



From Poisoned Pen Press

July, 2012

Chapter One

“Lost satellite reception.” DellaStreet spoke in crisp, unapologetic tones. I made the only possible response, a muttered but intense, “You useless piece of —”

DellaStreet, named after Perry Mason’s secretary, had gotten us into this wilderness before abandoning her GPS duties. The paper map of Washington State was equally useless. We were deep into secretive back roads, dipping in and out of forested canyons—Sasquatch territory with no long-range visibility, no road signs, and no other traffic. I pictured hikers discovering our skeletons in the zebra-striped zoo van years from now, picked clean by insects and rodents, me still at the wheel and Denny Stellar seat-belted next to me. The Vancouver *Columbian* headlines: “Remains of animal keepers found at last!” My parents would be raising my son. And DellaStreet would still be stuck to the windshield with a question mark on her worthless little screen.

The van smelled of mud, animals, and frustration. The Finley Memorial Zoo education staff always cleaned it after they brought animals back from a school class or park demonstration, but a vague essence of red-tailed hawk, king snake, and opossum lingered. Windshield wipers beat against a fitful rain, the heater throbbed, and something loose in the back rolled and clanked annoyingly.

We were on a rescue mission and, so far, we couldn’t find our ass with both hands.

This trip was supposed to be a break from my routine of cleaning and feeding the bird collection, or, in Denny’s case, the reptiles. “I haven’t had this much fun,” I said, “since I last got poison oak.”

“You were just trying to suck up to Neal,” Denny said. “Unpure energy, negative results—guaranteed.”

“Unpure? That’s not a real word.” Denny invented the word, but not my motives. The plan was to showcase my flexibility and cooperative attitude, thereby earning points with our boss.

Not that he had offered me a choice. This morning, I’d found a note from Neal Humboldt, the zoo’s curator, on my timecard asking me to come to his office first thing. He’d spun his chair to face me when I stood before his desk, his compact body dense with energy, intense blue eyes already looking past me to the next item on his list. “Oakley, need you to go pick up some exotic pets from a farm somewhere north of Battle Ground. The owners got themselves busted for drugs and hauled off to the slammer. Animal Control wants us to park the animals. We’ll keep them in quarantine until the trial. Won’t hurt us to do the agencies a favor. Take Denny and the Education van.” He twisted back to his computer.

“Um, where? Exactly...”

His hands froze over the keyboard. “Oh, right. Here’s the address.” He shoved a piece of paper toward me.

“What kind of animals? We’ll need carriers.”

“They said parrots and reptiles. That’s all I got.” Back to the keyboard.

“Just a day trip?” I asked and kicked myself. The subtext was, “because I have a kid and can’t go kiting off on unplanned overnight trips.” Not good to remind him of my limitations. Iris Oakley, able to leap tall exhibits in a single bound.

“Yeah, yeah. Get back by four. Shouldn’t be any overtime.”

So I’d found Denny and the van and plugged the address into the GPS and here we were, with the morning ticking away. I stretched my shoulders and neck, aching from the tension of peering through a rain-pelted windshield looking for a mailbox or driveway. Also from the tension of not talking to Denny about breaking my best friend’s heart. I couldn’t face that conversation when we were cooped up together with no escape.

“We’ve been sucked into a parallel universe with a road shaped like a torus,” Denny said. “It’s a continuous loop until the end of time.”

I was tempted to agree, but I caught movement in the rearview mirror and flinched as a patrol car closed in swiftly on our bumper. It swept past us on a blind curve.

We were saved.

#

I pulled through a wide-open metal gate and parked between the patrol car and a Clark County Animal Control truck, hoping that our van could extricate itself from the mud when necessary. Other trucks and cars advertised the Clark County Sheriff’s Office, Washington State Patrol, and the electric company. One had a little satellite dish on top and TV station call letters on the side.

We climbed out of the van into chilly air and stretched. Two big dogs barked and paced behind us with more anxiety than aggression, a black dog with some Boxer in him and a Chow mix. Directly to our right was a muddy vegetable garden punctuated with stumps and fenced with hog wire. Tall trees, mostly young Douglas firs, surrounded the house and barns and crowded in along the driveway. How did the garden get enough sun to survive? Lichen-frosted trees stood evenly spaced down the fence line, a few apples clinging to their crooked branches. All the open spaces were churned-up mud, mud everywhere. Carrier and Ives it wasn’t.

“A stump farm,” Denny said, his dark blond hair bare to the weather. “Log the trees and starve trying to farm it, then give up and let the trees come back. Must be animal hoarders hiding out here so they can have all the dogs they want. Might have rabbits in that barn. Maybe a donkey somewhere around or pygmy goats. Not real farm animals. Pets.”

I’d known Denny a long time and had no trouble tuning out his stream-of-consciousness guesswork. He took off toward a barn fifty yards in front of us with long strides, tall and hunched forward. “Wait up,” I called. “We need to talk to the cops first.”

Denny stopped and jittered in place, then swung toward the single-story gray house to our left. Three homemade plywood dog houses near the front of the house had no door flaps, no bedding. All they provided was a partial windbreak. Next to the front porch, the traditional frayed blue tarp sheltered a heap of firewood with chunks spilling out at the edges.

A Clark County deputy sheriff on the porch looked perturbed by our arrival. His uniform was way sharper than our dark brown shirts and pants. He wore a khaki shirt, olive-green pants, and thick-soled black shoes that had picked up a lot of mud. He got to wear a star on his chest and an ear bud with a coiled tube down to a pocket, plus a belt with a gun. I felt underdressed.

“I’m Iris Oakley from Finley Zoo,” I said. “This is Denny Stellar. We’re here to remove the exotic animals. The zoo agreed to hold them.”

