



The Great Flamingo Robbery

Book 5

S. E. Grosskopf

PREVIEW

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Chapter I

Monday, April 6, 1931

“**D**o you take birds here? I tried the pet store, but they didn’t want it.” Charlie Skeldon looked around the tiny office of the zoo director. Faded posters of wild animals, lists of staff schedules and upcoming events, a shelf of books, and several cabinets crammed into the corner. Dust tickled his nose. He held back a sneeze. “It’s too big, and my landlady says I can’t keep it in the kitchen anymore. I don’t want to turn it loose in the park because it’s hurt and can’t fly. It don’t seem to like seeds or bird food, and I don’t know what else to feed it, but I think it’s hungry.”

“We can help with wildlife rehabilitation.” The director, Mr. Bloom, flipped through one of his desk drawers and took out a file. “Where did you find it?”

“I work at the dockyards.” He wiped his grimy, calloused hands on his pants. “It was in a broken crate. The shipping label came off, so we don’t know who it belongs to or where it’s supposed to go.”

“What kind of a bird is it?”

“I dunno. It’s about this tall, with a long neck and a big beak.” He held his hand four feet off the ground. “It’s got skinny, yellow legs. You’ve got other birds sort of like it, so that’s why I brought

it here, except yours are pink and this one's a little bit shorter and not so pink. Maybe it's sick. Are there doctors for birds?"

"Doctors for birds are called veterinarians."

"Oh." The word was too big for Charlie to remember. "You got one of those who could help it?"

"Could we have a look at the bird?"

"Sure, I left it outside." Charlie stepped out. The bird stood with one wing lifted slightly. It had a piece of rope tied around its neck, like a dog's leash. The other end was secured to the bicycle rack. He untied it.

When the bird didn't want to follow, he wrapped one arm around its body and picked it up, careful not to touch the large, infected cyst that bulged under one wing. It was too lethargic to peck him. If it did, the black-and-yellow beak could have done some damage. He carried it inside, making sure not to get the long neck or stick-thin legs caught in the door.

Mr. Bloom's eyes bugged out. "I'll give you five hundred dollars for it."

"For . . . this?" He set it down. It put its head lower and resumed standing with one wing raised. Charlie considered five dollars to be a lot of money. He hadn't been expecting anything at all, as long as the bird went to a good home. Five *hundred* dollars. The thought made him dizzy. "I mean . . . are you sure?"

"That's my top offer," Bloom scolded. "It isn't exactly in prime condition."

"I know, but . . ." Charlie tried to keep a straight face. "I'll take it." He handed the end of the rope to Mr. Bloom. "You're sure your bird doctor can help it?"

"Yes, we'll take very good care of it." He dropped the rope, since the bird was confined to the tiny office anyway, then wrote out a check.

Charlie hurried to the bank, stopped to pay off what he'd borrowed from his pal Marley last month, then strolled home with more money in his pocket than he'd ever seen in his life. He hadn't the slightest idea how he was going to spend it. He crossed the weedy sidewalk and hopped up the steps to the rotten back porch

of the boarding house. The screen door slammed behind him. The landlady leaned out of the kitchen.

“Sorry, Mrs. Hancock,” he said automatically. She’d scolded him for slamming the door before. “I got rid of the bird, like you said, and I can pay the rent from last month. This month too.” He reached into his pocket and took out several crisp bills.

“Charlie, where’d you get that kind of money?”

“I sold the bird. The zoo gave me a lot. And they’ll take good care of it. They have a special doctor for birds.” He handed her the overdue rent.

“Well, that’s alright, I suppose.” She tucked the money into her apron. “There’s a man waiting for you in the living room.”

“Who?” He hadn’t been expecting anyone. Maybe Marley spread the word that he had money. He owed a few other friends too.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him around here before, but he looks important.” A timer rang in the background. She hurried into the kitchen.

“Huh.” Charlie stepped into the living room. It wasn’t often used by building residents. Mrs. Hancock was particular about the furniture.

A man with slick black hair and a dark tan lounged on the couch with his shiny black boots on the coffee table. He wore a funny cap and a khaki uniform with too many medals to be a postman. When he noticed Charlie, he stood and gave a short bow. “You are Señor Skeldon?”

“Most people just call me Charlie. Who are you?”

“I am Commander Esteban Del Rosario Sánchez.” He tapped his heels and bowed again. “I am here on behalf of El Presidente Rafael Ortiz, the President of Isla del Fuego, to negotiate the return of misplaced property. A crate belonging to the President was damaged and left at the dockyard. Several of your companions said you took the contents.”

“Well, we didn’t know who it belonged to and nobody else wanted it.”

“I want it! Where is *el flamenco*?”

THE GREAT FLAMINGO ROBBERY

“El what?”

“The flamingo.” He raised his voice in frustration.

Charlie shook his head.

“The pink bird! It belongs to President Oritz.”

“I thought Hoover was still the President, and if he wanted it, he shouldn’t have left it sitting on the dock.”

