Star Chamber Brotherhood
A Novel
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PF Publishing, Boston

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Chapter 1
Day Zero: Saturday, May 11, 2029 Weston, Massachusetts

Hank Oshiro had not seen so many polished black Fords and Nissans in one place since 2012, nor as many gold Swiss watches, English bespoke suits, or handcrafted Italian loafers.

"So this is where all the money went," he muttered.

Oshiro had come to loathe the people he served at parties like these. Over the past two decades they had inherited the earth but, as he knew from hard experience, they were anything but meek.

Oshiro pulled his white waiter's jacket down around his hips while he stood in line at the bar, waiting for his tray. He had not worn one of these starched numbers since he was in college fifteen years earlier, and the mandarin collar was already chafing his throat. It was a simple enough job to serve straight-pour liquor to this group of middle-aged men and a few women, but he could not shake the uneasy feeling that, despite his long-ago experience and recent crash-course training, someone would expose him as an impostor.

He picked up his tray, already loaded with a rare pre-war fifth of barrel-reserve bourbon, a carafe of spring water, a clear acrylic ice bucket, ice tongs, and six double Old-Fashioned glasses, and made his way through the crowded service area back toward the reception tent and the receiving line.

Holding the tray with one hand, he reached casually into

his trouser pocket to confirm that the slender two-way radio and laser pen were still in place. Then he continued along the rear of the reception tent toward the spot he had been shown on a hastily sketched map of the property the day before.

That spot, about ten or twelve meters from the reception tent, would give Oshiro an unobstructed view of each approaching car as it slowed to disgorge its passengers at the end of the red carpet. The only problem was that the marked location, being out of the way, was an unlikely position for a waiter.

No sooner did Oshiro arrive in position than he felt the two-way radio vibrate in three quick pulses, announcing that the target had turned off Church Street and was only three or four minutes away. A crowd was already assembled along both sides of the red carpet. Franz Meier, the catering company's owner, was directing every waiter he could find to the area where the newly arrived guests had gathered.

Oshiro cast a glance across the fields toward the stone gates at the eastern edge of the property, and saw a dark sedan emerge onto the gravel road. He strained his eyes to discern its color in the gathering darkness.

Suddenly he noticed Meier coming his way with quick nervous steps and a scowl imprinted on his deeply lined face.

"You, Server, what is that on your tray?"

"Bourbon, Sir, 12-year-old barrel reserve."

"Good, exactly. But why are you hiding it? Quickly, go to the carpet and stand ready for the Director. He is a whiskey man and he likes his neat."

“The Director?”

“Go, please. He is arriving in a few moments and must be attended to. *Kapiert*?”

“*Jawohl*… Yes, Sir.”

As he started toward the receiving line, Oshiro cast a sidelong glance toward the stone gates and saw what now appeared to be a dark maroon Ford sedan approaching the fork where the driveway became circular. He walked slowly, glancing over his shoulder twice more before the sedan reached the fork. At that moment, he reached into his pocket and pressed the call button on the radio.

He quickened his step now, moving close to the outer fringe of the crowd forming along the red carpet. The host, dressed in a neatly tailored slate-gray pinstripe suit of a quality Oshiro had not seen for over twenty years, stopped him and poured a glass of bourbon for himself with a splash of spring water. The man conveyed an air of casual elegance that would have drawn baleful stares, had he dared to show himself outside of tightly patrolled enclaves around Boston, where the Unionist *nomenklatura* and their new class of parasitic contractors, consultants and lobbyists lived and worked.

Oshiro maneuvered through the crowd so that he had a clear line of sight to the approaching sedan. He strained his eyes to identify the license plate number. Yes, there was the S, and the tall twin 1s, the hyphen, and the 22 at the end. He reached into his pocket and pressed the call button again.

Oshiro scanned the crowd and spotted Franz Meier nearby. Meier returned his gaze with a stern look and a curt wave that spurred Oshiro to move even closer to the red

carpet.

Now the heavy sedan pulled to a stop opposite the red carpet, while valets in forest green windbreakers rushed to open the passenger door.

Oshiro held his breath. Even after five years, he was certain that he would recognize Frederick Rocco without difficulty. But would Rocco recognize him? It seemed improbable—after all, Rocco had supervised thousands of prisoners in his career, three or four thousand in Kamas alone.

But, as every prisoner knew, veteran security professionals sometimes possessed an uncanny ability to detect those who had spent time in the camps. Rocco may have never laid eyes on Oshiro, but what might Rocco do if he happened to glance his way? Denounce him as an Enemy of the People and order his arrest? Was it possible that he might give himself away, perhaps through his eyes?

Oshiro took a step back from the crowd and slipped his hand into his trouser pocket for a third time. In a moment it would not matter whether he were spotted or not.

He watched the passenger step onto the gravel road. The guest was of middle height, narrow-shouldered but wide of girth, and wore a nondescript undertaker's suit. His balding head displayed an obvious combover and the pencil-thin mustache on his lip made him resemble a homegrown Himmler. The man might well be a State Security official of some kind, but he was certainly not Fred Rocco.

Oshiro panicked. He had not yet pushed the button, but what if the shooter pulled the trigger without receiving his signal? Should he abort or wait? The plan did not anticipate a situation like this.

Without thinking, Oshiro turned his head and cast a glance back toward the woods near the stone gates. He saw a muzzle flash at the edge of the forest, and a moment later heard the crack of the bullet as it passed close by. Stunned, he watched the wrong man jerk backward as the rifle bullet tore through his chest, then half-turn and crumple onto the red carpet.

The others in the crowd reacted in a variety of ways. Those with military training hit the deck, while a handful of security men rushed forward to surround the victim and hustle him back into his car, dead or alive. Most of the other guests and wait staff remained in place with stunned expressions, incapable of coherent action. A few appeared unaware that anything at all had happened and continued to argue, joke, and drink without interruption.

But for Oshiro, time compressed. In less than a second he assessed the situation and decided what to do. Slowly he edged around the crowd as if returning to the serving tent, deposited his tray on an empty trolley, and removed his white jacket. Then he set off at a brisk pace, crossing the field toward the forest about forty meters away. Once he reached the woods, he hid behind a tree.

Two security men in green windbreakers were already halfway across the field. When they saw him stop, one of them pointed.

Oshiro's mind raced; he knew what he had to do. He ran another twenty meters into the forest, turned left, pulled out the laser pen and used it as a flashlight to search for a place to bury the radio under a thick layer of pine needles. Then he ran back to join his original path and continued deeper into the woods, more slowly and quietly now, watching and

listening for his pursuers.

At first he heard nothing. Evidently they knew something about man-tracking and small-unit tactics. He expected that the pair had split up and might attempt to outflank him. Perhaps they had radioed for backup. If they had, he thought, he would need to adjust his strategy as well.

No more than a minute or two later, Oshiro heard a broken twig behind him and froze. He reached into his pocket. The laser pen was still there.

From a different spot some ten or fifteen meters to his left, a calm and steady voice addressed him.

"Freeze! Put your hands up slowly. Now!"

In an instant Oshiro ducked behind a tree, pointed his laser toward the man and shined it at his eyes.

"Drop your weapon and lie face down or I'll shoot," he replied, every bit as calm as his pursuer.

And at that moment, the second security man fired his pistol three times, killing Oshiro before his darkened laser hit the ground.

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Hector Alvarez drummed his fingers nervously on the gearshift lever of his silver Toyota sedan, while he strained to listen through the lowered window for approaching footsteps. Alvarez, a tall, lean man in his mid-forties with military-length, salt-and-pepper hair and a handsome face, glanced at his watch.

"Ten more seconds and we're out of here," he said to his passenger, whom he had picked up just minutes before

at a spot nearby. “That’s the plan, and we’re sticking to it. Spotter has an alternate escape route if he misses his pickup. It’s all in the plan. He’ll be fine.”

