet March sunshine—just down the road from where their beast parents still breathed, unpunished.

My safe little world had been broken into pieces. I felt a boiling wave of rage rise up and take over the dark bedroom.

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I proceeded to brood all the next day about the little girls and my friends—and what the Bradleys had gotten away with. I felt paralyzed; helpless and sick of everything and everyone. But down deep I knew it wasn't everyone ... it was me. When had I become this gutless shell, rooted to the ground, unable to act while everything went wrong around me?

That night I had a conversation that would change everything.

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When I moved to Sandpoint I joined the local chapter of Trout Unlimited. We were fly-fishermen working to improve trout habitat. I'd made some good friends there.

TU meetings were held on Mondays, but since St. Patrick's Day fell on a Monday and our president's name was O'Hara, we met a day early.

It was a typical March night. Drizzling cold that went through you—a good Sunday evening to be inside with friends. We talked about plans to improve Granite Creek, a little stream that ran into the east side of Lake Pend Oreille, the enormous alpine lake on which Sandpoint had been established in the 1880s.

We debated for an hour and a half about what it would take in money, manpower, and all the blah-blah-blah and political correctness that goes along with trying to get decisions made with a bunch of well-meaning volunteers. No decisions made; a regular meeting.

Afterward, a few of us went over to Skip's Pub for a beer. Skip's is the place in our tourist town for locals. It's full of old artifacts, old pictures and old friends. It feels and smells like a pub should; kind of old, but rich and full of character. Safe, I guess you might say.

I sat at a table with Steve Albright, the local fish and game officer, and my closest friend ever.

Steve was from Maine. He stood about five-foot-four, had a great wife, two cute daughters in high school, and had put a lot of tough people in jail.

If you haven't lived in North Idaho, you probably can't imagine the attitude some people have about being told when, where, or what they can hunt. When the freezer is empty, you go fill it. If there's a bear in the yard and it's starting to worry the wife, you shoot it. If a better elk rack than the one you got yesterday walks by, you may never get a better chance. Not the government's business.

And there was the poverty. It wasn't about low paying jobs. There weren't *any* jobs. So a lot of these "hunting" activities weren't seen as illegal ... just survival.

Through the years, as we got close, Steve had told me some pretty wild stories; true stuff about waiting on a remote logging road in the dark for guys with rifles to come packing out an elk quarter or dragging a bear shot out of season. And he'd busted more than one upstanding citizen with a load of drugs they'd just slipped down from Canada.

He never knew what he might be walking into and that's what he liked about his job.

This is an interesting guy, a person worth knowing. The kind of man you want to have on your side. Our level of trust was as high as it gets between a couple of men and I knew some things he really shouldn't have told anybody.

We were catching up. "So, how does it feel to be old and decrepit?" Steve laughed. "I hated to miss your party."

"We had the usual good time," I said. "The weather was perfect. Good company, good food. And it was especially nice not to have to put up with any crap from you."

"Sounds like a great way to celebrate going over the hill." He was still laughing. "You get a case of Depends or Viagra or anything useful?"

"Ha-Ha," I raised my voice to get over the music that had just started. "We all missed your quick wit."

On a Sunday night there weren't too many people in the Pub, but it was Open-Mic night so a bunch of the regulars were up on the little stage getting under way. They were making some pretty decent music.

Izzy Feldman, a heavy-set, forty-something guy with thinning red hair, a traditional Chinese herbalist and chiropractor when he wasn't singing rock and roll in Skip's Pub, was at the microphone belting out *Blue Suede Shoes*, doing a pretty good Carl Perkins.

Steve and I listened to people we knew, or at least recognized, make music. We chatted and drank dark, heavy porter. We talked about fishing, rods and reels, and about some other friends, Ron and Jill, who hadn't been at the TU meeting that night. They were off in the Bahamas for their annual bonefishing trip.

"That damn Ron sure knows how to live, doesn't he?" Steve was saying. "He manages to make a living and still fishes more than anybody I ever met."

"Yeah, and he lives with a pretty good fisher person too," I said. Ron's girlfriend, Jill, could fish anywhere with anybody.

About 8:30 the rest of the TU guys started taking off. It was a school night.

Steve didn't give me the same cues about wanting to leave. When the door closed behind them he said, "I'm off tomorrow. Stay for another one?"

"Why not," I said, thinking I might get to hear another of his great stories.

I was right, I got a story. But it was not at all what I expected.

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Pub owner "Skip" Skipland swung by our table. "Hey Chip. Steve. You guys doin' OK here?"

"Bring us a couple more, if you would please, Skip." Steve pointed at our almost empty glasses.

Skip was a great publican; always there, always interested in what would make your visit to his place better. He didn't ask what we were drinking, he knew. And he had shown up before the story got started. I don't think he was listening, he just had the knack.

Steve suddenly looked pretty grim. "I need to get something off my chest, Chip. Do you mind?"

The look on my face must have been a doozy, because his serious demeanor vanished and he burst out laughing.

Skip returned with the pints, sat them on well-used cardboard coasters, swept up our empties and left us to our conversation.

"What's on your mind Steve?" I said. "You OK?"

Steve's grin vanished, "I shouldn't tell you this ..."

When Steve preceded a story with that line, I paid close attention. We locked eyes in a visual handshake of confidence.

Steve kept going, "But I really want to—need to. Hell, I'm pretty busted up about something."

I got a knot in my stomach. I hoped like hell he wasn't having marital problems. I liked his wife, hated to see that happen to anybody, and his girls would be in it too.

"You and Bev OK?"

"No, I mean yes. Bev and I are great. The girls too. It's got nothing to do with them."

This tough guy, who put bad men with guns in jail, looked me in the eye and teared up. "This is something that happened at, uh ... at work."

Now I was concerned about my friend, but I was fascinated too, hoping I wasn't looking like some kind of thrill seeker out for vicarious excitement.

He took a healthy swallow from his glass. "Where the hell do I start?"

"It doesn't matter Steve, just start," I said.

"I messed up. I've been doing what I do for more than twenty years, and I pulled a bonehead, rookie move. And now it's my fault some bad people got away with hurting some kids."

My guts tightened. The conversation I'd had with Ben and Jess the day before was blasting around in my head. "What happened?"

"Well, I was working on the east end of Baldy Road. You can't believe how many four-by-fours come tooling through there at one in the morning with a dead moose, tits up, lying in the bed ...

"Anyway, I was up just past your turn off, it wasn't late, maybe nine o'clock or so, and I saw this truck coming. It turned onto Jesus Is My Redeemer Lane. I followed with my lights off just to see what he was up to. There's only one house up there; a guy named John Bradley owns

it. You know him? A lot of people think he killed his step brother but they couldn't prove it ...” Steve paused for a drink. The back of my neck danced and twitched.