The crew-cut deputy relaxed, nodded, and led us through the rain toward the closer of the two barns. I scanned the place as I dodged mud puddles in his wake. Both barns were roofed in rusted metal and sheathed in weathered wood siding. Feral blackberry canes arched along their

sides. A green Vanagon camper with moss-edged windows sat composting alongside the closer barn. A man in a black wool jacket and knit cap pointed a camera at us.

We stepped out of cold, wind-driven rain through a sliding wood door into the barn. I paused, startled by heat and busyness. Nothing in the weathered exterior hinted of this warm, bright space. The moist air smelled of marijuana sap. People stood on ladders removing grow lights; they snipped off bushy plants and hauled them out of the barn; they photographed everything. Thick batts of insulation bulged along the walls and ceiling, their shiny aluminum surfaces reflecting the peculiar orange glow from the fixtures still hanging. A boxy heater roared. Thin black water tubes dangled everywhere, their ends in white dirt-filled buckets.

Bird keeping could be surprisingly educational.

“The Tiptons kept most of their birds back here,” our guide said.

“Tiptons?” I said.

“The people who lived here and presumably set all this up.”

Denny, often oblivious to expectations, veered off. The deputy led me to the rear of the barn and opened a door. I heard wings beating, shrill cries, and soft thuds. He flicked on a switch. I stepped into the narrow, harshly lit room and stopped short.

At least two dozen parrots fluttered and cried out from a chicken-wire cage stretching to our right. The birds flew to the far end where they clung to the wire or other birds' backs, wings beating frantically. Three of them weren't frantic—they were dead on the floor. An aisle ran along the interior wall. The deputy walked unheeding down this toward the massed birds.

“Hey!” I said. “Don't go down there. They're already scared to death.”

He stopped, looking surprised and then offended.

I moderated my voice. “We'll take it from here.”

“Fine by me. Get them out of here so we can shut off the electricity. And try to stay out of our way.” He took his hurt feelings and left.

I backed out of the little room and closed the door so the birds would calm down. Staring unseeing at the crime scene technicians bustling around, I tried to reorganize my thinking. What on earth was this mass of ill-kept birds all about?

Denny swung back from a far corner of the barn. “Are the reptiles back there? I don't see any.”

I shook my head. “Parrots. Lots of them. We don't have enough carriers. They look terrible.”

Denny bounced on the balls of his feet. “I need to check the other barn.”

“Go take a look. I'll be there in a minute.”

I slipped into the back room again as unobtrusively as I could and took a second look. The birds didn't thrash around as wildly this time. Most stayed where they were, hanging from the wire sides or clinging to the few perches. Their bodies and wings were green, with yellow, red, and blue markings on faces and shoulders. Amazon parrots. A couple different species—lilac-crowned, red-crowned, and one or two others. I'd have to look them up.

Two of them flew toward me and veered back, clumsy in the tight space. They settled on a dowel in mid-cage, hyper alert. Both had broken wing and tail feathers, probably from bashing into the walls.

Focus on the basics: fill the empty food and water bowls. I found a plastic bucket and carried it out into the grow operation, looking for a water tap.

Denny came charging back and nearly slammed into me. “Ire, they won’t let me into the other barn. They say it’s got turtles, but the meth lab is in that barn and they won’t let me in. Come talk to them. Please.” He wheeled and headed out the way he’d come.

Meth lab? “In a minute.” I found the tap and carried the bucket back, moving slowly and avoiding eye contact with the birds. They stirred, but didn’t flush. I spotted a bag of parrot food behind the door, a brand I didn’t recognize. The guano thick on the floor said the birds were eating it when they had the chance.

After filling the water bowls and setting out the crummy food, I gathered dead birds off the floor and put them into the bucket. Bright wings spilled over the edge. This cage was filthy, too small, and badly designed. No natural light, no decent food, not even good perches. No wonder birds were dying.

Who were these people who didn’t give a rip, who couldn’t be bothered to find out what parrots needed to stay alive? A small, hot fire of anger ignited. I left so the birds could relax enough to drink and eat and stepped outside the barn, back into the weather. I turned away from the house, rain peppering my face and hair. Outside the smaller barn, Denny paced in front of a woman deputy leaning against the exterior with her arms crossed. He was saying, “No, no, not tomorrow. The parrots are in bad shape and this might be worse. They could be *dying* in there.”

“Like I told you, this is a *meth lab*,” the deputy said. “A serious hazard to your health, which is why I’m standing here in the rain to keep people out. You’ll have to wait until it’s cleaned up.” She was about my age and seemed too slight for law enforcement. Then again, she carried a gun.

I elbowed Denny to shut up. “Fish and Wildlife asked us to get these animals into safe situations. We wouldn’t want any trouble between Clark County Sheriff’s office and another agency.”

The deputy looked me over and apparently decided a zoo uniform and the name label over my pocket were all the information she needed. She shook her head slowly and firmly. “Just so you know, you make meth wrong and you get nerve gas. Think about it.”

I did think about it. The people we’d seen entering the barn weren’t wearing respirators. No nerve gas. “People in there now are wearing protective gear. You could ask whether they have extras on-site. Then we could make a quick assessment of the situation.” I thought that last bit was a nice turn of phrase, and apparently it did the trick.

She sighed, straightened up, and walked inside. She returned in a few minutes and resumed her post. The barn door opened, revealing a white jumpsuit and hood. The figure pulled off a paper dust mask and became a woman. I made my pitch and learned that she was with the health department. Negotiations led to a determination in our favor, at least for a brief inspection. The price was jumpsuits, face masks, vinyl gloves, and disposable booties. “No one told me we’d have two more people to outfit,” the health department woman said. “We’re going to run out.”