“I still don’t like it,” the passenger replied, making sure his hunting rifle was out of sight. This was Greg Doherty, age 40. Of similar athletic build, his boyish face and straight blond hair gave him the appearance of an aging surfer. The men had not met before and did not know each other’s names. They only knew each other’s function: Spotter, Shooter, Driver and Chief.

“Wait here. I’ll find him,” Doherty announced.

Suddenly the car doors clicked shut.

“Unlock it,” Doherty demanded.

“No can do,” Alvarez answered firmly. “We all knew the risks before we signed on. We’re sticking to the plan.”

At that moment they heard three faint pops from deep within the woods.

“That’s it,” Alvarez declared, knowing the pistol shots spelled Spotter’s death. “We’re out of here.”

“But we can’t just leave him,” Doherty objected.

“It’s my call. I’m the driver. We’re following the plan.”

Doherty looked toward the woods and clenched his teeth. In the Army, even in the darkest days of the Manchurian War, he had never left a fallen comrade behind.

Hector Alvarez put the Toyota in gear and slowly pulled off the shoulder without switching on the headlights until he had turned onto Laurel Road and was certain that no one was following.

They continued on Concord Road toward downtown Weston. As they approached the strip of shops on the

Boston Post Road, Doherty broke the silence.

"Right turn here. I'm getting out."

Alvarez looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"You're sure of this?"

"Let me out. Now," Doherty insisted.

"Have it your way, boss," Alvarez replied indifferently. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

"Yeah, it's been real, dude," Doherty replied and stepped out into the darkness.

Chapter 2
One Month Earlier
Wednesday, April 11, 2029 Somerset Club, Beacon Hill, Boston

Werner had felt unbalanced all day. The sensation was difficult to pin down. It was a disordered, befuddled feeling, but with an expectant, almost effervescent aspect, as if something momentous were about to happen. But with only fifteen minutes until closing time, Frank Werner could no longer see how anything out of the ordinary would materialize tonight.

He looked through the double doors that led from the bar to the dining room. The last diners had departed by eleven and the headwaiter had finished resetting the tables for the following day. Business had not been bad for a Wednesday night. Fortunately for the Somerset Club, bar revenues more than compensated for poor attendance in the dining room. That was good, because Werner owned the bar.

The Somerset Club, a venerable institution dating back to the 1850s, had been a private social club for wealthy Bostonians for more than 160 years, when the Unionist government imposed new regulations that drove most private social clubs out of business and forced them to sell their assets to local governments for pennies on the dollar. A decade later, during the nascent economic reforms following the death of the President-for-Life, the City of Boston auctioned off the former clubhouse at 42 Beacon Street. The double-bayed structure, of French design

decorated with hand-carved stone cartouches, had once been the most expensive private dwelling in Boston. Two centuries later, the buyer was a straw man representing a leading member of the City Council, who then sold it at a quick profit to the current owner, an immigrant dealer in recycled building materials and gray-market construction equipment.

Werner turned his attention back to cleaning the granite counter behind the bar and putting his jiggers, shakers, strainers, muddlers, and other cocktail equipment in their proper places on the shelf behind him. With his attention focused behind the bar, he failed to notice the stranger who took a seat at the barstool directly across from him. Upon looking up, he spotted him in the mirror.

The man was dressed in a brown tweed sport coat and gray flannel trousers, his knit tie clipped to his shirt with a gold tie bar. The visitor removed his olive loden hat and set it on the stool beside him. Werner turned around to take his order.

His attire seemed to suggest that the man was a former Somerset Club member who had found his way back upon hearing about the bar's growing reputation for quality spirits and cocktails. There were still people from Old Money in Boston, and they did tend to gravitate to their old haunts. But most of them were broken men: frail-looking, weak-willed, gray-complexioned creatures who survived on remittances from their émigré children or the proceeds from selling off their dwindling cache of family heirlooms.

But this man was anything but weak, Werner thought. He was a few inches short of six feet, barrel-chested, thick-shouldered, and yet spare at the waist. By his trimmed gray

beard, receding hairline, and weathered complexion, Werner judged him to be in his fifties. The man folded his hands on the bar and looked at Werner with a trace of amusement. The hands bore the unmistakable signs of hard labor—very hard labor. These were the hands of someone who had served time in the labor camp system.

A thrill seized Werner. Did he know this man? Had they perhaps been fellow prisoners? He strained to recollect where he might have seen the face before.

The stranger's eyes showed an unmistakable spark of intelligence. Werner detected humor, curiosity, self-assurance, and a complete lack of fear. This was unusual in Unionist America of 2029. Nearly everyone Werner met in Boston had been traumatized in one way or another by what most people now referred to in shorthand as "the Events." The only people who did not show fear were the Unionist *nomenklatura* and their New Class protégés, along with the criminal underclass. And, of course, the special breed of men who had mastered their fear in the camps.

"What would you like?" he asked the stranger.

"Pour me a shot of your best bourbon," the man answered with a half-smile.

"That could get expensive," Werner informed him with a raised eyebrow. "Do you have a particular mark in mind?"

The stranger shook his head.

"Any pre-war bourbon or sourmash will be fine. Bonded if you have it."

"You've come to the right place, my friend. How about some Woodford Reserve? We just..."

"Make it a double. Straight up. No ice."

Werner nodded and reached down to fetch the bottle from a low shelf. He measured three ounces and poured a bit more, meeting the stranger's gaze as he did so.

"That will be twenty New Dollars. I think you will be pleased with it. The final batch of this bourbon was bottled over fifteen years ago. Bought it from a widow in Brookline…"

The man peeled off a twenty and a ten and laid them on the counter without looking up. He took the glass and drank.

"What's the matter, Frank? Don't you remember me? Do I look that different without a jumpsuit?"

Werner felt a shock. He could not place the face or the voice, but now he knew where had met the man. Suddenly he realized why he had felt so odd all day. The long-awaited turning point had come; his life was about to change.

The stranger pulled a folded piece of newsprint from his inside jacket pocket and laid it on the bar. As Werner reached for it, the man downed the remaining whiskey and stood to leave.

"I have something else for you, Frank. Hold out your hand," the man announced in a tone that remained cordial but did not permit contradiction.

Werner did as he was told. The man handed him a white paper disc the size of a half dollar. At its center was a drawing of a five-pointed star with the numeral "1."

"If you remember the man in the article, I expect you'll remember me. Now, listen carefully. When you leave here, I want you to walk up the hill and turn right onto Park Street. If I pass you, follow me. But if I don't pass you, just

go on home and look for me another night. I will explain later."

Without waiting for a reply, the man turned and walked out the door.

Werner felt the blood rush to his cheeks as memories of his incarceration at the corrective labor camp in Kamas, Utah, overtook him. He glanced around the room but no one was paying any attention to him. He unfolded the newsprint and read.

One side of the paper contained single-spaced government notices in small print. On the other side was an advertisement for a state-run department store and an article showing a photograph of a middle-aged government official under the heading, "Former DSS Official Appointed Regional FEMA Director."

A wave of rage and disgust washed over Werner as he read the laudatory article about Frederick Rocco's career progression: first in the FBI and the Department of State Security and now in FEMA, where his new challenge focused on providing emergency housing for refugees from flooded coastal areas in northern New England.

Of course, Werner remembered Rocco. Fred Rocco had been commandant of Kamas during the prisoner revolt of 2024. It was Rocco who had brought in tanks and troops to quash the revolt and retake the camp. And it was Rocco who had signed the order sending Werner and three thousand other prisoners to punishment camps up North, where they were intended to die without a trace.

The presentation of the star could mean only one thing: the Star Committee had sentenced Rocco to death for his crimes at Kamas. And Werner had been selected to carry

out the execution. This was an honor and a duty, and he knew he could not refuse. And yet he questioned it.

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Though April was nearly half over, the weather was still wet and cold, with heaps of frozen snow generating pockets of fog on Boston Common. Ever since the decade-long series of volcanic eruptions that rimmed the north Pacific from Japan to Mexico, and darkened the skies over the entire Northern Hemisphere, America had experienced a mini-Ice Age, from which it was now only emerging. Much of Canada and Northern New England had been barely habitable until the mid-2020s. Fortunately for Werner, his two years in the Yukon had occurred after the thaw had begun.