Sánchez snarled and lunged. Charlie found himself backed against the wall with a knife in his face.

“Where is *el flamenco*?”

“The landlady wouldn’t let me keep it here, so I sold it to the zoo.” Charlie’s palms sweated. He was bigger than Sánchez, but he hated fighting.

Sánchez looked even meaner than Wolfie Blake. “You will get it back.”

“I can’t. I already spent some of the money.”

“Then you will find another way.” The knife flashed.

Charlie jerked back and pressed his hand to his stinging, bloody cheek. “Ow, hey . . .”

“Bring me the flamingo. You have until tomorrow morning.”



Chapter II

Tuesday morning, Lowan worked on a complex series of equations, checking his notes and adjusting several variables. The answer still didn't come out the way he wanted. He tried again, inputting other data and—

Rita, his secretary, tapped on the workshop door. "Uncle Lowan, there's a call from the zoo." She unsuccessfully tried to repress a giggle. "The director wants to hire you to find a missing flamingo."

"A what?" He lost track of the variables. After the interruption, he would have to begin the whole equation over. Not wanting to admit that he didn't know what a flamingo was, he concentrated until he shared her mental image of a tall pink bird. "Is it valuable?"

"I don't know. I explained to Mr. Bloom about your fee, and he still wants to hire you."

"Mr. Bloom?" On the last case, he'd met a Mrs. Bloom at the Botanical Society while looking for rare orchids. He stepped out of the workshop into the office and went to his desk, then reached for the telephone. "Mr. Bloom? This is Lowan. My secretary said that you are missing a flamingo."

"Yes, and after that business with the missing orchids last week, my wife mentioned you. We had a break-in last night. I

already notified the police, but I want to do everything I can to get the flamingo back quickly.”

“You are certain that it did not simply escape?”

“It didn’t cut the chain off the gate.”

“I see. Is the bird valuable? My services are quite expensive. If the flamingo is worth less, it may not be a sensible use of your money.” Advertising a fee of a hundred dollars per day usually kept the nuttier cases away.

“I paid five hundred dollars for this flamingo, so I do consider it worthwhile. This might be easier to discuss in person. Would you mind coming to my office? I can show you where the flamingo was kept.”

“I will be there shortly.” He hung up, called for a taxi, then grabbed his hat and coat.

Twenty minutes later, he walked down a path bordered by lilies, tulips, and animal statuary. The director’s office was located in the back of the admissions building, through a separate entrance at the rear. He knocked and went in. The room was small and stuffy, jammed with filing cabinets. Staff schedules and animal care instructions covered the walls, along with a few faded wildlife posters. “Mr. Bloom?”

The man behind the desk rose to shake his hand. He was over fifty, somewhat thin, and wore no jacket. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up. “Thank you for coming.”

Lowan accepted the handshake. The brief contact gave him a strong impression of Bloom’s anxiety. “Tell me more about the flamingo.”

“I bought it yesterday. A man found it and brought it in here. The whole thing was extremely unusual, not to mention unexpected. It was in poor condition, malnourished, and with an infected cyst under one wing. I was going to have the veterinarian look at it today, since he was already here for the zebra—”

A loud and insistent knock interrupted the conversation. A zookeeper barged through the door in a highly emotional state. “The zebra . . .” He panted as if he’d been running.

“Now?” Bloom jumped out of his chair, grabbed his jacket, and slipped into it. Anxiety intensified. “Sorry about this,” he said to Lowan. “If you want to go down to the flamingo enclosure and have a look around, I’ll join you later. This might take an hour or two.” He and the other zookeeper ran out of the room and jogged down another path through the zoo.

Lowan followed the signs to the flamingo enclosure. Two dozen vibrant pink birds stood around. Most lounged on one leg with their heads tucked against their backs, their necks forming unnatural-looking tight loops. A few browsed among the water lilies. Two stood on the bank and pecked at each other, squawking and flapping their wings.

A zookeeper raked the grass, ignoring the racket behind him.

“Pardon me.” Lowan leaned over the fence. “What can you tell me about the flamingos?”

“A group of flamingos is called a flamboyance,” the zookeeper said. “They can live for sixty or seventy years. The pink coloring comes from carotenoid pigments in their food.”

“Could you tell me anything about the flamingo that was stolen last night? I came to discuss it with Mr. Bloom, but he was called away.”

“I saw that flamingo when Bloom brought it in yesterday.” He paused to lean on his rake, speaking slowly. “I don’t know why he bought the thing in the first place. And why anyone would steal it . . .” He shook his head.

“Was it valuable?”

“Look over there.” He motioned across the enclosure. “Two dozen Greater Flamingos in prime condition. Ain’t one of ’em worth more than fifty dollars. A thief broke in overnight, and what’s the only thing he took? The mangiest, sorriest flamingo anybody ever seen. The thing was half-dead. I wouldn’t have given more than five dollars for it.”