“The sheriff had some interest in Bradley; and the Lane dead ends in his driveway, so that made me want to follow the truck too. Anyway, by the time I got there, the truck is already parked in front of the garage and the guy isn't in it. There were lights on, one on each side of the garage door. And I could see through the truck's back window. There wasn't anybody in the driver's seat, unless he was laying down, which some of these dumb asses would try. It's like he jumped out and ran.”

“Holy shit.” My mind was furiously blending Ben's story with what Steve was telling me.

“I sure as hell didn't want to get shot by some nervous asshole, but I didn't want to let this guy get away. It smelled funny, you know? So I walked up directly behind the truck where I could see him if he popped up. Nothing happened. I took a quick look in the bed; nothing there. I looked inside the cab; nothing in there either except a scoped rifle lying on the seat.”

“What kind of rifle was it?” I don't know why that was important to me, but I had this movie image of an assault rifle with a night vision scope that I couldn't shake.

“Oh, some beat-to-shit old Savage bolt action, I think.” Steve was gazing out the Pub's front window at the taillights drifting by. “I was standing there, trying to decide what to do, when there was a creak on the front porch. The door came open, somebody big ran inside, and then it slammed closed. It was a screen door on a spring. He must have been hiding in the shadows watching me.” Steve rocked side-to-side in his chair, set his jaw. “Then I heard a little girl screaming ...”

“A little girl screaming?” I parroted back. My heart had gotten louder than the music. It's pounding and Steve's voice was all I could hear. Had that little girl been at my house yesterday afternoon?

“Yeah, screaming bloody murder. Then the screen door banged again and this little blond girl came running out. She ran down the steps and under the garage lights. I'm standing right there, like ten feet away, looking over the hood of the truck. She didn't have a stitch on; couldn't have been more than five or six. Ah man ...” Steve's eyes left the window and he started twisting his glass into the table. “Then this big fat guy comes running out after her. He's got this wide, studded leather belt looped in his hand. He's not wearing anything either.”

I didn't want to hear any more. I hated what my imagination was doing with it. I could see myself standing in the driveway of a house at the end of Jesus Is My Redeemer Lane, every molecule capable of murder.

I worked my focus back to Steve. “Oh God, Steve, the guy was naked?”

“Yeah, and I lost it. I lost it! I extended my baton and the next thing I knew I had that sick son of a bitch laid out on the concrete in front of the garage, bleeding in about ten places. If the bastard's fat-assed wife hadn't come shrieking out of the house and pulled me off him, I think he might be dead right now. I almost wish I'd finished the job.” He looked around, making sure he hadn't been too loud.

Nobody in Skip's seemed to be aware of what we were talking about.

“God Steve, who wouldn't have reacted like that? Was it Bradley?”

"Yeah, it was Bradley ... Then I did what I should have done in the first place. I cuffed him, left him bleeding on the concrete, went back to my truck and called in the troops."

There it was. Ben, Jess, the girls, Steve, and the Bradleys ... All tied together.

Steve sucked in and let out a huge shuddering breath. "When I attacked him, I ruined any possible chance of putting him away."

"Ah shit, Steve. Surely there's something ..." How could this be? Steve had seen this terrible thing going on and they just let this Bradley guy and his wife walk away?

"We went in, but we didn't find anything illegal inside the house. Not a thing. We hauled his ass in but the little girl wasn't talking. The wife is a psycho, screaming bitch who threatened to sue. It was his word against mine. We had to let him go.

"He probably could have had my job, or worse, I could have been the one locked up in the Pen down in Kuna. He could have sued the state for a million bucks. It was a cluster fuck. So that sick asshole and his wife got away with ... with ..." Steve choked.

My friend was withering; disappearing before my eyes.

"It's my fault and there's nothing I can do about it."

"What about the guy in the truck?" I said.

"Never saw him again. No idea who he was or what he was doing. The truck turned out to be registered to John and Scarlett Bradley." Steve's hands were pressed flat on the table and there was enough quiet rage in his voice to make it quaver. "I really screwed up."

"What happened to the little girl?" I asked, even though I knew exactly what had happened to the little girl.

"There had been some suspicion about what was going on at that house. The Bradleys have two other daughters. The girls had missed a lot of school. There had been some bruises reported, strange behavior and that kind of stuff. Add that to what I saw, and the state was able to get all three of them out of there. At least that beautiful little girl ..." Steve had to stop again.

"I ... I just can't think about what that sick asshole and his wife were up to."

"Why didn't any of this come out?"

"The prosecutor kept it quiet and John Bradley obviously didn't want it out either. He and his wife ducked and covered."

"Steve, thank God you got those girls out. What if you hadn't been there at all? You may have saved their lives. Focus on that. I wish I'd done something that good just once in my own life."

I let that sink in before I asked, "What about you? You OK? Did you get in hot water with the state, or what?"

"Well, they weren't too pleased with me, but my boss understood and so did the sheriff. I think the prosecutor would have burned me if they hadn't intervened. I'm OK as long as I don't do anything stupid in the near future." He hung his head. "Don't know if I can ever forgive myself for the Bradleys going free. But, I did get those three girls out of there and that's got to be worth something."

"Damn right. It's worth a lot. Don't forget it," I said. "I don't know what I'd have done if I'd been there, but I have a feeling it wouldn't have been much different."

“But I’ve been trained to deal with this kind of stuff. It was just bad work on my part ... bad work.”

“Yeah, but you’re a man and a person first. I wouldn’t be sorry about that.”

Steve looked me in the eye and gripped my hand over the table. “Thanks. Thanks for listening Chip.”

I was glad he hadn’t felt the need to mention how sensitive this all was. He had trusted me with something big; about as big as it gets. Steve and I held the handshake a little longer.

On the stage Izzy Feldman had moved on to *All Shook Up*. “Yeah, I’m all shook up ...”

“Hey Skip!” I yelled across the bar, “Bring me the tab. The Game Warden and I are done.”

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I walked across the street and got in my car, seething over the injustice and depravity of it all. Ben’s and Jess’s lives turned upside down. Steve, the best guy I knew, almost thrown in jail for doing what was unquestionably right.

How could anyone, worth anything, do nothing and let those animals, those fucking Bradleys, go unpunished? How could *I* live with that?

I didn’t remember driving home—but there I was, parked in my garage; stomach churning, heart racing, looking in the rearview at the terrified old guy inside my shirt. He was thinking seriously about killing two people he’d never seen ... and I was looking for the courage to let him do it.

Part 1 CHAPTER 2

I wasn't a Dead-Head, but the Grateful Dead started singing *Truckin'* somewhere inside my pillow. What a long, strange trip it's been ...

I listened to the music. My wife was there cuddled up next to me. The clock shot the red time onto the ceiling. And as always, when she slept and I couldn't, I drifted. Old memories jostled with each other for attention.

I was born in Lincoln County, Iowa in the very same hospital room in which my mother had been born twenty years earlier.