Werner had been fifty-one at the time of his arrest, fifty-three during the Kamas revolt, and fifty-five when he was released on the brink of death from the Yukon's infamous Mactung tungsten mine. Now, at fifty-eight, he had recovered much of his former health and strength, and still possessed the phenomenal resistance to hardship that only the rarest combination of extraordinary genes and the trials of the labor camp system could have imparted.

He had survived Kamas and the Yukon only by what seemed like a series of miracles, and made his way back to Boston. Werner was astounded by the evidence that someone else had accomplished the same feat. Now he was eager to learn how this extraordinarily fit and prosperous-looking fellow prisoner had done it.

Werner locked up the bar and wished the headwaiter a

good night, then opened the door onto Beacon Street and felt the brunt of the icy wind across Boston Common. After years of working outdoors, sometimes with clothing that was woefully inadequate, Werner still suffered the misery and pain of cold weather the same as anyone else. What distinguished him from most people facing such conditions, was knowing that the human body can tolerate terrible cold and having developed the mental practices that enabled him to withstand it.

Werner wore a handmade wool sweater from Maine under a traditional Burberry-style trench coat, without scarf or gloves, and felt adequately equipped to undertake the walk across the north side of Boston Common to the Park Street T Station.

He was halfway along Park Street, having passed a row of boarded-up storefronts and vacant lots opposite the north edge of the Common, when he saw the stranger step out of a doorway some fifty meters ahead. The stranger turned left onto Tremont Street, and Werner followed.

On most nights when Werner left the Somerset Club, the sidewalks along Park Street were lined with unruly drunks, prostitutes, and panhandlers who harassed most every person passing by. The alleys and doorways along Tremont Street, where the homeless and the insane crowded together on cardboard flats against the cold, reeked of urine and feces. To Werner's relief, at this hour, the chilly north wind had driven the homeless off the streets, leaving only a few random night workers, all-night coffee venders, and transit police outside the Park Street T Station, while a few meters away on the Common, a pair of horse-mounted police surreptitiously shared a flask of

hooch.

When Werner saw the stranger vanish into a gated alley just short of the Tremont Theater, he followed. The stranger closed the gate behind them and the two men finally met in a recessed doorway that was invisible from every direction, except straight up.

In the darkness, Werner could see that the stranger wore an authentic Austrian hunting coat of green loden cloth, with the leather collar turned up to meet the brim of his Tyrolean hat. Werner could not begin to imagine where he might have obtained such stylish relics.

Werner waited for the stranger to explain, but when he didn't, Werner began:

"Excuse me, but I still can't recall your name. Would you mind refreshing my memory?"

"Of course," the stranger replied. "I'm Dave Lewis. I was your inside contact on your first Star Committee mission. Remember? And later we were at Mactung together."

"Yes, right, I do remember," Werner replied hesitantly. "Again, please forgive me, but both of those episodes are a bit blurry, since I spent a week in the isolator after the first, and nearly died from exhaustion during the second. But I do remember your face and have the sense that we were buddies once, at least at Mactung. Am I right?"

"You are."

"Then I thank you, Dave, because the isolator turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. And, if it weren't for the fluke of being sent to Mactung, I would probably still be chopping wood in one of those Yukon death camps, or else be buried. Tell me, how on earth did

you make it out?"

"I'm afraid that's not something I can share with you just yet, though I look forward to doing it soon. That is, once our mission is accomplished," Lewis added.

"So a Star Chamber still exists for Kamas after all these years? And are you the Star Master?"

The visitor nodded.

"It took us a while to reconstitute, but we did. And now we have lists of those in the CLA and the Kamas camp administration accused of serious crimes against prisoners. Very few remain alive. Hardesty, Cronin, Whiting, Chambers—all died within a year or two of the revolt, some with our help. Of those we convicted, only one is still at large: Rocco. When his sentence is carried out, the Committee will dissolve."

"Okay, that's clear enough," Werner acknowledged. "But why come to me? I already did a mission for the Committee. I thought each man would only be called upon to do one."

" Correct, Frank. But, as you may recall, that mission was never completed. Our target, Uriah Tucker, survived and went on to betray hundreds of prisoners to Rocco, including you and me. And nearly all of them died in the Arctic without a grave, without a record, without a memory. Except for us and a few others."

"And none of the others is available to help?" Werner probed.

"Frank, you are the only one who can possibly do what needs to be done. You live in Boston, you are an experienced intelligence officer, you're under their radar, and most importantly, you have a stake in the outcome.

We're counting on you to make it happen."

"But for God's sake, Dave, I don't even know how to begin! How do I put together a team for this? Where do I find people willing to risk their lives over a place that no longer exists?"

"There are more survivors of the camps in Boston than you may realize. A surprising number of them are connected to Kamas. Look at all your friends, acquaintances and casual contacts as potential candidates, and you will find the men you need."

Werner felt a growing unease in the face of Dave Lewis' apparent confidence that Werner would ultimately relent.

"I'm not a spring chicken anymore, Dave," Werner cautioned. "I'm pushing sixty, I'm worn out, and I'm tired of the fighting and killing and struggling to survive. Sure, Rocco deserves punishment, but why not leave it to God? It's been five years since Rocco flattened Kamas."

Lewis listened attentively, but didn't say a word.

"You many not know this," Werner went on, "but I have a daughter out there somewhere, and I'm trying to find her. And a fine woman right here in Boston has kindly taken me in and seems rather fond of me. And there are other people in this town who count on me for their livelihood. Somehow I've managed to make a life for myself at age fifty-eight in a town I've never much liked," he shrugged, "and here you come along and tell me I've got a higher duty to a bunch of guys who are long dead. How am I supposed to convince men with less of a stake in this than I have to risk it all, when I'm not fully on board myself?"

Dave Lewis remained silent, took his hands out of the

wide slit pockets in his loden coat, rubbed them together, and blew on them. Then he spoke softly, all the while looking into Frank Werner's eyes as if searching deeply for clues.

"I've come a very long way for this conversation. Believe me, none of us would have placed this burden on your shoulders if there were any other way," Lewis began. "Frank, it is not flattery when I say that you are an officer and a leader and man strong in both intellect and character. Make no mistake: it is the nature of strong people that they create the options from which others must choose. When you select the members of your team, it will be up to you to find reasons to help each of them to make the right choices. And in doing that, you, too, will come to accept the wisdom of what you've done."

"And maybe I will," Werner replied. "After what we've both been through, I would probably regret it for the rest of my life if I turned you down. But if I agree to put a team together and we succeed in killing Rocco, I will have committed premeditated murder, which is wrong by any moral or spiritual code on this earth. Can you honestly tell me that killing Rocco is worth my taking on that much sin or karma or whatever it is that the angels weigh when we pass over to the other side?"

Dave Lewis smiled.

"I can't answer that one for you, Frank. But throughout history, when faced with extraordinary evils like tyranny and totalitarianism, God-fearing men have decided soberly to take on that burden. I'll admit that it can be a slippery slope, but philosophers in every major moral tradition--China, Greece, Rome, you name it--have all made reasoned

cases for it."

Appearing to know exactly what to say to win Werner's support, Lewis continued.

"Think of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, or the Taliban. Would God have preferred good men to stand by and let the usurpers take everything? One can't expect to live in a free country without defending it, and that's not limited to repelling foreign invaders. In times of tyranny, men who aspire to remain free must join together to bring down the tyrant or live out their lives as slaves. It's always been that way."

Werner sighed before lowering his head in submission as if a heavy weight were being placed on his shoulders.

"All right, then. If I do this, how much time do I have?

The visitor shrugged.

"Rocco will be well protected. You should allow enough time to assemble your team and plan the operation."

"That could take months," Werner mused.

"Perhaps, but it doesn't have to. You see, this year will mark five years since the Kamas revolt. The anniversary of its first day is about forty days from now, on May 19. And the revolt lasted for forty days. How about that for a coincidence?"

