



The Pigeon Wing Murders

Book 11

S. E. Grosskopf

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Chapter I

Friday, May 1, 1931

Jacob Hartley stepped outside to feed his pigeons. The spring weather had turned pleasantly warm, the trees were filling in with leaves, and the scent of fresh grass wafted through the air. He needed a moment for his nerves to settle. If he spent more than ten minutes outside, Strigane would come looking for him.

Escaping never crossed his mind. Not when they still had Elaine, and he didn't know where they were holding her. Thinking of the last few days made his heart pound.

He stepped into the three-sided wire mesh coop, constructed against the back wall of the house. A bin in the corner contained mixed grains and seeds. He scooped some into a trough—millet, oats, sunflower seeds, corn—watching the pigeons flit around beneath the slanted tin roof. Feathers rustled. One landed on the edge of the trough and began to peck.

Not his pigeon. Elaine's. They sometimes sent messages back and forth by feeding each other's pigeons. If it came here looking for food, it wasn't being fed at home.

Of course it wasn't. Not when a gang of robbers was holding Elaine somewhere.

The whole situation burned his stomach. Strigane showed up here a week ago, told him that they had Elaine, and if he didn't

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cooperate in using his pigeons to send messages, he'd never see her again. The man had half a dozen of his own pigeons with him, and had sent some of Hartley's away with an accomplice.

A series of coded messages had been flown back and forth, relatively safe from interception. Sending coded messages had been his job during the war, and then a nostalgic hobby. He'd never expected it to turn into this. Trains, positions, timing, Saturday . . . tomorrow. He didn't know much more than that. Strigane told him what to write, but didn't explain the meaning behind any of it.

He'd released Strigane's final pigeon last night. The last of Hartley's pigeons had returned this morning with the answer. This was it.

If he ran to the neighbors and called the police . . ., he'd never see Elaine again. He glanced at the next house, so temptingly close. Mrs. Moore waved at him through the kitchen window. He waved back and smiled, not doubting that Strigane would kill her, too, if he got her involved in this.

The pigeon coop had a little wooden door near the top, which flipped down to create a landing space for the pigeons to enter or leave. He closed it, temporarily locking Elaine's pigeon inside, then went through his pockets for a pencil and a scrap of paper.

Elaine wouldn't get the message, but he'd bet that Barney Fletcher was looking for her. If, by some miracle, Fletcher went to her house and found the pigeon. . . . It was a longshot, but the only shot he had.

He scribbled the note in the code that he knew by heart, then rolled up the tiny scrap of paper and put it into a metal canister, which he fastened to the pigeon's leg. By now, it had eaten its fill. He carried it outside of the coop and released it. It soared upward, circled around, and turned north.

A gunshot *cracked*. The pigeon floundered and dipped below the trees. Hartley turned around, his pulse thudding in his ears.

Strigane held his semi-automatic raised toward the sky. "Whose bird was that?"

"Elaine's." Hartley put his hands up. "We had them trained to fly back and forth by feeding them. Since it wasn't getting fed there, it came here looking for food. That's it."

“You’re right.” Strigane took aim at Hartley. “This is it.”



Patsy Gilmore wandered down an alley near Fifty-Second Street, looking for a can to kick, a rock to throw, or any piece of scrap he could sell for a few pennies. The weather was far too nice to spend the morning in school. They never taught him anything useful, anyway.

Days like this, he had to roam.

Horns honked. Muffled traffic noise drifted from a few blocks away. A door at the back of a bakery opened. A garbage can rattled. Patsy stepped closer, watching the man in the white coat and puffy baker’s hat throw a bag into the can and slam the lid.

The baker swore, kicked, and shook his fist. The can thundered again, metallic and resounding. A black cat scampered down the alley. The man went back inside and slammed the door.

The cat turned and looked around, green eyes blinking. Patsy jogged toward him, but stopped several paces away and held out his hand. “Hey, Blackie.”

He hadn’t yet been able to touch the tomcat, but he’d gotten closer each time they’d met. Maybe in another week or two, he’d find out how soft its fur was. “Sorry, I don’t have any food for you today.”

The cat turned his back on him and strolled away at a leisurely pace, walking with his tail angled upright and flicking from side to side. Patsy imagined himself on a jungle adventure, accompanied by a fierce and loyal panther.

Blackie stopped and crouched low. His green eyes focused on something in the distance. The tail-flick intensified. He wiggled his shoulders and hips, getting into the best position to spring.