Mom and Dad had agreed my name should be Charles, after my paternal grandfather, but when the doctor came into the waiting room, Dad was passing the time playing poker. Doctor Carroll picked a blue chip up off the table, flipped it to my father and said something like, "You're the winner Keith. You got a big baby boy."

So, I was Charles 'Chip' Cradle from that minute on. I'd hated it as a kid, but I grew to like the story as an adult.

I started life with two great-grandparents, four grandparents, dozens of cousins, six pairs of aunts and uncles, and a sister. Another sister was added three years later. You couldn't turn around in Lincoln County without bumping into somebody I was related to.

I'd been born during the final decade of the small family farmer. When my parents drove me home from the hospital in their beat-up '49 Ford, our one-hundred-twenty-acre rented farm had chickens, hogs, milk cows, horses, oats, corn, beans, a huge garden, a windmill to pump water, corn cribs, a mammoth hay barn and a gravel road. Dad had a bunch of worn out machinery and there were still horse harnesses hanging in the barn.

By the time I left for Journalism school, eighteen years later, we owned five hundred acres. We raised hogs, corn, and soybeans. All the other crops and animals were gone. My dad had a new shed full of very expensive machinery, a new air-conditioned house, a new pick-up truck, and a Lincoln Continental he drove on the new highway in front of our house.

There had been so many generations of farmers in my family that they had no more idea of why they had chosen to farm than a duck knows why it flies south in the fall. I didn't seem to be from the same flock. My parents may have been disappointed about that, but they never let on and I flew in my own direction. Dad had asked me once, when I was a junior in high school, if I'd like to take over the farm. My answer was no. That's the last we ever spoke of it.

My parents were the most loving, forgiving, outwardly happy and quick-witted people I knew or have ever known. I was encouraged to try everything, and I was led to believe I could do anything I put my mind to.

My dad was always around. Farmers live where they work. We had breakfast, dinner (that's the noon meal on the farm), and supper together. He and Mom traded off putting me and my sisters to bed. Sometimes, when it was too hot to sleep in the house, we'd all lay on blankets in the yard and gaze while Dad pointed out the constellations.

From the beginning my dad made it possible for me to fly. He'd pick me up over his head and I would zoom around next to the ceiling, or under the trees and sky, banking and diving and soaring. I never crashed. His big strong hands held me up and I was weightless.

At some point, I don't remember exactly when, Dad wasn't necessary for my take-offs anymore. Effortlessly, I flew anywhere I wanted to go. At night I would just Peter Pan it right out the window, soaring across vast expanses of time and space. It was my secret. And it was the best part of being alive.

But I lost that magic. About the time I turned 13, I failed to stop a terrible thing from happening. My confidence eroded. And as I doubted my worth and abilities, my flights became fewer and farther between, only showing up when I was dead sure of what I was doing. Eventually I became certain of only two things; I would never make a difference and I would never fly again.

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My dad also helped me gain an appreciation for life and death and the fine line of time and circumstance that separates them.

I'd been given access to a .22 single-shot rifle when I was ten. I would spend hours holding stock still with that cocked rifle pointed at a hole in the foundation of the corn crib. Sooner or later a rat would poke its head out, black eyes searching for danger. I learned to stay cool, making that one little rifle shell count; dealing swift vengeance for stealing our corn.

Dad would pay me a dime for every rat I shot. I'd have done it for free, but those dimes made me feel valuable and able. It was exciting to be quiet and deadly. And it was a good thing that needed to be done. For something to live, something has to die. Not cruel. Not unjust. The rats ate our corn. The rats were subject to death. No questions. No regrets. No doubts.

Now I was wondering, could I get to that point with John and Scarlett Bradley?

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At 5:00 AM, my brain going a million miles an hour, things changed. I had a glimmer of hope that I could make a difference and fly again. Strange and morbid as it seemed, John and Scarlett Bradley might make it possible.

I dressed in the dark; put my pocket knife in my right pocket and my watch on my left wrist.

I hurried through a large bowl of AlphaBits, drank a big glass of orange juice, and carried a press-pot of coffee to my office; a room with a spectacular view in the lower level of the house.

My cell phone was lying in the middle of my desk, turned off. I had left it there on Saturday before the party started. It was an old-fashioned flip phone and I had it because I had to. I didn't text and I didn't tweet and I couldn't send e-mails from it. I sure as hell didn't answer it when I had guests.

I punched the power button and saw that I had some missed calls and voice mail. Thankfully, it was way too early to call anybody back so I got out my white board and markers.

I once had a wise old boss who was fond of saying, "Planning takes the doubt out of taking action."

How do you plan a murder?

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Sure, I'd plotted a few murders before; an ex-girlfriend, the ex-friend she ran away with, a couple of bosses, the jerk every neighborhood and office seem to have. I imagine we all think

about it at some point. God, I hoped so or I was crazier than I thought. But those weren't really plans. It was just steam. Not ever a chance of really happening.

This was different. What I felt in my guts and my brain was *way* different.

As terrible as the thought of actually killing somebody had always been, somehow I was seriously considering it. No going back if you did it. Dead. Taking a life. Murderer!

I said it every way I could think of, trying to talk myself out of it, and still, I was setting up the white board and uncapping a marker ... the power of my rage pulling me in.

My wise old boss came back. "Intentions only become actions with a plan." I couldn't consider doing it unless it could be done right. I needed to get past my emotions to be sure.

I wrote with a black marker.

Goal:

To be sure of something again. To do something unquestionably right and good. To fly again.

Strategies:

1. Kill John and Scarlett Bradley: Remove the possibility that they would ever hurt a child again.

2. They had to know it was me and why I was doing it: They needed to be aware I was killing them for what they had done and so they could never do it again. I was a stranger. This wasn't personal.

3. Make an impact that would encourage other people to act: Get the Bradley story out. Inspire other people to do what was right.

4. I would not do this in anger. I had to feel good and sure about who I was and what I'd done—after I killed them.

5. I wasn't going to prison: I would not be punished for doing something for the greater good. Afterward, I would have to escape. That would be another plan altogether.

I capped the marker and stepped away from the white board.

Things get real when you write them down. This wasn't just thoughts or self-talk. My heart hammered as I read the words. My forehead was cold and oily. One swipe of an eraser and it would all be gone; done with. I could walk away.

I uncapped a red marker, moved on to Tactics.

Probably too early for this, but this is the part that everyone wants to get to—the execution.

I would shoot them. Shoot them dead with a large caliber handgun. I already had one in a box in my gun safe.

My initial thought was to kill them, together, inside their house where they'd done terrible things to their beautiful daughters. The Bradleys needed to be awake and aware of who was doing it and why. I wanted it to be fast and as painless as possible. Not complex. Detached.

To do that successfully I'd have to watch them and their house for a while. I could hike up there and scope it out. It was remote and I could probably watch them any time of the day.

I wondered what it would be like to watch somebody. What would it take to sneak into somebody's house? I'd never even thought of it before; never occurred to me. The idea made my heart pound again a little—OK, a lot.