"I don't believe in coincidences," Werner replied.

"Neither do I, to be honest. But, in any event, I'll be back to see you in forty days. We'll each have a glass of your excellent bourbon to celebrate your success and remember the men who couldn't be here to share it. What do you say?

"Forty days? I'll do my best."

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It was past two in the morning when Frank Werner unlocked the front door to the apartment building on Harvard Street in Brookline. Yet, when he passed the building superintendent's door, he saw a light through the peephole. He had never encountered such a dedicated gatekeeper—or busybody—as this odd and irksome woman who seemed to mind everyone's business but her own, yet was always willing to lend a hand when needed. He waved as he walked past the peephole toward the staircase.

When he reached the sixth floor at last and entered the apartment, he was surprised to see Carol at her desk writing a letter.

"You certainly are a dedicated correspondent, Carol," he said as he greeted her. "I hope you're not complaining to your friends about my hanging out in bars until two in the morning every night."

Carol Dodge put down her pen and faced Werner with a coy smile.

"I never worry about you becoming a lush, Frank. You're much too sensible to drink up your profits. And I don't much worry about your seeing other women, either. To tell the truth, I've begun to doubt whether you even notice women anymore. You've lived in a man's world so long that sometimes I wonder if we've become invisible to you."

Werner approached her from behind and planted a tender kiss at the nape of her neck. He had met Carol just over a year ago and had moved in with her not long after.

She was still a very attractive woman at the age of forty-eight and Werner had surprised himself on that memorable occasion by mentally undressing her while they spoke about their children, who had attended the same private school before the Events.

Carol had been grocery shopping near her apartment in Brookline and her black jeans and black t-shirt had revealed a trim and graceful figure. Similarly, her shoulder-length black hair, tied into a ponytail with a red ribbon, had given her a distinctly girlish air. If they both had been twenty years younger, Carol Dodge would most definitely have been Werner's type, or one of them.

Before the Events, Carol had been married to Peter Dodge, CEO of the Boston teaching hospital where she was a senior pediatric oncologist. Though she had no children of her own, she was devoted to her stepson, who had once dated Werner's older daughter. She had lost that son, a newly minted naval officer, in the Manchurian War, and had lost her husband a few months later in the Longwood Riots, during which he had acted heroically to preserve the Longwood hospital district from destruction at the hands of crazed rioters, arsonists, and looters.

"I worried about you, Frank. What happened?"

"The T broke down again. I had to walk."

Werner released her shoulders and walked across the living room to the windows and looked out toward nearby Beacon Street.

"You know how I hate your being on the streets so late at night," she complained. "It's dangerous. Stay at the Club, if you must. But don't risk your life on the streets. There are people who care about you, Frank! I certainly

do!”

“I promise I won’t do it again, Carol. I’d swear on a Bible if I could find one anywhere in this town.”

“I don’t like when you joke that way, Frank. Someone could overhear you.”

“Okay, I’ll try not to,” Werner mocked in a loud voice, looking up at the ceiling as if speaking into a hidden listening device. “But enough about me, Carol. Why on earth are you still up at 2:00 a.m.? Your rounds start at seven, for heaven’s sake.”

“I couldn’t sleep. Squatters got into the building again. They broke into Mrs. Leibowitz’s apartment and tried all the doors on the second and third floors before somebody called in the block watch.”

“How did they manage getting past Harriet? She’s like the dragon outside the castle gate. She would have had the police here in a minute.”

“Harriet was out,” Carol answered with anxious eyes. “Mrs. Leibowitz took refuge with a neighbor and they got on the phone till they found someone who would help. Frank, I’m worried. It’s not just the squatters. I received another letter from the Housing Authority today. They want to take measurements in the apartment.”

“Okay, I understand why that might spook you, Carol. But we’ve been through this before. You have an ironclad exemption. If you get notice that the BHA wants to move more people in with you, the hospital will fix it, just as they would do for any doctor on staff. It’s a condition of your employment.”

“You keep telling me that, Frank,” Carol objected, “but Harriet makes it her business to be very well informed

about goings-on at the Housing Authority, and she says changes are coming. This new FEMA campaign to find housing for the refugees is putting the Housing Authority under enormous pressure. Old exemptions aren't being renewed and they're even thinking of allotting fewer square meters per person."

Werner stepped away from the window to the sideboard where he kept the liquor. He poured a few ounces of dark rum from a decanter into a sherry glass and took a sip.

"I wouldn't take Harriet's word at face value on this. I seem to recall that she has some relatives among those refugees. But whatever is going on, it can wait till morning. You need some sleep."

"And you? Aren't you coming to bed?"

"Yes, in a few minutes. Why?" Werner replied.

"Because it's Wednesday and you never drink during the week. Is something wrong? You had an odd look when you came in."

"Nothing's wrong. I just need a few minutes at my desk before I join you. I have an early morning tomorrow, too."

"All right. But don't take forever," she answered with a come-hither smile.

Frank Werner turned off the lights in the living room and walked down the hall to the small study where he kept his books and papers. He reached into his desk for a bound notebook and opened it on the desk. The pages were filled with names and addresses, listed alphabetically, along with cryptic notes about each person.

He turned page after page between sips of rum, pausing occasionally to jot a word or a name on an index card. When the card was filled, he crossed out a third of the

entries and wrote another list on a new card.

This card he took to the window and studied its contents while finishing the rum. When the glass was empty, he tore the card into small pieces and stuffed them into the glass. Then he turned out the light, brought the glass with him into the bathroom, and closed the door.

Chapter 3
Flashback: Friday, March 30, 2029 Brookline, Massachusetts

Frank Werner stood at the bar and, like a stage magician, removed the bottle of vintage California champagne from the ice bucket, dried it with a starched linen napkin and displayed the label to Carol and her guests who were seated on sofas in the center of the living room.

"Domaine Chandon Brut 2012, the last of the best."

He uncorked the bottle and poured it into six fluted glasses and handed them to the guests, while Linda's music system played a song by one of those gravel-throated French singers of the Nineteen-fifties, like Aznavour or Montand. Though Carol denied it, Werner considered it a throwback to Carol's childhood in French-speaking East Beirut. When he wasn't around, she even played the occasional ballad by Fairouz.

Carol and her close friend Linda Holt received the first two glasses of champagne, followed by Mary Steen, the wife of Carol's longtime colleague at the hospital, Paul Steen, and Linda's escort for the evening, John Worthington, a retired professor.

Linda, a semi-retired anesthesiologist and pain specialist in her early seventies, had been a friend since Carol was a junior resident at Children's Hospital. Nearly twenty-five years Carol's senior, Linda seemed to play the role of mother and elder sister to her. After losing her husband to a bicycle accident years before the Events, Linda had continued to practice medicine. Now she maintained a part-

time schedule at the Boston Medical Center, while also working several days a week at a hospice in Chestnut Hill, supervising the dispensing of painkillers to the terminally ill. Despite the grim nature of her work, Werner found that Linda could always be relied upon for a warm smile, a kind remark, and a sympathetic ear. She was the most youthful seventy-something he knew.

Werner had met the Steens only twice before, and had only a superficial acquaintance with Professor Worthington after a couple of theater performances the man had attended as Linda's escort.

The dinner that night was ostensibly to celebrate Carol's forty-eighth birthday, but it also marked the one-year anniversary of the day when Carol had invited Werner to move in with her. Not long afterward, Werner learned that Linda had wielded an important influence in Carol's decision. Though this alone would have been sufficient to ensure Werner's enduring good will, he had also come to know Linda as a thoughtful and cultured person whose judgment and intuition were rarely off the mark.

When at last Professor Worthington received his glass, Werner proposed a toast.

"Wait a moment, Frank," Carol interrupted. "We really should include Harriet. I'll call her in from the kitchen. Is any left in the bottle or might we open another?"

Werner lowered his glass and nodded indulgently.

"Of course we can pour her a glass, dear. I planned to open a fresh bottle in a moment."