She sent the deputy off to the parking lot rather than ruin her booties in the mud. We waited in the drizzle until the deputy returned with an armload of packages and an even less hospitable attitude. I hoped the gear was top quality and we wouldn’t be poisoned for some theoretical reptiles. We suited up and walked in like astronauts exploring a new planet.

Inside seemed at first to be a typical farm barn. It was cold and smelled like motor oil. The inadequate light from a dirty window and a single bulb hanging from the ceiling revealed a room crowded with an aging tractor, shovels hung on pairs of nails, coils of hoses. That was the front room, maybe a third of the barn. We walked through an interior door into the main room. A few fluorescent fixtures, nothing like the banks of them in the first barn, threw a cold blue light. Another box heater kept it warm. Sharp chemical smells penetrated my face mask. I quelled the urge to hold my breath.

“Make it quick. Still dust and vapors in here,” said a muffled male voice from another astronaut outfit.

On the left was a kitchen—sink and stove, pale laminate counter top. Plastic litter overflowed a shiny galvanized garbage can. The counters looked like a classy high school chemistry lab. Tubing, an assortment of glass flasks and plastic bottles. Bunson burners, a digital scale that would be ideal for weighing baby birds, a box of Red Devil lye. A new fridge, nicer than mine. The perimeter was barricaded with red tape strung around the barn’s support posts. White figures worked inside the tape, photographing and fingerprinting and stuffing items into bags.

I stopped gawking and pivoted to follow Denny. On the other side of the barn, a few heat lamps hung over a low plywood corral. Twenty or so tortoises of several shapes and sizes moved sluggishly over dusty straw bedding. Again, far more animals than anticipated and in equally primitive housing.

Denny stood with his hands resting on the plywood barrier. I could see only his eyes, but he looked to be wearing the blank expression he put on when he encountered something marvelous and desirable. “A grab-bag of expensive torts. No sulcatas. Radiated. Pancake? Damn—is that a spider?” he muttered into his face mask. “What the hell is that one?”

I gathered he was pawing through his mental catalog of tortoise species.

He leaned over the wall and picked up one the size of a baseball. The tortoise waved its stumpy legs in the air, then cried out shrilly and peed a surprising little flood. I jumped.

Denny put it back. “They urinate in self-defense, and they look dehydrated already.” He walked around inspecting the corral. “Water bowls are dry because they’re set under those cheap heat lamps, and the little ones couldn’t reach into them anyway. I’m seeing scraps of iceberg lettuce and that’s all, so crappy nutrition.” He waved an arm, encompassing the corral. “This is an amazing collection in lousy conditions. It makes no sense.”

The implications clicked. “These aren’t pets,” I said. “This is a wildlife smuggling operation.”

Chapter Two

The drugs that led to this bust weren't our business. The animals were. I fumed while Denny studied the tortoises. The parrots were terrified because they had no experience with people, at least not until they were trapped in a Mexican forest, jammed into containers of some sort, and smuggled into the U.S. A similar fate must have befallen the tortoises. This wasn't a food market in China or a pet market in Bangkok or any of the other places that regularly hit the news with confiscated wildlife. These were smuggled animals in our very own Washington State. They were to be sold over the internet and shipped to people who didn't know or didn't care that they were getting frightened, sick animals with poor prospects for survival.

Staying in this barn wasn't going to help the survival of anything. I could feel vile molecules soaking into my lungs and swimming up to my brain. "Let's load these tortoises and get out of here before we're all tweakers."

"You can't just throw turtles in your van," said the health department woman. "They're contaminated with meth."

"We'll rinse them," I said.

The man in the haz-mat suit nodded. "That should work. Clean the turtles and seal them off from the air circulating in your van so you won't breathe in any dust."

Denny and I looked at each other. No way were we going to put animals in air-tight boxes.

I swiveled to look at the kitchen area. "We'll use that sink."

The woman shook her head. "Not today. The Narcotics team isn't done with this area yet. Red tape means hot area."

Denny's arms flew wide. "They need to be out of here. They get poisoned like anything else that breathes."

The haz-mat man said, "Nobody coordinated with us. The site should be cleared tomorrow. Time's up."

We were ushered back outside, Denny sputtering. I stripped off the face mask and, for once, appreciated the cold damp air. I led him away from the woman guarding the barn. Our protective gear cut the wind and blocked the rain. "Denny, stop ranting. We're not rolling over without a fight. I'm going to find out who rules this scene. Try not to piss anybody off."

Leading the way from barn to barn to house porch, I talked with several uniformed officers of the peace as well as Health Department staff and a woman from the Department of Ecology. We ended up on the porch away from the steady drip from leaking gutters, me and Denny, a Washington State patrol officer, a deputy from the narcotics team, and the Department of Ecology woman. I did my best to sound professional. It didn't help that my jumpsuit had a lot in common with the fleece sleeper I zipped my two-year-old, Robby, into every night. Our position was simple: We needed to move the tortoises today because they were exposed to toxins.

The replies were variations on "come back tomorrow, or maybe the next day."

Denny, mouth tight and grey eyes stormy, rocked on his heels and crossed and uncrossed his arms. For the most part, he kept quiet.

A sheriff's department car pulled up in the parking area, setting off the same big dogs that had barked when we arrived. A white pit bull crawled out from underneath the VW camper and joined the chorus. A man with a catch pole in his hand and "Animal Control" on his jacket emerged from a white truck and approached her. The hubbub interrupted the deputy who was employing a great many words to say "no" to me.

Our group on the porch was further distracted by two deputy sheriffs escorting the photographer in the black jacket off the property. He limped a little, but managed to retain his dignity despite the hand of the law on each elbow. A man leaned against the TV station van and watched with a video camera on his shoulder.