I kept going on the plan. The stink of the dry-erase marker filled my office.

How do you influence a big audience? Media; broad-based, social, all of it. If you handled it right, you could get stuff out and viral in about an hour. I hoped my message would cause somebody else to do something that needed to be done. Not something as radical as what I was moving toward, but something they could feel sure about. I'd issue a release, a written statement after the Bradleys were dead; what I'd done, why I'd done it.

I went to the next point.

How could I keep emotion out of it and feel good about myself after killing somebody? Could I do this? Would I lose my nerve; take the easy way out as I had so often before? Would I feel bad? I wanted to think I could do it and not lose any sleep but ...

I had to get to a place where I knew that the world would be better without them—like killing rats in the corn crib, no judgment, just necessary. I needed to be sure.

That got me through the toughest part; killing them. That only left the rest of my life to plan out.

How was I going to avoid getting caught? Showers with the guys was not in my file of acceptable endings. I had some time to figure that one out. I had a couple of ideas, but I still wanted to think it over for a while. No hurry.

Getaway: To Be Determined

I wrote down a couple of non-negotiables:

- No one else would get hurt in the process.
- No one else would be implicated or blamed.

I would need a budget. I had something like twenty-thousand dollars in my safe-deposit box. Seemed like more than enough.

Finally, when to do it? Things never got done without a deadline, but I had a lot to do and learn before I could write in a final date.

Deadline: To Be Determined.

The board was full. I stood back and looked at what I had written, hovering between past and future.

I was in my same office with my same feet on my same carpet, breathing in the fumes from the same markers as I gazed at the same whiteboard that had held countless plans—but the words were new, from some other universe. They held meaning only if I dared to take the terrifying steps they suggested.

I typed the whole thing into a word document saved it to my desktop and wiped the board clean. Colored dust drifted in the sunlight of my office.

Enough thinking, I needed to get into action.

It would be a good day to shoot something.

I kept all my guns locked in a heavy steel gun safe. Except for my dad's old Remington shotgun; it was in the bedroom closet. I kept it there, loaded with double-ought buck, just in case. There are a lot of reasons to have a shotgun ready when you live up in the mountains and most of them have nothing to do with people.

The short baseball bat under the bed was what I had always thought I would use if it came down to a human intruder or me. I wanted to be sure I didn't come out of a dead sleep and accidentally kill the wrong person. I figured if I brained somebody with the bat I'd have a pretty good chance of knowing exactly who they were before I started swinging. But using it had always been dimly hypothetical; like life insurance.

I had collected quite a few firearms through the years; nothing big or too expensive. I had a shooting-gallery Winchester pump which had belonged to my grandfather Cleo, my first single shot rifle, and several pistols. They were all .22s—except the one I envisioned using for my plan.

That one was new, purchased a week ago on a whim; a Beretta PX4 .40 caliber with a twelve shot magazine. I saw it in the case and made the mistake of having the gun counter guy let me play with it for five minutes.

So I took it home—told myself it was a birthday present. I hadn't even fired it yet. Funny how things show up when you need them.

The Beretta had only two possible purposes: Shooting at targets, which I had always enjoyed, and killing people.

I grabbed the Beretta, a box of ammo, and some ear plugs. I went out across the lower patio to the woods on the west side of the house and walked through the trees for a couple of hundred yards to a spot with a slope right behind it.

I emptied the box of cartridges into my coat pocket, dropped the clip out of the Beretta into my gloved hand and started loading it.

Forty-caliber pistol bullets are scary looking things. I shuddered, imagining a copper-jacketed slug tearing through the air with such force that it would go right through a person—a gruesome thought.

I pushed twelve cartridges into the magazine and snapped it into the handle of the pistol; made sure the safety was on and chambered a round. The grip was fat and solid, filling my hand.

A cowboy theme song drifted into my head as two men faced each other on the Dodge City Street. TV in my childhood; gunfighters were kings, and the guys in the black hats always got what they had coming.

With the pistol in my hand I felt lethal, the way I used to feel waiting for a rat to stick its head out of the corn crib. I picked a ten-inch Ponderosa pine about fifteen feet away, raised the pistol, pushed the safety, and snapped off a quick shot. The report echoed off the surrounding mountains. No worries; gunfire was a common sound in my neighborhood.

The slug blasted a big chunk of bark off the tree. Not bad for a first, out-of-the-box shot. I grabbed the grip with both hands, took careful aim and squeezed. Dead center. I shot up the rest of the box, hitting what I wanted to hit, adjusting the sights a bit, and making sure the gun did what it was supposed to do. I wasn't planning on needing anything like twelve shots, but the two I was planning for had to work.

I picked up my spent brass, walked back to the house, tore down the pistol, cleaned and oiled it. As I locked the Beretta in the safe, the brass casings clicked in my pocket. I dumped them on my desk.

Blackened, empty holes stared up at me like accusing eyes. "What are you doing, Chip?"

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I went upstairs trying to shake the idea that the shell casings had been questioning me.

Coffee cures all. I stuck my cold cup in the microwave. It started beeping as my phone started vibrating; Ben Chandler. "Hey Ben, what's up? I don't talk to you for months and then twice in three days."

"Hey I left you a couple of messages. Jess can't find her phone. She swore she had it when she got home from the party, but we can't find it. She thinks she may have left it out by your fire ring."

I didn't remember seeing it. "I'll go out right now and look around. I'll call Jess's number and see if the bushes ring."

"That would be great. I'm in town, if you find it give me a call and I'll run up. She's already in withdrawal."

Outside I punched in Jess's number and was rewarded by James Taylor singing *You've Got a Friend* from beneath one of the teak benches. I found the white phone, took a chance and touched two.

Ben's face came on the screen. He answered on the first ring.

"Hello dahhrrring, I'm free this afternoon. Whadda you say?" I did my best Mae West, or was it Marlene Dietrich? One of those old timers with the great delivery.

"Sounds good," Ben said. "I hear you're not like all the other girls ..."

I couldn't hold the woman's voice anymore and burst out laughing. "It was out by the fire ring, under a bench," I said. "Lucky it didn't get wet."

"Excellent," Ben sounded relieved. "Be up there in a few minutes."

"OK," I said. "Is it coffee or beer time?"

"Well, the phone is found. That's reason to celebrate," Ben laughed. "I think I left a couple of IPAs in your garage."

"Perfect," I said. "Somebody has to drink that crap. It's taking up valuable space in my fridge. See you in a few."

"Yep," Ben hung up.

I stuck Jess's phone in the pocket of my jacket.

I decided to police up the yard and see what other goodies might have had been left behind by Saturday's guests. I'd just gotten down to the patio, finding two cups and a beer bottle on the way, when James Taylor sang again.

I dug for the phone. No name came up, just a local number. The voice on the other end spat, "I'm gonna get my girls back you bitch ... Sleep tight tonight." The phone went dead.