He replaced his glass on the sideboard and removed the second bottle of champagne from its ice-filled cooler.

A few seconds later, Carol reappeared with Harriet

Waterman in tow. Though Harriet was only three years younger than Carol, her life had taken a far different path. Born near Camden on the coast of Maine, she had married a lobsterman the summer of her high school graduation and had given birth to five children, of whom only two lived.

Over the past two decades, the Maine Coast had been hit by disaster after disaster including hurricanes, a tsunami, recurrent flooding, and massive forest fires, and had shared in the country's pandemics, famines, and civil unrest as well. Since Harriet came from one of Maine's larger clans, when the troubles hit Down East, her relatives called upon her early and often for help. Until her husband died in the Saigon Flu epidemic, she had been able to help many of them, taking in some for weeks at a time while they looked for work or a new home. But without her husband's support, she had been obliged to sell the house and move in with her daughter in Boston.

Werner found a seventh flute glass, though it didn't match, and filled it for Harriet. Her eyes widened with delight, as sparkling wines had become a rarity even for relatively affluent professionals like Carol and her friends.

"We give thanks to Carol for enriching our lives this past year and may she have her best year ever in 2029," Linda Holt declared, raising her glass. " Happy birthday!"

To that, the seven raised their glasses and drank.

Carol immediately set about opening the presents arranged before her on the coffee table. From Linda she received a crystal pendant, from the Steens a framed print, from the Professor a book of poetry, and from Werner an embossed antique silver bowl with hand chasing.

Once all presents had been opened and duly admired,

Werner dispensed the remaining wine and found a seat beside Carol on the sofa.

"Cambridge," Werner' responded to Professor Worthington's question where he found the silver bowl. "A woman lost her house in the flood and was selling some of her valuables. She had a beautiful silver collection. Most of the pieces were beyond my budget, but this one was reasonable enough."

"My wife collected heaps of silver in her day," Worthington mused. "Her housekeeper spent a day each week polishing it. I suppose it must be a glut on the market these days, with so many people selling? Was she offering it through a dealer?"

"Actually. I met the woman at a flea market. I make the rounds several times a week. It's where I find leads for much of the pre-Events wine and spirits I trade."

"Really?" the older man questioned. "Don't you find it dangerous to do business at flea markets? I've read that those places are teeming with thieves and pickpockets and shady characters selling counterfeit goods."

"Not at all. Most of the sellers are ordinary people," Werner declared. "Some are former shopkeepers who can't afford rent anymore, but continue to buy and sell in the open air. Others come only when they need to sell something to keep food on the table. These people aren't stupid, Professor. They set up in fenced-off areas like schoolyards and vacant lots and arrange for their own security. Some even bring armed guards if they're handling a lot of cash. Markets like these are how people have traded throughout the world since civilization began."

"I see your point, Frank," Worthington conceded. "It's

been so long since I've traveled outside the country that I've nearly forgotten all those charming bazaars and *marchés* and *mercados* my wife used to drag me through."

"Frank," Mary Steen chimed in, "Carol mentioned that you spent some years out West before returning to Boston. I'm so curious what it's like now. Since the government declared so much of the West a Restricted Zone during the insurgency, it seems there's hardly a mention of it in the media any more."

Her husband raised his eyebrows. "I've been told that anyone who works in a Restricted Zone is required to sign a nondisclosure agreement. If that's so, perhaps Frank may not be at liberty to talk to us about what he saw there."

All eyes turned to Werner.

"Oh, no, it's perfectly all right," Werner replied genially, emptying his glass. "Most of what I can tell you dates back to before the Events. Our family moved to Salt Lake from New York in 2006 and came to Boston in 2016, well before the insurgency."

"But I understand you returned to Utah and came back to Boston just a few years ago," Mary Steen persisted. "Can you share your impressions of what's changed out there? Carol said something about your having gone back to help rebuild. It sounds fascinating!"

Werner smiled weakly. Mary Steen had no idea what she was asking. If he answered truthfully, she would never believe it. And if she did believe, it might traumatize her. So he gave her a short version of his standard cover story. To avoid tripping himself up with too many lies, he had long ago crafted a story that was as close to the truth as he dared get.

“I went back to Utah in 2022, during some very difficult times, as we all know. I spent a little more than two years there, at a remote site working on reconstruction and recycling of war-torn areas in the mountains. Then I was transferred to the Yukon for just over a year where I worked at a mining site before being recalled to Utah. When my commitment came to an end, I decided to come back East.”

He took a sip of champagne, surprised how easily the lies rolled off his tongue.

“Not a very exciting story, really. Utah is as physically beautiful as ever, I can happily report, and the people there are determined to lift themselves up by their bootstraps. I may even go back there one of these days.”

Carol cast a concerned look in Werner’s direction. He sensed that Linda saw it and knew what was going on in Carol’s head. Frank’s possible return to Utah had become a sore spot between him and Carol. He had asked her more than once to consider moving back to Salt Lake City with him. A board-certified oncologist with her credentials could walk into any hospital in Utah and be offered a position on the spot with a generous housing allowance, no questions asked.

But for Carol, this was far too big a change. Though she had visited Salt Lake City for conventions, skied at Alta and Deer Valley, and visited the national parks at Bryce Canyon, Zion, and the Grand Canyon’s north rim, Utah was not a place where people like her could possibly settle down. Her job, her friends, her apartment, and her culture were all in Boston. That she had been born in Beirut, Lebanon, and did not come to the United States until she

was seven years old was beside the point. She was a product of The Winsor School, Harvard, Tufts Medical School and Children's Hospital Boston. Having earned her rank in Boston, she could not conceive of giving it up.

Werner's arguments in favor of a move had failed to score points with Carol. For one, he loved Utah for its mountains, its wide-open spaces, its youthful population, its dry sunny climate, and the opportunity to be physically active despite his advancing age. And now that the Mormon-inspired laws restricting the sale of alcohol in the state were a relic of the past, he was confident that he could make a living in the wine and spirits business, whether as a bootlegger, bar owner, or perhaps in time as a licensed distributor.

Werner also possessed a legal residence permit for Utah. In fact, his residence permit was not valid anywhere else but Utah. He had neither a travel permit nor a residence permit for Boston and would almost certainly never get one. He had come east only to search for his missing daughter, and had intended to return within a few weeks or months.

Sadly, however, the search for his daughter had taken far longer than he had expected. He had come across tantalizing hearsay from former classmates and friends that she had traveled or moved or emigrated, but he was not able to unearth a phone number or an address for her. He knew that the longer he stayed in Boston, the greater the risk of exposure and re-arrest. And unless he found her soon, he planned to leave the East and continue his search from Utah.

"You mean go back as a private citizen?" Paul Steen

interjected. “But isn’t Utah still a Restricted Zone? I thought that you had to be out there on government business before they’d even sell you a ticket.”

“In most instances, I suppose,” Werner admitted. “But I expect I can find a way. At the moment, it’s just something I like to think about.”

“You know, I wish I knew how half the people in the shantytowns around here got their residence permits,” Harriet Waterman remarked, emboldened by her second flute of champagne. “Most of the homeless you see around here aren’t from Boston, that’s for darned sure. Half of them are down from Canada. Especially the squatters. Why, I heard them speaking French Canuck to each other when they demonstrated outside the building last week.”

“You’ve had trouble with squatters here in Brookline?” Mary Steen asked in a concerned voice. “Cambridge has been swarming with them. Now they’ve taken over some of the more habitable buildings in the flooded neighborhoods along the Charles. I’m told they’re even moving into some transitional neighborhoods. The police don’t seem to do anything to stop them.”

“The police look the other way, ma’am,” Harriet replied knowingly. “If they knock heads, they get in trouble with the radicals on the City Council. To tell the truth, it wouldn’t surprise me if somebody was getting paid off from this. What I hear is that, when a squatter gang takes over a building, they charge rent from the people they bring in to live there. That’s how they can afford to bribe the police and the crooked politicians.”