Patsy crouched down next to the cat and tried to see what they were hunting. Farther down the alley, more garbage cans sat beside a line of doorways. Discarded paper scraps fluttered. Something moved. Blackie launched himself forward and landed squarely on the target. A bird squawked.

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“Hey!” Patsy found a rock to throw.

It hit Blackie on his rear. The cat leapt straight up into the air and yowled, landing on all four feet. He spun around to stare, with his back arched and his fur poofed out.

“Sorry. I know you’ve got to eat, but not this way.” He stepped forward. Proximity made the cat back away and growl.

A pigeon flopped down the alley, holding its wing awkwardly. Blood stained its grayish feathers. It tried to fly, briefly, but couldn’t get more than a foot off the ground before it crashed against a garbage can. Patsy cornered it between the can and the wall and pounced to grab it with both hands.

Soft feathers tickled his fingers. Then, cold metal. He held the bird up and turned it over to check the underside. It wore a small canister strapped to one leg. “What’s this?”



Chapter II

“I remembered what happened last week Tuesday.” Detective Lieutenant Marx stood in front of Captain Kramer’s desk. He stared down at his shoes and fidgeted, holding his breath while he waited for the response.

“What?” Kramer spoke with his usual impatient bark. He was a square-faced Germanic blond, broad-shouldered enough to be imposing even while seated on the opposite side of the desk. His thick mustache would have hidden his expression, if it wasn’t for the coldness that his eyes betrayed. He’d spent the last three years making his hatred for Marx abundantly clear.

“I . . .” Marx choked and looked down again, and began his story while trying not to stutter. “After Tom Nanning and Alison Paine were kidnapped, I went to Mellinger’s house . . .” He walked through the story, the explosion at the barn, the fire, calling for the police, leading up to Kramer sending him to the hospital. Somehow, the events of that day had left him with a mild case of memory loss.

If he couldn’t completely remember, he would lose his job. Kramer had warned him that a faulty memory would compromise his investigations. He waited for Kramer’s decision, feeling like a prisoner accused of a capital offense awaiting the judge’s verdict. He didn’t know what he’d forgotten. If he hadn’t remembered enough, if he’d left out any important details . . .

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“That vacation must have done you some good,” Kramer said. He still sounded harsh and scolding.

Marx let his breath out and glanced up. He wasn't sure if his recovery was due to his far too eventful vacation, which had been interrupted by another murder investigation, or if the credit should go to Lowan's 'memory exercises.' He didn't understand how or why it had worked, but it did work, and he wasn't going to ask questions. He also wasn't about to explain it to Kramer, since Kramer hated Lowan.

“Just in time.” Kramer grabbed a brown folder from a stack and tossed it across the desk. It landed with a dull slap that made the other nearby papers flutter. “That one's yours. It just came in a few minutes ago.”

“That means . . .” He reached for the folder, hardly daring to ask if he still had a job.

“Get to work.” Kramer made a dismissive motion, then leaned over his paperwork. “Don't forget about Officer Littlejohn's funeral at two o'clock this afternoon. Get a haircut.”

“Yes, sir.” Marx took the folder and hurried out. Other men, many in uniform, stepped quietly down the corridor, without the usual chatter. The death of a fellow officer left the entire department under a gloomy fog. Littlejohn had been a good cop, well-respected, with almost ten years on the force. Marx hadn't considered Littlejohn a personal friend—he didn't have many of those—but this was a difficult loss for him, nonetheless. He'd found the body.

Marx's own tiny office, formerly a closet, was a short distance farther down the hallway. He held the folder under his arm, fumbled with his keys, stepped inside, and snapped on the light. After being gone for over a week, the air smelled stale with faint traces of the cleaning supplies that used to be stored here. He settled into his chair, grateful for the privacy and seclusion, even though everyone else called his office a claustrophobic mousehole. He was glad he didn't have to share a desk with anyone.

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Tossing his hat aside, he ran his fingers through his hair, which tended to become curly when it got too long. Kramer was right. He centered his thoughts for a moment, then flipped the folder open and scanned the important details. A man had been shot outside of his home less than half an hour ago. The neighbors called about the sound of the gunshot, and the first officers on the scene had confirmed it as a homicide. He glanced at his watch. By now, the coroner should be there. He didn't have time to waste.



In his apartment, Lowan unpacked his suitcase. The ever-present smell of warm oatmeal cookies drifted from the next apartment, as heavily as if it had originated in his own kitchen instead of the neighbor's. He was mildly surprised that Jane Maplewood hadn't immediately rushed over to welcome him home from vacation.