It could only have been Bradley. If the son of a bitch had been standing there, I would have split his head with a rock and fed him to the ravens without a second thought. No question. I would have done it and flown away in joy.

Anger and fear grew as I walked up to the garage. I fumbled the cap off a bottle of beer.

The Bradley guy was crazy; a complete psycho. He would kill *me* without any plan and without any remorse at all. He'd just pull the trigger and move on. I'd never felt anything like that coming from anyone. And I'd never, ever, been so terrified.

And here came the other terrifying part—I was actually thinking of killing the voice on the other end of that phone. What the hell was I becoming?

This wasn't writing on a white board with colored markers, pretending to plan an advertising campaign. I was being spun by fear and hate and confusion and regret. I wanted to lie down, hug my wife, rewind the tape, and be isolated and safe on my mountain ... where monsters didn't lurk up the hill.

I had to think. Get a handle on my emotions. I drank my beer and stewed.

Would I tell Ben about the call? What good would that do besides scare them; which is what Bradley wanted, right? No. That didn't seem like the thing to do.

I checked Jess's phone. The last call was a Sandpoint prefix; a land line. I jotted the number down on my workbench then figured out how to clear the number from her phone.

A gleaming black Audi crunched up the gravel drive; looked like Ben had a new car.

I waved, relieved to see my friend's face and to have something good to center on. "Nice car!"

"Thanks, just picked it up. Had to have more room ..." He pointed at my beer. "I see you couldn't wait for me."

"Hey, it's still my birthday for a couple more days." I handed him Jess's phone. "You better take this now so we don't forget."

He pushed some buttons, intent on the screen. "Don't see anything important," he said. "Maybe that's a lesson in itself huh?" He reached in the window and tossed the phone in the glove compartment.

The phone gone, I opened an IPA for Ben.

"So, show me the new wheels," I said.

Ben had good taste; great cars, nice house, his wife was a good choice too.

A dentist, Jess worked on kids' teeth exclusively and did a lot of it for free. If you knew her, you would have expected that.

Ben was a financial analyst of some sort. He got deep into the dealings of companies and how they got more value for their stock. Not my bag. I never even tried to understand it.

He had started working for a new company a few months back and it appeared he was doing very well. It seemed they could afford to do whatever they wanted, and now they had added three more kids to the family in one fell swoop. Not easy and not cheap either.

We walked around the Audi, a Q7 SUV. A gorgeous car and capable of working its way through the weather and the mud and the other stuff you had to be prepared to handle in North Idaho.

"Hop in," said Ben. "Let's take it for a drive. I think I'm gonna love this machine."

He insisted that I get behind the wheel. He jumped in the passenger seat, sat his bottle in the center cup holder and ran me through a check-list of where things were. I was surrounded by that wonderful new car smell—probably toxic—but there isn't anything like it. The seats were dark gray cowhide; soft and comfortable.

"Mmmm," I said "This seat has infinite position adjustment. It'll be great for long trips."

Ben said, "With my long legs and Jess's short ones, we need that. Check out the sound system." He reached over and snapped on the music. Aerosmith came out like they were playing live in the back seat. Steven Tyler was wailing right behind me: Rag Doll livin' in a movie ...

"What do you think?" Ben spoke up over the thumping bass line.

"Too nice for you." I sipped my Belgian beer. The car was nice. I relaxed into the leather.

"Probably, but life ain't fair," he said. "Let's take a drive." He turned the music down a bit.

With my seat figured out and adjusted, we took off. At Baldy Road he said, "Hang a left," pointing with the top of his beer bottle. "Let's go up instead of down."

That was a strange request. Above our house, Baldy was the domain of four-wheelers, monster pickups, mountain bikes, and the occasional lost tourist in a white rental car with a shredded tire.

He gave me a "just do it" look, jabbed a button and killed the music.

"OK, you're the boss." I pulled out into the muddy road. I had to hold back a little; the thing would have jumped out from under me if I'd really punched it. I was grinning from ear-to-ear; a fun machine.

Ben was looking intently out the window to his right. We'd be passing Jesus Is My Redeemer Lane in a minute. It wasn't a coincidence.

"Slow down a little will you?" he said.

I wasn't going very fast anyway, too soft and muddy. I slowed to a crawl, drained the rest of my beer. The sign for Jesus Is My Redeemer Lane was coming up on the right.

"What are we doing Ben? This seems like a bad idea to me."

"I've never been up here and I just wanted to get it in my mind where these sick assholes are," he said. "That may sound weird, but I just want to know. I want to make everything that happened to my new girls real to me. I want to know where all that shit came down. Maybe it will help me help them. I don't know, probably crazy."

We both craned our necks, looking out Ben's window down the lane. It curved and disappeared back into the dense woods. No way you could see Bradley's house without going up there.

"Shit," Ben said. "I thought we'd be able to see it from the road."

I caught movement in the rearview mirror. A jacked-up, red 4x4 Dodge pick-up came roaring up the hill behind us, its big square grill filling our back window.

I swung the wheel to the right, hit the gas, jerked over onto what little shoulder there was then jammed on the brakes to stay out of the steep ditch. The pickup braked hard, turned, and skidded up Jesus Is My Redeemer Lane just behind us. A beefy arm shot out of the driver's window, a pudgy finger flipping us off. The truck straightened out and disappeared around the curve; John Bradley going home.

"That had to have been that lousy son-of-a-bitch! That was him, right there." This was the Ben I didn't know again. He strained against his seat belt. I thought he might jump out and give chase on foot.

Ben swung back around to look at me, knocking his bottle out of the cup holder into my

lap, drowning my crotch and his new leather upholstery with bitter beer.

"Time to go home," I said. "We need to get this cleaned up right away or Jess will have your balls for breakfast, and she won't be too pleased with me either."

I backed into Jesus Is My Redeemer Lane and turned around to head home. Ben sat silent; eyes closed, the light gone out of him, radiating cold, dark malice and frustration. It felt like the windows of the Audi might blow out. I rolled mine down, let the air in, relieving the pressure and hoping my feelings would fly away before they mixed with his and drowned us both.

I hit the radio button. Steve Winwood wailed out of the back seat and The Low Spark of High-heeled Boys gave us another chance ...

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A few minutes later Ben and I were in my garage, cleaning and airing the beer smell out of the Audi. Most of it had soaked into my pants, so we thought he'd be able to keep the new car smell a while longer.

"I feel like a complete moron." Ben had a fresh bottle in his hand. "What the hell did I get so excited about? I knew what the deal was with the girls when we decided to help them. It's not like I can turn back the clock and wipe away what happened."

I threw a beer-soaked towel at him and said, "You're right. You can't do anything about it. Stay focused on the girls."

Ben caught the towel, this time keeping the beer inside his bottle. He sat on the wide step leading from the garage to the laundry room, nodding and sipping.