“That’s so interesting,” Mary Steen continued respectfully. “I read in the *Herald* this morning that the

squatters are a major reason for the new FEMA relocation project. Unless FEMA and the Housing Authority can come up with some way to house all the refugees, we could be facing housing riots like the ones in Philadelphia and Cleveland."

"Well, they'll need to break ground soon if they're going to build enough units," the Professor observed. "The summers around here aren't as long as they used to be. FEMA may have to bring in tents they way they did after Hurricane Michele."

"That's what the Mayor wants, but FEMA says they've run out of tents and don't have funds to buy more, Harriet continued. "What they want is for the Housing Authority to crack down on exempt and grandfathered leases so they can cram more people into the buildings they've got. Can you believe their nerve, measuring our apartments and telling us how many square meters we're entitled to, and if they think we have too much, bringing in strangers to live with us? Over my dead body!"

With that, Harriet looked up and saw Carol Dodge tidying up the glasses on the coffee table.

"Oh, the dessert! I nearly forgot about it!" Carol exclaimed.

"Never mind, don't you worry, Mrs. Dodge," Harriet replied, "I'll start the coffee and bring it out with the cake. Anyone prefer tea?"

She saw no takers and retreated hastily to the kitchen. Mary Steen followed behind.

Paul Steen took the opportunity to consult Carol on a medical question and the Professor excused himself to find the bathroom. That left Frank and Linda Holt alone.

“Frank,” Linda began, seating herself next to him, “you mentioned last week that you were ready to have me do a reading for you. If Carol doesn’t object to our being away for a few minutes, might this be a good time?”

Werner was taken by surprise, but since he had indeed made the request, he assented. Linda spoke a few words softly into Carol’s ear and led the way to the den. There she wasted no time clearing the desktop and seating herself behind the desk. She motioned for Werner to pull up a chair opposite her.

“Since we only have ten minutes or so, there will be no time for formalities. I trust Carol has told you a bit about how I work. I am what some people call an intuitive. When I lay out the tarot cards, I get mental impressions related to the questions that have been asked. Sometimes they take the form of pictures, or voices or words on a page, or even aromas or feelings. I do my best to make sense of them and convey them to you in a way that provides useful guidance. Am I making sense to you?”

Werner nodded.

“Good. Then what are the questions you would like answered?”

“Wow, Linda, you caught me a bit off guard. I suppose the biggest question is whether you can tell me anything about where my daughter Marie might be. I still believe she’s alive, but my best guess is that she emigrated three or four years ago. Am I wasting my time staying in Boston tracking down leads to her? In my heart I feel it’s time to go back to Utah, but Carol doesn’t want to leave Boston, and I don’t want to hurt her by going without her. Sooner or later, something has to give. So where do I go from

here?”

Linda Holt closed her eyes, lowered her head as if in prayer, and set the tarot deck in front of Werner.

“Cut the deck, shuffle it thoroughly, and put it back face down on the desk,” she told him.

He did as told. Then Linda dealt the cards in rapid succession, laying them in rows, pausing only occasionally to turn them over or arrange them in groups. When she was finished, though nearly all were face up, Werner could discern no meaningful pattern. Nor did he know what any of the tarot images signified.

“I am receiving some very distinct impressions,” Linda began. “First, someone from your past will come back into your life and raise important unresolved issues. The nature of these issues is not being revealed to me, but I get a very clear sense that you will recognize this person and will understand what the issues will mean for you.

“Next, I am picking up the presence of three females, one of them a mature woman, a mother perhaps, and two of them younger, perhaps the woman’s daughters. The woman and the older daughter have passed to the other side. The younger daughter is still on this plane, but further information is being withheld from me. The message is coming through that, before you can learn more about your daughter’s situation, you must complete some business here in Boston. The two women who have passed over are asking to come through but something is blocking them until certain tasks are underway.”

Werner sat alert in his straight-backed wooden chair, his eyes wide and his mouth agape.

“Can you describe the blockage in more detail?” he

asked. “Is there something I’m doing wrong?”

“No, that’s not it,” Linda replied, still in reverie. “The forces at work here are powerful, but not ill-intentioned. I sense that they may be your spirit guides, the team representing you, so to speak, on the other side. They are quite firm about this. Their point is that you have some duty so important that it takes precedence even over your family. It involves others who have already made a great sacrifice for a cause you share with them, a cause that reaches far into the past and extends far into the future. At some level, Frank, I believe you have already chosen this role as well as the duty that comes with it.”

Linda Holt opened her eyes and gave Werner an expectant smile.

“You must have questions, Frank. Please go ahead.”

“I don’t know where to begin. But, for starters, did you really get all that from the cards?”

“Not all of it, of course, but everything that came through is reflected quite clearly in the cards. There is no mistaking it, Frank. I don’t recall ever having so many big cards come up in one reading as consistently as they did in yours. Something big is about to happen in your life. And when it does, everything is going to change.”

Before Frank could answer, the Professor opened the door and poked his head into the room.

“I’ve been asked to summon you two to the next room,” he announced with a knowing smile. “The candles are about to be lit on a perfectly beautiful chocolate cake and I suppose we’ll all be expected to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ before any of us will be permitted to eat.”

Chapter 4
Thursday, April 12, 2029
Boston

Frank Werner stepped off the commuter train at Concord Station and drove from his mind the thoughts that had dogged him since meeting Dave Lewis the night before. It was just after three in the afternoon and the dense rows of bicycle racks were still full. Werner saw some interesting ones, too, bikes that looked as if they had lain neglected in garages and basements for years before being pressed back into service. What with gasoline rationing, ever-steeper road taxes, prohibitive tariffs on imported cars, and waiting lists for new Government Motors cars, only the wealthiest of commuters and privileged government officials still drove to work in the city.

Werner had not set foot in the town of Concord in nearly seven years. Not since his older daughter's graduation from Concord Academy on a chilly late May morning, when parents and students alternated between joy at graduating from secondary school and sadness at the imminent death of their beloved Academy.

Two years earlier, the President-for-Life had announced his New Education Plan, which called for the assimilation of all private educational institutions above the kindergarten level into the public educational system. By then, the ranks of private secondary schools had already been reduced severely by attrition, owing to the dwindling supply of parents who could afford what amounted to an extra four years of college tuition during a time of wage

controls, soaring taxes, and devastated net worths. And despite the hand wringing in intellectual circles across the land over the abolition of private education, the opponents of the President's new plan could muster little public sympathy to preserve what most Americans considered an archaic privilege of the rich.

Werner also remembered his very first visit to Concord, when he and his wife had taken their older daughter, Justine, for her pre-admission tour and interview at the Academy. The town seemed the embodiment of early American ideals and traditions, with monuments to show for it. There was the Concord North Bridge, where the revolutionaries had fired the "shot heard around the world;" and then there were Ralph Waldo Emerson's house, Thoreau's Walden Pond, Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House, the Old Manse, and many other lesser monuments to the colonial era and the seminal influence of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, the Alcotts, and their intellectual heirs.

The natural beauty of the town and its surrounding countryside had been carefully preserved, so that it was not difficult at times to imagine having stepped through a time portal into a bygone era. All this was possible because of the remarkable wealth the residents of Concord and their ancestors had accumulated over nearly four centuries. Its charm and history, meticulously preserved across many generations, had made Concord one of the most desirable residential enclaves in Greater Boston.

Werner crossed the street and continued past the row of shops that served Concord's rail commuters until he reached Middle Street and turned right. He consulted his

notebook and went on until he found 50 Middle Street, an imposing three-story Federal-style mansion painted white with black shutters and trim. He knocked and heard a woman's voice answer. A moment later Nancy Widmer opened the door wearing a stylish beige wool suit with an open jacket trimmed with brass buttons. Though she was preparing to relocate, clearly he had not interrupted her while packing her dishes and chinaware.