"The Tiptons are going to be famous," I said.

Denny erupted. "Do you want the media to hear you let these animals die?" he demanded of no one in particular. "You got the dog catcher here to look after a bunch of mutts, but you're going to let endangered reptiles die because you can't bother to fingerprint a kitchen counter?" The trooper scowled and Denny stopped, but the point was made.

We were abandoned on the porch as the officials regrouped in the kitchen.

The trooper emerged and said, "Go ahead and move the birds first, and we'll see if we can clear the kitchen in the meth barn." Denny left it to me to announce we couldn't do the parrots today. We didn't have enough carriers and the birds needed to settle down and eat. This was not a welcome message since it meant the electricity couldn't be turned off in the marijuana barn. It was raining too hard for the barn to burn down, but my heart sank when I realized we had to come back a second day.

More official consultation. Next offer: take the tortoises out of the meth barn as fast as possible. We could have half an hour.

I took a deep breath. "You said we need to rinse them to remove toxic dust, and you're right. We can't rinse them outside in icy cold water. You won't want us to bring them into the house and contaminate it. Is there a water heater in the marijuana barn?"

A reluctant head-shake.

"Then we have to rinse them at the kitchen in the meth barn."

We were ordered, rather than invited, to strip off the protective gear on the porch and drop anchor in the house, Command Central, and wait. The implication was that the technicians would hustle through their work at the meth lab, but no one promised anything.

We'd barely settled ourselves on rickety wooden chairs around the kitchen table when a shattering scream erupted. Three men in various uniforms sitting in the dining room smirked when we jumped. The blast came again, raucous and piercing.

Another animal health disaster? I followed my ears. In a back corner of the living room stood a seven-foot-high wire cage, about four feet by three feet, holding two huge macaws. The corner was dim, but their blue wings and gold bellies were vivid. These birds didn't act frightened. They seemed aroused and irritated. Side by side, they shifted their feet on the single perch running across the middle of the cage and let out the occasional unnerving shriek. The upright cage was large for a living room, but not big enough for them to fully spread their wings, much less fly. Their food bowl still held a little seed mix and scraps of orange peel. Another bowl had an inch of water. The cage held no toys, mirrors, or other entertainment options. The concept of environmental enrichment hadn't made it to the Tipton farm.

One bird was bare-bellied, half naked from neurotic feather plucking. These looked like the pet birds I was expecting. When I reached in to top up the birds' water and seed bowls, the less-plucked one side-stepped toward me and implied that he or she would bite me good with an enormous curving beak if I didn't get my hand out of there pronto.

I chatted with them, explaining that I was on their team in all this chaos. I promised a much better life in a much bigger space. The one closest to me seemed to listen with declining hostility. The other shrieked and clambered around the cage, maneuvering with beak and feet. I'd worked with smaller parrots, but these big macaws were new to me.

It was almost noon. We fetched our lunches from the van and returned to waiting in the kitchen. I hand-fed my carrot sticks to the macaws, who each grasped one with a foot and nibbled on it, biting off chunks and letting most of it fall to the floor, wasteful feeders like other parrots. The friendlier one rewarded me by allowing a fingertip to scratch his emerald forehead through the bars.

Each bird wore a closed band on one leg, near-proof they were hatched in captivity since that kind of band must be put on when the bird is only a few weeks old. Each also bore a blue band, probably from their breeder. The blue ones were "open" bands, C-shaped strips of aluminum that were closed around the leg with special pliers at any age. The blue bands were dented and scratched where the birds had chewed on them.

I washed up and sat down to eat. My sandwich was soon gone, and no one came to tell us to move the tortoises. The sense of victory over officialdom oozed out, replaced by a suspicion that we'd been conned into docility. I half-expected a health officer to come back and say, "So sorry, didn't work out, come back tomorrow." Denny fidgeted and brought up treatments for reptile lung problems, biker gangs as meth customers, and the stupidity of shipping raw logs overseas instead of milling them in the U.S. I opted to ignore all of this.

He got up and paced. "Every minute they breathe that crap is a minute closer to pneumonia." He finally took himself outside. Through the kitchen window, I could see him juggling four apples. He was pretty good at it.

I couldn't think of a single thing to do that would pass the time. It didn't help that the house was threadbare and sad. The vinyl kitchen floor was faded, the pattern worn off in front of the sink and stove. Linoleum counter tops in an old-fashioned pattern of speckles were also worn colorless. The walls and hand-made plywood cabinets wore the same dull beige paint. But it wasn't dirty, not even the chipped enamel sink. The kitchen spoke of poverty, hard work, and limited lives.

The cops in the dining room griped with each other about budget limitations on the gear they wanted and issues with leave time and holiday pay. It sounded remarkably similar to zoo keeper griping.

All these agencies were focused on the drug bust. I had to wonder how much they cared about trafficking protected species. Would they go the extra mile to bust the criminals who wholesaled these animals to the Tiptons?

Nobody paid any attention when I walked through the dining room and living room and found the bathroom. After I flushed, I took a peek into the vanity drawers. Knowing more about the Tiptons couldn't hurt. The drawers revealed a big assortment of over-the-counter stomach remedies on the left side, kelp pills and primrose oil on the right side. Herbal remedies such as "women's rejuvenation" and "whole-body tonic" in the medicine cabinet. Some of the Tiptons

hadn't been feeling well. An opened box of tampons below the sink. No makeup. A can of Bag Balm. Cheap toilet paper. The mirror showed mud on my chin, cause unknown.

The hallway to the three bedrooms was lined with posters and framed prints of the U.S. flag, the Declaration of Independence, and political slogans, among them "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of tyrants." Another: "Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice." The doors were open and I peeked into each bedroom. No animals. One room held two twin beds, the other a double bed. Both were messy—clothes on the floor, beds unmade. The third room was tidy, with one twin bed and an old dresser. A picture of Paul Revere on a galloping horse was taped to the wall.