"Assholes like Bradley and his wife will eventually get what's coming to them. I really believe that." I hoped Ben was hearing me. "You go up there again, you'll just get into some kind of trouble. Keep him the bad guy. Those girls need *you* now."

"Yeah, I think if Bradley had stopped and hassled us I might have done something really stupid ... satisfying, but stupid." Ben looked at me. "Glad you were with me buddy. Thanks for helping me clean up."

"Hell, I was more worried about my jeans than anything. I wouldn't want somebody to smell that cat piss on me and think I would really drink an IPA!"

We laughed, trying to let our brush with John Bradley fade, then dove into our own thoughts for a moment.

Ben, such a good guy who felt so wrong about the world right then. And me; feeling his pain, now understanding his frustration and the helplessness. Knowing I could not just let it go ... planning my mission.

"Hey, I have a favor to ask." He rose from the step. "I've got a chance to go to Hawaii for a couple weeks on a work-related trip, sometime around the first part of May. I can take the whole family on the company's dime."

"What, you want me to come along and take care of Jess while you watch the kids?" I said seriously.

Ben gave me a stage scowl. "Asshole ... No, I wondered if you would mind going by the house a couple of times while we're gone, just to check on things."

This was kind of a big deal. Ben didn't ask for help. Flattered, I said, "Sure, I'd be happy to. What do you want me to do?"

“Well, I’ve got a kid coming by every day to feed the animals. If you could just check on his work. You grew up on a farm, you know what to look for.” Ben, covering all his bases. “I don’t want to embarrass the kid, or make him feel like I don’t trust him, but two weeks is a long time.”

I said, “No problem. Sounds like fun. Why don’t I come over and walk through the chores with you before you go?”

“Sounds perfect,” he said. “Man, look at the time. I better get Jess’s phone back to her before she dies of a bad case of phantom ringing. I’ll call you to do the walk around in the next few weeks.” Ben hopped in his new car and disappeared down my driveway.

I turned to go back into the house and kicked his forgotten, half-full bottle across the garage and under my Land Rover. The bottle lay there spinning, spreading a circle of foam.

Sometimes it seemed that I just went from one mess to another.

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Emotions aren’t good for making or executing plans, so I did what I usually did when I had to work something out—I kept moving. I cleaned up the beer and swept a bunch of winter grime and trash off the floor. Next thing I knew I was tidying up the whole garage.

I thought about the vile call on Jess’s pretty white phone. Was it a bluff or was it possible that John Bradley would actually do something? I could still tell Ben. I could say I took the call and didn’t want to worry them. No, that sounded lame. I didn’t think I’d tell them.

I pattered around, straightening up my work bench, organizing cans of bolts and screws and nails. I saw the scrap of paper with the phone number from Jess’s phone. I pulled out my own phone and tapped in the number. It rang eight times before a small voice said, “Hello?”

“Hello,” I said. “Who is this?”

“Jamie Harris,” the small voice said. “I was walking by and this phone was ringing.”

“Hi Jamie, can you tell me where you are?” I said.

“It’s just a dumb payphone by the Dairy Delight,” Jamie Harris said.

“OK, thanks Jamie. I just dialed the wrong number I guess.” I left Jamie standing at the telecommunications relic.

John Bradley had used the payphone for his threatening call—not stupid, just crazy. He made his call then drove home and flipped me off just because I was there.

What would a sick bastard like John Bradley do now? How do you put yourself inside the head of a freak like that? Thinking about it gave me a rush of revenge adrenalin, making my heart race and renewing my fear that I might act out of anger.

I walked around the house to the fire ring where I got a small blaze going and sat on a sun-warmed bench. I could see for miles down the Pend Oreille River. The water between the mountains looked like a ribbon of silver that somehow seemed higher than where I sat. How different than where I had grown up. And how lucky I felt to be sitting there with the sky and the river and the mountains spread out all around me. I thought about how much I did love it—and how wrong it was to have the Bradleys living there like maggots in an otherwise perfect apple.

Tom Petty, my favorite old rocker, sat down on the bench across from me, started singing: Well I won’t back down ...

Tom knew what was right.

I looked into my little fire, listened to Petty, and thought about everything.

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After high school, all my friends had gone on to college. Not one of us went back to be a farmer, or a small town whatever.

I had wanted to be Darren Stevens, the husband on the Bewitched television show. He was an advertising executive and, as far as I could tell, all he did was have fun and go to bed with Samantha, the gorgeous blond witch on whom I had a huge crush.

With that rock-solid motivation, I went to the University of Kansas and got my degree in journalism and advertising—people make choices for worse reasons than having a thing for a beautiful blond witch.

I expected to get a job right out of college, and with the help of my favorite professor, I did. I graduated, married Suzanne, and got a job all within six weeks. It was different world in 1976.

After stints with a few ad agencies, I'd joined a Midwestern company where I stayed for twenty years. The company developed, grew and sold seed to farmers. It was a satisfying business to be a part of; profitable, pleasant, and honest. We were selling something people really needed. Seed turned into corn or soybeans and that turned into food or other products that, mostly, were necessities. I could get up in the morning, look in the mirror and feel sure that the things I did helped people. I liked it. And I liked the people I worked with. You pretty much knew where you stood with them.

None of us knew it at the time, but it was the end of an era.

When I started, people still said what they meant and did what they said. The lawyers and the accountants and the internet geeks hadn't screwed it all up yet. But, almost overnight, things began to change.

The business became more about the money and the patents and the litigation and the shareholders and the few getting ahead of the many. I rejected it and fought it and succumbed to it all at the same time. After a huge chemical company took us over, I hung around for a couple of years and then took an early buy-out. I didn't like their greedy profit motives, but I guess I was OK with having profit motives for myself. Funny how things can gradually erode and you just don't see it.

I walked away with a nice chunk of cash and became a consultant. I hoped I could make a difference, and I wouldn't have to play all the games that had taken over my work world.

In a year I got restless. At forty-nine I decided I needed a change; a change in just about everything. I took a couple of trips to ski, fly-fish and scout out the West. The next thing I knew I bought thirty acres of trees on the side of a mountain just outside Sandpoint, Idaho. I sold everything in Iowa and moved. I really didn't even think about it. I just decided to do it and went.

I expect I shocked, maybe hurt, friends and family when I just picked up and left. But on

the other hand, I had a lot of people say how much they envied my courage and the freedom I must have felt. I found that kind of sad. Does it really take that much courage to just do what you want to do? Or was that their nice Iowa way of saying; "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

I went for the fishing and the coffee and the mountains and the air and the remote wilderness feel of the place. But most of all I went for the people and the chance to be without a history.

I threw another handful of sticks on the fire and recalled telling friends and family about my decision to move. Skinheads and rednecks always seemed to come up. The Ruby Ridge shoot-out had given the Idaho Panhandle a reputation as being thick with encampments of survivalists and a hotbed of neo-Nazi nutcakes.