Nancy invited Werner inside, and within moments he noticed that the dining room table had recently hosted a luncheon. Four empty wine bottles stood guard over the remains of the meal, and he noticed at least five or six empty martini glasses. Displayed on the sideboard was what he guessed to be her farewell present, a very wide oil painting depicting a row of seven women seated in a formal drawing room, each seen only from the waist down and each with her respective terrier seated on her lap or at her feet. Werner could not help but smile at the sheer joy reflected in the expressions of the well-tended canines.

"Oh, don't mind the mess," Nancy remarked casually as she led him back to the kitchen. "They stayed so long there was no time to tidy up."

Nancy was an attractive and unusually energetic seventy-three-year-old, a woman who had formed countless friendships and acquaintances over the years, not only in Concord, but among Boston society at large and at her summer home on Islesboro, off the coast of Maine. She took enormous pleasure in entertaining her friends, visiting them at their homes and socializing with them at her downtown club. Since her husband's death three years earlier, she had slashed her monthly expenses to the bone in

order to maintain the house on Middle Street as long she could. Now, with the sale complete and the move to her daughter's house in Western Massachusetts two weeks away, Nancy Widmer had invited Werner to bid on the purchase of nearly the entire contents of her amply stocked wine cellar. Despite the finality of such a move, Nancy seemed determined not to reveal even a trace of sadness or disappointment.

"No dogs today?" Werner asked her, surprised at the absence of barking from her twin Corgis.

"They're spending the day with their doggie friends on Sudbury Street. But never mind the dogs. Come over here, Frank. I want to show you something."

He followed her into the pantry. There he saw her slide the shelves into a recess to reveal a heavy steel door that led down a flight of stairs into a cellar. Though he had been to the house a half dozen times to pick up wines and spirits that Nancy had sold him from time to time, Werner had never before been admitted to the wine cellar.

"This house was built in 1820 with a small root cellar," she declared. "The owners, who were radical Abolitionists, expanded the cellar in 1850 after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, to hide slaves traveling north along the Underground Railroad."

She pointed proudly to a small framed map showing the routes north to safety, a faded print showing ragged slaves on the run, and a laminated plaque with the lyrics of "Follow the Drinking Gourd," a Negro Spiritual tune popular at the time.

"Did you know that the slaves used the stars for navigation in those days, Frank? They watched for the Big

Dipper because it points to the North Star. I remember learning that song in grammar school. We all learned it. And to think that the slaves probably sang it right here in this house!"

Werner read the first stanza and was surprised when it sent a chill up his spine:

When the sun comes back,
And the first quail calls,
Follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is waiting
For to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

For the briefest moment an image of the Yukon tundra flashed through his head. His 2,000-mile trek from Kamas, Utah, to the Canol Road in the Yukon Territory had been the polar opposite of what the slaves had experienced. Unlike the Negro slaves marching toward freedom, every step had taken him further away from freedom and toward forced labor and premature death. More than a century and a half after the Emancipation Proclamation, he still could not comprehend how the Corrective Labor Administration had come into being and expanded so rapidly within just a few years. Even today shackled prisoners were trudging to their deaths in corrective labor camps throughout Alaska, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories. Knowing this, and having survived it, was sometimes more than his mind could endure.

Nancy Widmer waited for Werner to read the lyrics, then led the way into the cellar. Nancy's late husband must

have paid a small fortune to the contractor who had converted the room into a temperature and humidity-controlled wine cellar, Werner thought. Along the far wall were floor-to-ceiling redwood wine racks, in both bin and column format, while to either side custom-built shelf units held sealed cases of wines as well as individual liquor bottles stored upright. And in the center of the room stood an antique walnut table for wine tasting and a pallet for stacking cases of spirits off the floor.

Werner moved closer to the shelves and inspected the loose bottles. To his delight, he found rarities that most casual drinkers did not know, but that to cocktail enthusiasts were worth their weight in gold: applejack, anisette, Brazilian cachaça, Campari, crème de cassis, Haitian rhum agricole, Kentucky rye, Lillet, maraschino liqueur, French vermouth and others, along with several spare bottles each of Angostura, Peychaud's and orange bitters. He duly recorded the name and quantity of each on his inventory sheet.

Nancy noticed his concentration and soon returned to the kitchen to let him conduct his inventory undisturbed.

Next Werner turned his attention to the sealed cases of spirits: three full cases each of Crown Royal, Johnny Walker Black, Maker's Mark, Mount Gay, Absolut, and Beefeater, plus partials. Obviously Mr. Widmer had entertained frequently, which was hardly unusual for a partner in an investment management firm. Judging by the quantities, Mr. Widmer had also been sufficiently canny to collect his supplies before they became scarce. Werner silently blessed the late Mr. Widmer, for it was just this sort of far-sighted hoarder who enabled Frank Werner to make

his living.

Surveying the wines, Werner found only a few cases that would fetch a respectable price. These were mainly lesser-growth red Bordeaux and two cases of California reserve cabernets. Nancy had warned him in advance that she had already consumed or given to her daughter most of her husband's better wines, and among the assorted bottles remaining in the racks, nearly all were everyday table wines. Being of pre-Unionist vintage, however, they were still in demand, and the wines alone had been well worth the trip. The fact that neither Nancy nor her daughter ever touched the spirits, was an unforeseen bonus.

When he had completed the inventory, Werner carried his clipboard upstairs to the kitchen, where he found Nancy Widmer preparing a pot of tea. She invited him to sit at the butcher's block table in the center of the room.

"Your husband seems to have had excellent taste, Nancy. You should be pleased that you were able to enjoy the best of what he put away before your move to Northampton. All the spirits in the cellar are quite marketable and I can offer you a good price for them. As for what's left of the wine, I can fetch a decent price for the five full cases, and I can sell whatever you want to leave me of the rest, but I'm afraid those aren't worth much."

He waited while she poured him a cup of tea, then continued.

"Overall, the market for wines has not been healthy this year. Part of the problem is the Unionist propaganda vilifying the Moneymen and their conspicuous consumption. I wish your wines would bring more, but I must defer to the market."

Werner removed a summary sheet of his appraisal, pointing out to Nancy the number of bottles of each wine or spirit and indicating his offer per bottle. He used a pocket calculator to verify the total and then underlined the number at the bottom of the summary sheet.

“This offer remains firm for one week.”

Nancy Widmer replaced her cup in its saucer, looked hard at the number and sighed.

“Unfortunately,” Werner continued, “the sort of people who have a taste for fine drinking and the money to pay for it want only the labels that everyone else has heard of. They won’t shell out big money to drink obscure wines in private, regardless of quality or value. On the other hand, they’ll gladly pay top dollar for a label that will impress their friends and clients.”

Werner paused to observe Nancy Widmer’s reaction. Though she was old and widowed and vulnerable in many ways, she was nobody’s fool. She had spent a lifetime buying and selling all sorts of things in all kinds of markets and remained both well informed and well connected. Not for a moment did he sell short her ability to see through his puffery. She might have heard, for example, that the Unionist elite and their New Class enablers, despite their public rhetoric, had recently fueled a renewed boom in fine wines and spirits. What she could not know, since she was not a professional in the field, was that that the supply of famous labels had dwindled to the point where even formerly unfashionable wines and liquors now fetched prices that far exceeded pre-Unionist levels.

Nancy Widmer remained silent. The transaction was not going quite as smoothly as he had anticipated.

“I’m very sorry if the total wasn’t what you expected,” he summed up. “But here’s what I can do for you. I’m willing to take up the price on all the spirits by 10 percent. That will bring the new total north of five thousand New Dollars. Would that be acceptable?”

Nancy Widmer appeared to breathe a sigh of relief as she nodded her assent.

“Yes, I’ll accept that,” she declared, putting on a brave smile—or faking it.

“Very good,” Werner concluded. “Then we have a deal. I’ll bring the money on Saturday.”

“Excellent. Where I come from, that calls for celebration. May I freshen up your cup of tea, Frank?”

“Certainly,” he replied.

But instead of reaching for the teapot, Nancy Widmer rose and opened a cabinet near the stove, and returned with a bottle of Mount Gay Extra Old Rum. She poured an ounce or two in each of their cups and added tea until both were filled.