The living room was faded, but also surprisingly clean, given all the mud outside. No file cabinet. Disconnected gray cords dangled from a small desk in a corner—the Tiptons had a computer, nowhere to be seen. I yearned to get my hands on it and explore their email for information on animal suppliers and collectors. No family pictures in the living room or dining room or on the fridge.

The three men in the dining room were drinking coffee and sharing a bag of tortilla chips. Either they were on break or they had soaked up their quota of rain for the day. The crew-cut Clark County deputy sheriff texted on his cell phone. An older Washington State Patrol officer thumbed through a gun catalog. The third was an electrician who had objected when we said we couldn't move the birds today and therefore he couldn't shut off the electricity—the parrots needed the heater. I scanned the living room one more time and walked back through the dining room toward the kitchen.

"Patriotism and crime, quite the combo, eh?" Boredom had overcome any grudge the electrician held for the inconvenience we'd caused. He was over-fed, straining the buttons on a standard blue work shirt. He leaned his chair back to a dangerous angle.

"Part of some extremist group?" I asked.

"Can't say. It looks to me like a homemade mix of Bible-thumping and survivalism. The back porch is stacked with boxes of canned food. I saw a metal box full of seed packets, from one of those apocalypse outfits." He put the chair and his life in jeopardy by rocking back and forth. "You've got your anti-government super-patriot thing going. Lived way out here so they didn't have to deal with the real world. But that's only my opinion. Not like I've worked a lot of crime scenes." He seemed to savor the words "crime scenes."

Had he been here for the bust? More likely he was good at eavesdropping. The cops looked as if they were about to tell him to put a sock in it, but they didn't. Mr. Hefty set his chair down with a thump. "They didn't hold with doctors, either. That wife could hardly walk. They've got her in the hospital."

"Where did they get the parrots and tortoises?" I asked. "They don't know anything about how to take care of them."

Three sets of shrugs.

"Have you found any international connections? Do you know yet who wholesaled the animals to the Tiptons?"

Three puzzled head shakes.

The electrician said, "Now I understand, and I could be wrong, that meth labs are kinda rare these days, what with the controls on cough medicine."

“Controls” seemed to be another tasty word and this topic was more interesting to his companions. The state patrol officer said, “Harder to get big quantities of pseudoephedrine now. They could have found another source—another state or Mexico—and brought it here to process. Lord knows the demand is still in place.”

The deputy sheriff stood up, stretched, and left. I caught his name tag as he passed. Gil Gettler. The state patrol officer walked toward the bedrooms and made a phone call in a quiet voice.

So much for my pitch about wildlife crimes.

I wandered back to the living room and pulled out a drawer in the computer desk. It held only pens, pencils, and rubber bands. “Don’t touch that,” said the patrol officer, phone still in hand. “Why don’t you stay in the kitchen, please.”

What were the hazmat people *doing*? I could have stuffed the entire lab into garbage bags six times over in the time we’d waited. Clocking out by four o’clock was a lost cause, and being late to pick up Robby at day care was a strong possibility. I settled disconsolately into a kitchen chair. Denny came back inside, shook water off his head, and began a monologue about tortoise nutrition with analyses of fresh greens and hay.

The Animal Control guy arrived and saved me. He sat down in one of the two empty kitchen chairs with a sigh and poured coffee out of a steel thermos.

“I’m Iris Oakley.”

Denny nodded at him.

“From the zoo, right? Ken Meyers.” Medium height, about level with me. About my age, twenty-seven, or a little older. Calm dark eyes, brown hair. Denny and I watched him as if we’d never seen a man drink coffee before.

The electrician pulled on a jacket and left.

“Did you catch that pit bull?” I asked.

“Lord, it’s damp out there.” He wiped his face with a handkerchief. “She was happy to find a friend. She’s loaded up. I struck out with the other two.” A little pause separated each sentence. After Denny’s motor-mouthing, Ken sounded thoughtful and a little sluggish. “Lucky mutts. Cops shoot dogs if they have to. These ran off when Old Man Tipton fired a few rounds. I’ll try the live traps tomorrow.”

So there was actual gunfire. “We heard that the wife was taken to the hospital. Was it just the two of them?”

“No. They’ve got a couple of sons. Grown ones. They went to jail, too.”

This was way more interesting than Denny’s ramble. “Every agency in the state seems to be here.”

“Meth brings everyone together.” A chipped front tooth showed when he smiled.

“What do you do with the dogs?” I asked.

“Humane society. They’ll be out of the rain and fed. How’s it going with the parrots and turtles?”

“Turtles live in water. These are tortoises.” Denny was fed up with many things, among them bad taxonomy. “And we wouldn’t be sitting here if they’d let us load them.”

“I had a box turtle when I was a kid,” Ken said, unperturbed. “I guess the Tiptons liked having a lot of animals around.”

“Not pets,” Denny said. “That’s what I was expecting. A Burmese python, maybe. Green iguanas, monitor lizards. Those get too big, and people get rid of them.”

I said, “We think this was commercial. I spotted a stack of new cardboard boxes, just what you’d need for shipping tortoises. I suppose they made the sales by email.” I turned to the remaining officer in the dining room. “You have the Tipton’s computer, right? You’ve got wildlife crimes here, not just drugs. Maybe you can find the source—whoever the Tiptons got the animals from.”

He looked up from his catalog. “Department of Agriculture was informed about the birds, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife is involved. Also Washington State Fish and Wildlife.”

“You’ll share information with them, right?”

That earned me a tolerant nod.