But it wasn't so ... mostly. There were some North Idaho racists, sure, but no more than anywhere else. Saying that North Idaho was full of Nazis was as stupid as Hollywood's portrayal of Iowa farmers as bib-overall-wearing rubes driving 1954 Chevrolet pickups.

What I discovered in Idaho was the most diverse group of attitudes I had ever encountered living together in such a small area. I chose Sandpoint because it was a live-and-let-live kind of place; a very peaceful, laid-back haven in which you could relax and just be.

At least it had been until I found out about the Bradleys.

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That night, looking at the red time projected on the ceiling, my wife quiet and warm next to me, I decided I would pay the Bradley house a visit the next morning. It felt like the right thing to do.

Then I flew around the room; just a bit, but it counted. I flew.

Part 1 CHAPTER 4

At 5:00 I got up and dressed in the dark. I put my pocket knife in my right pocket and my watch on my left wrist. I ate a large bowl of AlphaBits, drank the big glass of orange juice, and carried a press-pot of coffee to my office.

I spent a couple of hours checking my e-mail and schedules, making sure my consulting clients didn't have any pressing emergencies. Every week I spoke on the phone with several clients for an hour or two each.

Doing business with conference calls, e-mails, texts, tweets, video calls, and other forms of mobile communications—sometimes without ever actually seeing each other—created a tornado of misinformation for them. And worse, it never allowed people to disconnect from work. It made for loads of confusion and bent out of shape, highly-paid, overworked, sleep-deprived, never acknowledged business people.

My function was to mediate, referee, and give people space to think. I did my best to help them stay in touch, figure out what they really needed to do, and to stay on the same page ... sort of.

They fought and scratched and cried and blew snot bubbles. I was fascinated by the whole thing, and my clients really appreciated having somebody to unload on. I felt like I was helping most days, but there wasn't ever going to be a cure. I was treating symptoms, distracting them so they wouldn't end up shooting themselves in their own virtual feet.

Things were quiet that day. My schedule was free for a walk to the Bradley's.

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If I was going to kill them in their house, I would have to look it over carefully; inside and out. The guy was dangerous—crazy dangerous—and there was the wife too. According to Steve Albright, Scarlett Bradley was just as bad and I had not seen her yet.

I grabbed my camouflage day pack and loaded it with gear I thought might come in handy. For some reason I felt the need to tell my wife I was going out. It wouldn't be a surprise to her; I walked alone a lot. Most mornings I just left, but I was jumpy just thinking about the Bradleys. I needed to have a touch with Suzanne to get myself centered some.

She was in her own space, gazing into the glow of her screen, working on a cup of herbal tea and gluten-free cinnamon toast. The toast looked like the end of a cedar one-by-six dipped in butter.

"Bye honey," I said. "I'm gonna take a little hike. Be back in two or three hours."

She looked up at me, not sure why I was checking in with her. "Sure, OK ... doing something special?"

"Naw, just need to get outside."

"K, be careful," she said and looked back into the glow.

I stood for a minute, a whole minute, and took in her pretty profile, as she gazed intently at what she was doing. It would have been nice to just go back to our bed, but I had things I needed to get done. Maybe I'd get to cuddle with her later.

I went out the front door; a grey day, not raining yet.

I was a common enough sight on my neighborhood lane, no issue there. But once I got to

the end of our lane and out to Baldy Road, I'd need to scoot across, get into the trees where I couldn't be seen. Then I'd cut through the woods to where I thought I'd find the Bradley's house.

I had on waterproof hiking boots, a camo sweatshirt, a cap, and jeans. They would turn thorns and weren't easy to see in the woods. I had to admit, the idea of sneaking up there and looking around was raising my heart rate again.

I was crossing Baldy Road when I heard a vehicle coming. I froze for a second—Guilty! I shook it off, sprinted through the far ditch and stood in the soft ground beneath a thick stand of cedars, terrified the driver would stop. An old Subaru wagon banged by.

Ha. The old hippy was picking his nose and singing, no idea I was watching him.

It was a thrilling game. Catching people unaware was cool. And this was the first time I would purposefully creep up on somebody. I'd watch their house, and them, and they'd never be the wiser—at least that's what I kept telling myself as I trudged.

The leaves were slick on the incline and I had trouble with my footing until I found a well-used game trail running along the hillside. Making my way carefully through the trees and brush, I kept an easy pace, quietly climbing northwest. I heard a couple of cars, obscured by the trees, going down Baldy.

Fats Domino crowded in next to me on the trail: *I'm walkin', yes indeed ...*

I didn't imagine old Fats had ever been in the woods lumbering down a game trail. But I kept the beat, whisper-singing along with him until a white-tail deer snorted, bounded down the hill and disappeared across the road. I kept on tromping for another twenty minutes; feeling my way in.

A sharp horizontal line, something man-made, appeared through the trees. I hunkered down and made out the roof of a house. The fear of being caught snooping around rippled up my back.

I imagined Suzanne; *"What on earth are you doing Chip?"*

I had an answer. *"Making sure. Just making sure. I gotta do this."*

Somehow that helped. She left my head and my heart steadied.

Dense woods can turn you around. I had to be sure of where I was. I worked closer, got within seventy-five yards, keeping a good stand of trees between me and the house. I had no good reason to be there. People could take a very dim view of trespassing, and everybody up here had guns. I had no doubt that these particular people would use them.

I inched down a short slope and hid behind an old Ponderosa, three feet across, which had somehow escaped the loggers.

No movement or sound from the house. I settled down, unshouldered my pack and checked my watch; almost 8:00. The light filtering through the canopy was pretty good.

I dug around in my pack, found a brown paper bag, took some notes and sketched a rough image of the house. It was two stories with an open front porch stacked with junk. There were three windows on the second floor above the porch roof. Steps from the porch ran down to concrete in front of an attached two-car garage. The garage had one big overhead door with a light on each side. Under one of the lights, brass house numbers, 101.

I couldn't remember if Steve Albright had mentioned the address. I wrote it down on my

paper bag.

The dirt driveway was full of big, deep, North Idaho potholes. The house was a dead end.

I'd have to follow the lane out around the curve to see how far it was to Baldy Mountain Road. I was guessing maybe a quarter of a mile. Everything I saw squared up with what Steve had told me about John Bradley's house.

I stuck the bag back in my pack and pulled out a small pair of Nikon binoculars. I glassed the front porch, saw a couple of red plastic coolers, a rotting overstuffed chair, part of an artificial Christmas tree, a bunch of shoes and boots, some cardboard boxes, several plastic gas cans, and a tan-colored plastic dog hut. The name Adolf was scrawled above the hut's arched door in black spray paint.

Damn. Steve hadn't said anything about a dog, but they were standard issue in North Idaho. And out in the boonies, dog was synonymous with pit bull. That was something I had to know.

Next to the dog hut was a big screen door; wooden with a ripped up lower screen. The door also matched with Steve's story.