“I suppose you know this, Frank, you being educated at Exeter and all. But back in colonial days, coastal New England practically ran on rum. A few in the interior made whiskey from their corn and rye, but true New Englanders never considered whiskey fit for human consumption. So let’s celebrate the end of one New England tradition with another…”

She raised her cup and drank deeply. Werner did the same. With their business behind them, Nancy asked Werner to tell her more about his career and what path had led him to Boston. Werner gave her a capsule version of his cover story, starting with his birth in Grosse Pointe,

boarding school at Exeter, back to Ohio for college, four years with the U.S. Government in the Middle East, then an MBA, a new job in New York, marriage, children, and a succession of other jobs that eventually brought him to Boston.

"When we moved here from Salt Lake City in '16," he explained, "we didn't even look at houses in Concord. When the girls started going to Concord Academy, we wished we had. But by then, the economy had crashed and the value of our house had plummeted and we just couldn't afford to move. Too bad we didn't, because it seems to me that Concord managed to remain untouched by the crisis longer than many other parts of Boston. Every time I came here in those days, it was a sort of haven for me."

Nancy poured more rum into his cup as he spoke, then added some to her own.

As he knew she had been an Establishment Liberal and a Unionist throughout the Events, he was careful not to turn the conversation toward politics.

But suddenly, to his surprise, Nancy Widmer leaned across the table and addressed him in a low voice.

"Tell me, Frank, how could it have come to this? With a President-for-Life, no less! How on earth could we have supported these scoundrels without having any idea where they were taking us? And all the while thinking we were doing everything right!"

"Don't ask me, Nancy," Werner replied with a bland smile. "I was still in Utah back in 2008 when the problems started. In those days I think I favored secession."

Werner gave a good-natured laugh. Nancy Widmer looked at him oddly, as if she had never heard someone

utter such a word out loud.

"I'm not familiar with Utah, Frank, but for us in Concord, the Unionist side was the only conceivable choice at the time. That's simply how it was. But, honestly, how could we have known? How could any of us have known what kind of people were running the Unionist Party, and what they intended to do when they had power? We thought they were Progressives like us. So we took them at their word. And now they turn out to be bloody Bolsheviks!"

Nancy shook her head in disgust, and then took a large sip of her spiked tea. Werner had the distinct impression that she would have drunk her rum neat if it had been later in the day.

"And my husband helped put them in power!" she continued. "Ron and his partners contributed millions over the years to the Unionists. But when they came into power, we lost everything. And I don't mean just money. When Ron was diagnosed with heart disease, the doctors told him it was treatable. But when the time came to schedule his operation, the Health Service disapproved it. Too old! After a lifetime of paying taxes! But never mind; we thought we'd do it privately. Except that no surgeon would treat him outside the system for fear of losing his license. And by then, no exit visas were being issued for treatment abroad. So when the heart attack finally came, they sedated him to ease his pain, and then more and more sedation, till he died. 'Terminal sedation' is what they call it. What I call it is euthanasia. And it's why I will never ever set foot in a government hospital again."

Nancy Widmer's eyes welled with tears but her jaw was

firmly set and she sat perfectly erect in her spindly Windsor chair. At that moment Werner sensed in her an inner strength that had been handed down from New England ancestors who had cleared the rocky land, fought the Indians, overturned British rule, and authored the great enduring experiment called America.

"Do you have grandchildren, Nancy?" he asked to steer the conversation in a more positive direction.

"Oh, yes," she responded, recovering quickly. "Both are out of college now and working as teachers till they can find something else. But I was very lucky to have them near me for a few years while they were boarders at the Academy."

"Really? What years did they graduate?"

"Oh, that would have been six or seven years ago."

"Then they probably didn't know our girls," Werner replied. "Our older one graduated five years ago, and the younger one left a year later, when the state took over."

"I believe that's when Monica Cogan was at the Academy. She was in the very last graduating class. Her parents were very dear friends of mine. In fact, Monica came back this year to work there. Of course, it's not a boarding school any longer. The state has turned it into a completely different sort of place, as you probably know."

"Would you happen to know how I might get in touch with Monica?" Werner inquired. "I believe our daughter Marie may have known her. Did you say she's a teacher at the Academy?"

"Well, not a teacher, exactly. More like a trainer or organizer of some kind. I don't have a number or an address for her just yet. Though I'm sure that if you go to

the old admissions office on Main Street, someone can tell you how to find her. But brace yourself. It's not the old Academy. You're not going to like it."

By now, Nancy Widmer had regained her composure and seemed in a hurry to get on with her day. She made a show of finishing her tea and Werner quickly followed suit.

"Thank you so much for inviting me, Nancy," Werner said, rising from his chair. "If there's anything else I can do to help…"

As if suddenly remembering something very important, she waved distractedly for him to sit.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there is. It's Ron's guns. When they were outlawed, I know for a fact that he didn't turn them over to the police, so it's very likely that there's still a rifle or a shotgun lying around. Do you suppose that any of your clients might be in the market for a fine shotgun or hunting rifle? I'm sure they'll be of very high quality. Ron bought only the best."

Werner listened quietly and surmised that the guns were no afterthought. Nancy had been sizing him up to see if she could trust him.

"I'm sorry, Nancy, but illegal weapons are a bit out of my line," he said with a stern expression. "Bootlegging is enough risk for me. But I understand the situation you're in and appreciate your need to, well, dispose of these things safely. I believe your husband was wise not to surrender his weapons to the authorities. That's a very dangerous thing to do."

"What would you suggest, then?"

"Nancy, strictly as a friend, I would be willing to dispose of them for you, provided that it's just a rifle or a

shotgun or two."

"Thank you ever so much, Frank. But what if I happen to find more? I remember he brought back a pistol from Vietnam and used to keep it in his study. Could you dispose of that, too, if I come across it?"

Werner laughed.

"Well, I suppose so, if it doesn't end up being an arsenal. And I have one condition. For your safety and mine, Nancy, and the safety of your family, you must promise me that if anyone asks about your husband's weapons, all you will recall is that they were stolen years ago from his car while he was on a hunting trip. Can you do that?"

"Certainly," she answered without hesitation. "I appreciate your concern for us and would never betray your confidence."

"All right, then. If you find anything, here's what I'd like you to do. If it's a long gun, roll it up in an old rug and tie the ends with twine. If it's a handgun or ammunition, pack it in a cardboard box and pack the box inside a liquor carton. I'll take a look at them on Saturday."

"What time do you expect to arrive?"

"Some time before noon," he replied. "I have another appointment that morning."

Nancy Widmer smiled as if struck by a humorous thought.

"Funny, it seems as if everything Ron once loved is against the law. Guns, whiskey, cigars, fast cars, making money, and probably half the books in our library. I don't suppose there's a black market in banned books, is there?"

"Don't even think about it," Werner answered. "Burn

them.” And with that he

smiled, wished Nancy goodbye, and let her lead him out to the foyer.

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Werner turned north and onto Main Street, opposite what had for over 100 years been Concord Academy. As he scanned the campus along Main, the first thing that caught his eye was the vacant lot where two of three dormitories had stood to the west of Aloian Circle. The charred remains suggested that the dormitories had been destroyed by fire.

The surviving buildings appeared to have changed very little, except for the unaccustomed sight of some broken windows and plenty of peeling paint. The hedges were untrimmed and the lawn appeared not to have been mowed since the snows melted, with tall unsightly weeds growing everywhere. The wooden sign hanging from a crossbar outside the former admissions office at Aloian House now read “Concord Center for Social Organization, Massachusetts Department of Education.”

Inside the building, the colorful chintz sofas and cozy stuffed chairs had been replaced by folding metal seats, while hardwood floors once covered by oriental rugs were now tiled with vinyl. Where framed photos and prints illustrating the Academy’s history had once covered the walls, cheaply mounted political posters hung in their places. Many of the posters, created in the style that wags had dubbed as Unionist Realism, featured the stylized acorn that had become the motif of the social organization wing of the Unionist Party.