Ken and I agreed that the Tiptons hadn’t spent much money on caring for their dogs. Ken said one had a skin condition that was common with dogs left outside. He was pleasant company, another animal person. But he finished his coffee all too soon and stood up. He washed his cup and left it in the dish drainer. On his way out, he said in my direction, “Watch out for rattlers. Drug dealers like their hot snakes.”

“That’s Denny’s job. The things that bite me aren’t venomous.”

When the cop started pushing buttons on his fancy cell phone, I inspected the kitchen cabinets and the back porch and learned nothing of any use. I sat down again. Denny went outside and juggled apples.

A long half an hour later, we were told to get our turtles out, the faster the better. We charged off to the meth barn. Two new sets of protective gear were waiting for us. The red tape in the barn’s kitchen area had been replaced with yellow tape. The garbage can, flasks, and tubing were gone. The air was a little better.

Denny rinsed tortoises in the sink and set them in a dish pan with a running commentary about each animal’s condition and species. I assembled cardboard boxes, taped the bottoms, and poked holes in the tops with a ball point pen. I found paper towels to dry off wet, struggling beasts and packed them up. Most of them had a high, rounded carapace on top—some with fancy yellow and brown markings—and a flat plastron on the bottom, four scaly legs, a beady-eyed head, and a neck with wrinkled skin. They ranged in size from tennis ball to volleyball. Two of them seemed flattened, not rounded. Denny said those were pancake tortoises. The littlest tortoise blew bubbles from its nose, and Denny was stricken with worry.

I moved the zoo van to the meth barn and left the engine running and the heater on. As Denny finished rinsing, I loaded tortoises in a drizzle. The deputy guarding the barn had disappeared. Pausing for a moment, I pulled off the claustrophobic mask and shoved the hood back, grateful for easy breathing. It wasn’t four o’clock yet, but the light was already dimming, clouds and twilight closing down the day. January in the great Pacific Northwest—cold and dark and wet. I wanted to go home, away from this sorry place with its ugly commerce. I wanted to hold my kid.

A half-grown Doberman emerged from the blackberries between the barns. Black and tan, uncropped floppy ears and a whippy tail. It looked skinny and scared. I made kissy noises toward it, but it crept back into the brambles. Ken had left bowls of dog food in the dog houses. I

hoped the Dobe got to it before the bigger dogs ate it all. I suited up again and went back for another load.

I emerged from the barn for the third or fourth time balancing two boxes of clean tortoises when a woman materialized at my elbow. A wild cloud of gray hair was half-hidden under a dark green plastic parka. She was short and a bit plump, but that grandmotherly impression was countered by the rifle slung under her arm. No, it had two barrels. A shotgun?

Her voice was soft, but urgent. "Can you tell me what happened? Where are the Tiptons? Was anybody hurt?"

She was a decade or two older than my mother and definitely not an agency person. She seemed nervous, which made me like the shotgun even less. And she'd waited until the farm yard was empty, everyone inside the house or in one of the barns. I put the boxes in the van, uncovered my face, and aimed for a soothing tone. "The family was arrested for drug trafficking. No one was hurt."

"The boys are in jail? Both of them?"

"Yes, and the father."

The woman nodded and the shotgun muzzle dipped. Her forehead wrinkled with a fresh thought. "They arrested Wanda? Is she with Liana? She won't do well without Liana."

I relaxed a little. This was just a concerned neighbor. "Is Wanda the mother? We heard she's in the hospital. Who's Liana?"

The woman turned away. "Their girl. I hope she's with Wanda."

"We didn't hear anything about a girl."

The woman considered, looking over her shoulder at me. "Maybe she escaped. Yes, that's possible."

I couldn't tell whether she was relieved or worried about that. I addressed what *I* was worried about. "Um, why the gun?"

"Perhaps you haven't met the Tipton men." She glanced around the farmyard. A formal nod. "I appreciate your assistance." Before I could organize the questions I wanted to ask, she ducked under the crime scene tape and walked with an erect back into the woods and was gone.

I *so* did not want to come back here.

When the tortoises were all loaded, I took a peek at the parrots in the marijuana barn. They had eaten most of the food. I topped up the bowl again. "Listen, you guys," I told them, "One more day in here and we're all out of this place *forever*."

Chapter Three

“Iris, you don’t know that these animals are smuggled.” Dr. Reynolds, the zoo’s veterinarian, spoke in a reasonable voice similar to the one I used with Robby, my toddler son. “It’s rare, but it’s legal to import wild birds with the proper permits, and then it’s legal to sell them. We don’t know for sure that they *are* wild caught. They could be captive-bred. Every one of those birds could be legitimate. We don’t have enough evidence.”

I was shut down in mid-rant about wildlife profiteers and how the zoo ought to move heaven and earth to see them arrested. It was eight in the morning, way too early for moral indignation. The vet—a slim, serious woman in a lab coat—outranked me, and I had no choice but to simmer in silence. We were at the zoo’s hospital building, where Denny had taken over one of the three quarantine rooms for the tortoises. He and Dr. Reynolds had stayed late the night before to set up housing for them, while I’d defected to pick up my son. The tortoises were now sorted by species and housed in Denny’s best efforts at the right conditions for each, with particular attention to their humidity and food requirements.

He held the littlest one, which was still bubbling from its nose and looked to be on its last legs. I stifled another diatribe about the people who snatched it out of its native habitat where it could thrive for decades and sent it instead to an early death in Washington State.

“Can’t speak for the birds,” Denny said, “but some of these guys aren’t legal in trade.”

Yes.

“And that’s the curator’s job,” the vet said. “Neal will follow up.”