Nothing else to see, and with nobody shooting at me, I decided what the hell, I'd go check out the back of the house. I was gathering up my pack when I heard it coming—big, loud and right for me. Not sneaking. A pit bull making all kinds of noise, blasting through the trees to tear me up.

I lunged away, brush grabbing at legs and whipping my face. It was coming fast. Shit, I'd never outrun a dog. There, a tree! Get up that tree. Almost there! Please God. One more step.

Toe under a root, I went face-down hard. The wind out of me, gasping, flat on the ground, I laced my fingers over my neck, waiting for teeth ...

Something sailed right over my prone body and dashed away into the woods; stark white glowing against the brown of fallen leaves—a snowshoe rabbit, running like the devil was after him.

The devil struck between my shoulder blades; clawing, ripping my hands and then streaking away; a black blur through the trees.

A cat! A fucking little black house cat, beating his retreat around the back of the house—terrified of the killer in the woods ... me.

I put my face in the dirt; didn't know whether to laugh or shit my pants. Finally, I got enough strength in my legs to quiver back to my pack. I took a long drink of water, and wilted against the Ponderosa's rough bark, trying to get the adrenaline rush under control and hoping the damage to my old heart wasn't too bad.

There were four tiny cat scratches on the back of my right hand. I was pretty sure one might bleed—a little.

Some deadly commando; putting the sneak on a house, planning to shoot the psycho-owners, and I shit myself over a kitty chasing a bunny.

The woods spun. I leaned on the tree and took another drink. I looked back toward the house where the deadly cat had disappeared.

Enough ... time to go home Chip.

On the trail I had a feeling something was going to come racing up from behind and get

me. It was the same butt-clenching, chilled feeling I got as a kid when I walked in the dark, alone, all the way from the barn to the house.

I didn't quite run.

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I came straight in the front door and gulped water from the kitchen faucet. Something in the drain smelled dead. My stomach turned over.

I shot out onto the deck, gulping fresh air, leaning over the edge in a clammy, sour sweat; gagging. The watching game hadn't been fun. No fun at all. Maybe I wasn't cut out to do this. A breeze hit my damp skin and I shivered; the cold-blooded killer.

I went inside, laid down on the sitting-area sofa under an old blue afghan.

"That was pretty quick," my wife yelled out from her space.

"Yep," I mumbled.

She appeared, put her hand on my cheek. "You feelin' OK? You look a little green around the gills." She slid her palm across my jaw. It felt wonderful—soothing and safe. Maybe I'd never go up into the woods again. Maybe I'd just hold her for the next forty years.

"Yeah, I'm good. Probably just a little out of shape after sitting in front of the fire all winter." I fought back the urge to tell her everything. "Thanks for caring, doll. I appreciate you."

She kept her hand on my face for another second, looking in my eyes. "Maybe you should just take a nap. You'll feel better after." She gave me her little smile.

An hour later I woke up feeling some better, grabbed my pack off the kitchen floor and went down to my office. A lot of stuff to figure out. I peeled off my crusty tee-shirt, pulled on a clean one and put a fleece over it. The sun had swung around so I took a chair out on the patio where I sat, warm and sheltered, with a printed copy of my Bradley plan and a legal pad. Review time. What had I found out before I panicked and ran home?

I looked at the blank page, chewed on the end of my sharpie, thought about the black cat and the white rabbit. "Jesus Chip, how lame can you get?" My giggling fit went on for a bit. It helped. I wiped my eyes, took a deep breath and started writing.

- There was only one house up there. I still had no proof that it was the Bradley's. But you have to make some assumptions in every planning situation. Who else's could it be?

- I had a pretty good idea that the Bradleys had a black cat. (The little fucker had scared a decade off my life). Big deal. So what?

- I knew what the front of the house looked like. I had a sketch in my pack.

- I knew how long it took to get up there on foot, and it was a pretty easy trip.

- I had a good idea of what the ground around the house was like. No surprises there.

- I hadn't seen anybody or heard anybody at 8:00 in the morning; probably already at work.

- I would have to get up there earlier.

I had learned something.

And then the part I was avoiding. I had also learned something about myself. I was not the tough guy I made myself out to be. I'd need some time to get used to ... what was it ... Risk or danger or terror? Saying I'd do it and actually doing it were two different things.

I looked down toward the river. The house number! So scared and sick, I'd forgotten about the house number. I went into my office, pulled my sketch and notes out of my pack. I got online and checked the name for the addressee at 101 Jesus Is My Redeemer Lane. John Bradley's name came up on my screen. OK, I knew something else for sure.

Making the list and finding the address made me feel a little more in control; ready to focus again. Then the phone buzzed in my pocket. I jerked and jumped. Ben Chandler.

"Hi Chip!"

I leaned back into my chair, thought of the normal thing to say. "Hey Ben, did we get busted or was the Audi clean as new when you got it home?"

"No problem," Ben laughed. "We got it all out. Jess loves it." Ben sounded like Ben was supposed to sound.

I said, "Well that's good news."

"Chip, I uh, I've got another favor to ask. I was wondering if maybe you could drive us over to the airport for the trip to Hawaii. I hate to have the car sitting there for a month. You could drive it while we're gone ..."

I sat forward over my desk; John Bradley's address information still on the screen. Ben's voice and his obvious good mood were calming. The morning's scare seemed pretty silly all of a sudden. As I relaxed, something clicked in the planning part of my head.

"Did you say you'd be gone a month?"

"Well it looks like we may go for longer than I thought," Ben said. "From mid-April until around Mother's day. Think you still want to check on things for us if we're gone that long?"

"You bet. Still sounds like fun. A couple more weeks won't make any difference to me." My stomach finally coming all the way out of its twist. "Is your company still paying for the whole thing?"

"Yeah, I'll be working half days on-site with a client," Ben said. "Phil Simmons, my new CEO, has a house we're going to stay in. It's a great deal."

Ben told me a few details about the CEO, a real character by the sound of it.

"Phil is a little quirky. He has a no-phones, no-computers rule for staying in the house. He insists that it remain completely digital-free, just the way it was when the house was built back in the late 1800s. The idea of getting away from phones, and TVs, and computers sounds like heaven to us. We're talking about just leaving our phones here."

"Sounds illegal to me, but wonderful," I laughed. I thought about a deadline and the decisions I was trying to make; forced myself back to the phone call.

"How 'bout if I come over a week from Friday, mid-morning? You can walk me through the chores and then you can treat me to a beer, if you promise not to dump it on me!"

"Yeah, OK," Ben said. "Come over, say around nine?"

"That's a deal. See you on the twenty-eighth about nine."

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I picked up my plan. Part of the answer to how I could escape had just arrived in the form of a beautiful black Audi Q7.

And the kill deadline had been set too; sometime between the middle of April and Mother's Day.

It was falling together. A sliver of confidence. I'd have to suck it up, get sure.
I'd have to go back up to the Bradley's.