Detective Lieutenant Marx went through the scribblings in his notebook and tore out the ones he was finished with. There hadn't been any murders reported since the previous Wednesday, and he'd already solved it. Given his line of work, he didn't mind not having anything to do. If nobody died of unnatural causes, Milford Falls had a good week.

Footsteps echoed down the hall. His tiny office, formerly a closet, didn't have a window facing the hallway like the other offices did. He hunched down over his desk, not sure what to expect. The footsteps passed, accompanied by muffled voices. Farther down the hall, Sergeant O'Conner exclaimed, "You want me to look for a *WHAT?*"

More voices and heavy footsteps. Marx's office door thudded open. Acting Captain Kramer tossed a file on his desk. "O'Conner's busy. Since you're not, this one's yours." He slammed the door again on his way out.

Typically, Marx took the homicide cases and O'Conner handled the robberies, though assignments could vary depending on their caseload. Unofficially, Marx also ended up with whatever Kramer deemed unpleasant or unsolvable. He flipped the file open.

A break-in at the zoo. The only thing missing—one flamingo.



Chapter III

“Get that bird out of here.” Marley scratched his graying hair and watched the flamingo wander around the little kitchen, poking at everything with its black-and-yellow beak. So far, they hadn’t figured out what it wanted to eat. “My landlord says no pets.”

“It’s not a pet.” Charlie grabbed the flamingo under one arm and gripped the long snaky neck with his free hand. At less than ten pounds, it wasn’t any bigger than a turkey, except Charlie had never seen a turkey with such long legs. “Didn’t I say I’d have it out of here first thing in the morning?”

He’d paid Marley twenty dollars for letting him spend the night. That was a lot of money, but he could afford it. Mrs. Hancock would have had a fit if he brought the flamingo home again.

Marley opened the door and looked down the hall, then motioned that the coast was clear. Charlie carried the flamingo out. “I might be a little late to work today.”

“I’ll let the boss know, but I can’t cover for you all day.” Marley walked with him down the hallway and held the front door open.

The bird squirmed under Charlie’s arm. He squeezed it tighter. Since he was rich now, maybe he wouldn’t go to work anymore.

He hadn't decided yet. For now, he would keep working. His boss would be mad if he quit without notice. He didn't like making people mad.

Something twisted in his stomach. He should have returned the money to the zoo and offered to pay back the part he had already spent. It wasn't right to keep the money after taking the bird. Maybe he would go back to the zoo tonight and leave it on the director's desk.

He'd worry about that later.

Outside, the sun glared. He hurried down the street. Several blocks passed before he spotted a taxi. He stepped into the street and let go of the flamingo's neck long enough to wave. It pecked at the buttons on his shirt. The yellow taxi rolled to a stop. He pulled the back door open. Being able to afford a cab made him feel important. He couldn't do it very often.

"Hey, you can't bring that thing in here." The driver leaned around with a horrified expression. "No pets allowed."

"It's not a pet, it's a bird."

"Whatever it is, it looks like it's got mange. No birds allowed either. The screwy things some people try to bring into my hack . . ." He stepped on the gas and shot the cab forward. The motion slammed the door shut.

Charlie looked down to make sure his feet were still intact, then kept walking. The distance wasn't more than two miles, less than an hour at a brisk pace, but even a ten-pound flamingo started feeling heavy after a while. He shifted it to his other arm. It squirmed again.

Sánchez had told him to take it to a dive called the Pink Bird. The name was easy to remember. He'd seen the place before. From the outside, it didn't look like much of a restaurant. The grimy brick building with little glass-block windows was known for loud music and lousy food, only open late at night.

This early in the morning, the restaurant was closed. He adjusted his grip on the flamingo and carried it down the alley beside the building.

"You're late." Sánchez stepped out of the shadows.

“The morning’s not even half over yet.” Charlie tightened his grip on the bird.

“At least you brought my *flamenco*. Give it to me.” Sánchez eyed the flamingo in the same greedy way that a wolf looks at a rabbit.

“You’re not going to hurt it, are you?” He wished he’d thought of that earlier. If Sánchez wasn’t going to take care of the flamingo, it would have been better off at the zoo where they had a doctor for it. He didn’t know what was wrong with it, but it was sick enough to drop feathers all over the alley.

“Give it to me.” He reached under his jacket. Instead of the knife, he pulled out a gun.

“Hey.” Charlie backed away, holding the flamingo like a small child. His heart thudded. The bird struggled and made feeble squawking noises.

Above them, a woman screamed. Charlie looked up. She leaned out of the window and shouted fast and angry words. He only understood one of them—*Sánchez*. The rest didn’t sound like English. A man joined her, leaning out to yell at them in the same language.

Sánchez aimed at the window and fired. Both occupants of the room ducked, but kept shouting. The bird panicked—squawking, pecking, struggling, beating Charlie with its wings until he lost his grip. It scrambled down the alley, trying to fly, though it couldn’t get very far off the ground. Sánchez took aim at the bird.

“No, you don’t!” Charlie lunged to block him. The gun went off.

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