Denny thrust out the ailing animal, which was about four inches long and beautifully patterned with yellow lines radiating from each dark shell plate. Dr. Reynolds flipped her long brown hair over her shoulder, pried one leg out from its shell, and stuck the tortoise with a needle full of antibiotic. “Our job is to keep these healthy and let the justice system sort out the rest.” She put the tortoise back into its own little habitat. “Marian will set up the middle quarantine room for the Amazon parrots. The third one I have to reserve for zoo animals, so we’re maxed out. Where does Neal want to put the macaws?”

Good question. “He hasn’t said. Would you mind asking him?”

“I will. And, Iris, be sure that all your clothing is washed with disinfectant after you handle those birds. The Amazons are likely to be carrying viruses. Wipe out the van and the carriers with disinfectant. We need to protect the macaws from exposure to the Amazons and the zoo’s bird collection from exposure to either of them. I can test for herpesviruses and vaccinate over the next few days, but that isn’t any guarantee. Hygiene is essential.”

She was treating the Amazons as wild birds despite the quibbling.

“Also,” she added, “wear a face mask when you’re handling them.”

Right. I didn’t need any bird-borne diseases either.

“Let’s go,” I said to Denny.

He shook his head. “You don’t need me for parrots.”

“Neal says you’re going. He wouldn’t let me have anyone else.” I had tried for my friend Linda, the feline keeper, or Hap, the commissary manager. No luck. Neal had tagged me and Denny for this job, and me and Denny it would be. I herded him away from the torts to the employee parking lot, ignoring the reasons why he couldn’t possibly go.

I took the driver’s side of the van again. Denny driving and talking at the same time could be life-threatening. I stuck in a Shakira CD, one of the Spanish ones so I didn’t have to strain to understand her words over the heater. The only Spanish I knew was “mojito.”

DellaStreet woke up and, according to her little screen, began searching the airwaves for her mother ship, no doubt so she could learn once again that she wasn’t in Chicago. She had failed to find the Tipton farm yesterday, despite her advanced satellite communications, and wasn’t needed today. I sent her back into hibernation.

The rain was at it again, this time with wind tossing the tree tops around. There’s not enough coffee in the world for January in the Northwest.

Exit signs slipped past on the freeway. Denny was soon bored. “Why is Neal hot for a new aviary when the reptile building is just as decrepit?”

“The reptile building isn’t falling over. The aviary is. He’ll get around to reptiles.”

“In my lifetime?”

I didn’t answer. After a few miles, he said, “Calvin will retire, and you’ll get to design it.”

Calvin Lorenz was senior keeper of Birds and my immediate supervisor. “He hasn’t resigned yet, and there’s no guarantee I’ll get his job when he does.” Calvin had been talking about retiring for years. If he did, then he wouldn’t be with his birds anymore. Arthritis battled with his love for everything in feathers.

“If you go for it, you’ll get it.” Denny stuck a foot on the dashboard, searching for a comfortable position.

“Maybe. More stressful.” Single parenting and a full-time job provided plenty enough stress. I didn’t feel like sharing my shaky decision that I would try for senior keeper.

A mile or two rolled by with Denny shifting on the seat, tapping a foot, adjusting the heater. He said, “Pete and Cheyenne have lasted a long time.”

I glanced at him. They were animal keepers hired two years ago who shared my house. “Why wouldn’t they? Cheyenne’s happy with the new elephant yard, and she’s on the design team for the new barn. Pete seems fine with being a floater. They’ve got a good deal living with me.” Why was this coming up? “Did you hear something?”

“No, just thinking about the future. Possible changes.”

“How adult.” Was this an opening to talk about how he had broken the heart of Marcie Altman, my best friend? I couldn’t find the strength.

Denny launched into lighting equipment for tortoises, all the ways to emulate sunshine. Since daylight mattered to birds as well, I listened with half my attention.

I pulled off the freeway onto increasingly narrow side roads. We found the farm with no trouble this time. The gate was open and the Animal Control van was back in yesterday’s slot, along with most of the vehicles we’d seen before. Ken was there, setting up live traps for the loose dogs in the pouring rain. He directed a chipped-tooth grin and a wave toward our van. The rogue photographer was also back, still in the black jacket and wool cap, a camera bag hanging

from one shoulder. He backed up from the house, shooting it from various angles, unconcerned about the camera getting wet. His limp seemed to be a permanent feature rather than a recent injury. He turned his attention to the roving Boxer mix and snapped it as well. The dog backed away.

“Ire, check out the gate,” Denny said. He hopped out and pulled it partly shut to expose its greeting. I peered at it through the van window.

Bare plywood and red acrylic paint, the lettering possibly done with a child’s water color brush. The boards varied in age and decrepitude, no doubt created and wired to the gate as inspiration struck. The message was unambiguous, if incorrect: PRIVAT PROPERTY KEEP OUT. That was the most weathered. Others announced:

Trespassers will be shot!!!

Attack Dogs Lose on Property!!!

If you are Government, We Shoot to Kill. No Sellers, No Politicians, No Phonebooks Delivery, No Census, No Nothin.

Denny pushed the gate back open, got into the van, and shook his head like a wet dog. I held up a hand to block the spray. “Charming welcome. They didn’t figure out that red is the first color to fade.” My sign-painter father would be pleased with my analysis.

I drove us through the gate and across the muddy yard and parked close to the house. Aside from Ken and the photographer, no one was wandering around the property today. Too wet and windy. We went inside to check in. Before we’d left the night before, I had reported my visitor and what she said—that the raid had missed a Tipton, a girl. The sole deputy remaining had raised an eyebrow and turned away to make a cell phone call.

This morning I asked the deputy who seemed to be in charge, a solidly built woman with blond hair, whether they had learned anything about the missing Liana. She thought about it and apparently decided we couldn’t cause too much damage. “The mother’s been asking for her. She says she has a teenage daughter, but there’s no birth or school record of a girl associated with the Tiptons or with this address.”

“Which fits,” said Gil Gettler, the crew-cut one who’d been in the house with us the day before. “These people probably kept getting more and more isolated until that last kid was totally off the grid. Home birth out here and nobody’d ever know.”

I couldn’t imagine how big a paper trail my son Robby had already. Hospital birth, social security number, health insurance. Not yet three years old, my boy was totally documented.

“I wonder if she’s wherever the other Tiptons are staying,” said Gettler. “They’re not likely to have all that many options.”

“*What?*” I said. “They’re not in jail?”

The woman said, “You didn’t hear? We’ve got a judge who’d probably let Ted Kaczynski out on bail. The Tiptons were released yesterday.”

“It was a lot of bail,” Gettler said. “Nobody thought they’d make it.”

“Well, they did. And now nobody knows where the hell they are.” She turned to us. “Don’t worry. They’ve been warned not to show up here until we’re done with the place. So they must be camped out somewhere else.”

Denny and I exchanged a look. This did not sound good, but what choice did we have? We got on with the job. I moved the van close to the marijuana barn and quick-stepped inside

before I was soaked. I was relieved to find that the heater was going and no more parrots had died. I unloaded pet carriers, stacking them inside by the buckets holding marijuana stumps. “Why’d you take all those down?” I asked the chubby electrician, pointing to the row of long fixtures leaned against the wall.

“Good for fingerprints,” he said. “You’ll get the birds out today? I need to shut this barn down.”

“I’m going to try.” I turned to Denny. “Get the nets, will you?” I pulled on a face mask and light-weight leather gloves. The gloves wouldn’t provide much protection against a bite, but thicker gloves made it hard to hold a bird gently. I went with the largest of the three nets I’d brought. The trick was to nab the bird flying, straight into the depths of the net where it would be surrounded by soft cloth, and not whack it with the rim. I stepped into the cage, hoping that the avian panic attack would send one into my clutches, but they all crowded away from me. I moved closer, and one finally lost his wits and flew past me. Bingo. I grabbed the back of its neck to control the beak, squeezed the wings together where they joined the body, and eased the bird out of the net.

I’d read endless news reports about the trade in wild animals. It was a different matter to hold a quivering bird in my hands and feel the too-thin breast muscle. This one had a toe missing, a raw stump. Strangers crowded together had fought to space themselves out and the weak couldn’t escape. I released it into an animal carrier.

I caught birds and Denny stacked carriers in the van, where the heater was running. I was grateful they weren’t in the barn with meth—at least we didn’t have to rinse them. By lunch time, I had most of them caught up and we were low on carriers. I hadn’t added any injuries except a broken feather or two.

Ready for food and a break, I pulled off my gloves, shut the back-room door behind me, and looked around the marijuana part of the barn. The activity level was diminished, with only two technicians working. Denny wandered around uselessly. “This is old shit,” he announced. “The water tubes are starting to crack and so are the buckets. They’ve been growing for years.” He poked a finger into a bucket.

“Denny, these cops are focused on the drugs. They might not have looked for evidence about the wildlife violations. Don’t mess anything up.”

“Right. Maybe they missed something. I’ll look around.”

Not what I meant, but I was okay with it.

I spent a few minutes sorting through a garbage can in the corner of the grow room until a technician noticed and told me to leave it alone. I didn’t find anything useful.

The rain had let up, so we gathered our lunches and trotted to the house under a thick dark sky that promised more deluge any minute.

“I want to take a look at that VW,” I told Denny.

“The tires look good,” he said. “This might be their only wheels. Every other vehicle here has a logo on it.”

“Not if they had something to leave the jail. Unless you can rent a car from the slammer.”

I peered through its road-grimed windows. “There’s room inside for boxes of animals. You could drive this to LAX, pick up a load, and come back here to market them. No one would expect to find illegal wildlife out here in the boonies.”

“Let’s take a look.”

That had been my inclination, too. I itched to pull the door open and search the van for gas receipts, feathers, whatever. But that might mess up crucial fingerprints. Reluctantly I stepped back without touching it. “No, better not. We can make sure the cops go over it.”

Movement caught my eye—the skinny Doberman. She slipped into the brambles along the barn. I looked around for Ken. He wasn’t in sight, and his white truck was gone. If I caught her, she could stay warm in the house while I tracked him down, instead of spending the night outside in the blackberries or in a wire trap. “You go ahead. I want to see about that dog.”

I broke off a bite of meatloaf sandwich. Moving slowly through the mud in the dog’s direction, I flipped the morsel toward the place she had disappeared. She emerged to snap it up and half-crouched at the edge of the weeds, looking wet and miserable. Ken could charm a pit bull. I ought to be able to woo this one. I squatted and chatted softly, flicking another bite toward her. She gulped it. The next bite landed closer to me. She whined, took a step forward, and changed her mind, backing into the berries.

When the chill had crept up my calves and knees to my butt, I stood up stiffly and meandered closer. A spattering of rain warned me to give up soon. I squatted again and duck-waddled toward the gap where she’d disappeared. She couldn’t be so scared of people that she had to pass on a meatloaf sandwich. I make a great meatloaf.

The heavens opened and dumped water on me. In seconds, my hair was plastered to my skull and rivulets ran down my neck, under my collar, and between my shoulder blades. I heard her whine again and the sound helped my eyes and brain sort through the vegetative chaos. Through the soggy tangled brambles, I made out the dog watching me, lying down with her nose pressed flat on—a person. On the chest of a girl. A dead girl. I teetered and struggled with my balance, then scrambled up and pushed a sharp-spiked blackberry cane aside.

I’d found Liana.