Freshly baked cookies must have been the bait for her trap.

He finished distributing the last of his clothes between the dresser, the closet, and the laundry hamper, then lifted his empty suitcase to put it away. The effort caused a strong twinge in his ribs. Exactly two weeks ago, he'd been kicked by a man wearing steel-toed work boots. Since broken ribs could take six to eight weeks to heal, he had at least another month to wait.

Five days of vacation, even if it had been interrupted by a murder investigation, had allowed his condition to improve. The previous Monday, he'd been forced to ask Jane to carry the suitcase out to the taxi for him. If only he could heal from broken bones as quickly as he did from smaller injuries.

As soon as he set the suitcase in the closet, pounding sounded on his front door. He went to answer, feeling Jane's blustery presence even before crossing the living room. When he pulled the door open, she presented a decorative platter brimming with oatmeal cookies.

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“How was your vacation?” Jane’s shoulder-length blonde hair, gracefully streaked with gray, framed her face, and she had a figure befitting her baking habit. Despite her bulk and her precarious cookie tray, she slipped past him through the doorway.

He turned around to face her, in the middle of his empty living room. His comfortable chair, the only piece of furniture in the room, was pushed near the radiator. Stacks of books covered the floor near it, some piled sturdily enough to use as an end table. Other than that, the room was empty. He didn’t need anything else. “My vacation was eventful at first, then restful. I spent most of yesterday sitting beside a waterfall.”

“Good.” She encouraged him to take a cookie. If she had her way, she’d insist that he ate the whole two dozen in one sitting. “Are you feeling any better? How are your ribs?”

“Improving.” He took one cookie and backed away, hoping to find an excuse to dislodge her from his apartment. Without shooing her away somehow, she’d spend the rest of the afternoon making useless suggestions and criticizing his lack of furniture or décor.

The phone rang. He reached for it as quickly as he could without reinjuring himself, still holding the cookie in his other hand. “This is Lowan.”

“Uncle Lowan, I’m glad you’re back from vacation,” Rita said. She was his secretary, not actually his niece, but he didn’t mind the way she addressed him. “I’m sorry to bother you, since I know you weren’t planning on coming back to the office until Monday, but something came up. Patsy Gilmore is here, and he has a bird with him. In a paper bag. He won’t go away, and he says he’s going to stay here until you come. I don’t know what to do.”

“A bird?” Lowan imagined the situation in a comical light. Patsy, an adventurous and enterprising fifteen-year-old, sometimes ran errands for him. Too restless to spend his days in school, he could have been called a delinquent, but he had a good heart and Lowan liked him. “Why did he bring a bird to my office?”

“The poor thing is hurt, and he wants you to help it. He said . . .” she stifled a giggle, “you can talk to birds.”



Chapter III

Marx parked his car in front of an old Victorian house on the southwest side of town. The neighborhood held onto the pretense of respectability, despite showing signs of wear. Lawns not quite manicured, evidence of slightly mismatched exterior repairs, older cars in gravel driveways.

A patrol car occupied the space at the curb ahead of him. The coroner's van was already backed up to the house. Marx jogged across the yard.

The door was unlocked, so he stepped inside. The front room looked lived in. Dried plants, used dishes, coffee stains on the end table, a dusty radio in the corner. No murder scene. He found his way through the house. In the kitchen, he ran into Officer O'Neill.

"Lieutenant." O'Neill's voice rose. "You're back?"

"Yeah. Where's the body?"

"This way." O'Neill led the way through the back door. "With you off, we weren't sure who headquarters was going to send. Last time, the captain came himself. Technical's already done taking pictures."

Soft cooing noises filled the air. Around the side of the house, a strange enclosure came into view—fenced in on three sides, adjacent to the house, with a slanted roof. From a distance, Marx might have thought it was a dog kennel. On closer inspection, it was constructed from flimsy chicken wire, six feet high. Inside,

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small boxes lined the back wall. Feathers rustled. A bird darted across the enclosure and settled into one of the boxes.

“Pigeons?” Marx asked. Most of the birds were gray, but others were whitish, spotted, or even brown. They were medium-sized birds, bigger than the average songbird, but not quite as big as seagulls.

“Pigeons.” O’Neill pointed. “Over there. Jacob Hartley, mid-sixties, apparently retired and kept pigeons as a hobby.”

A short distance away, the body of a man lay on the ground, covered with a blanket to keep the eyes of prying neighbors away. The coroner’s men stood with their arms crossed, looking bored. Marx lifted the blanket and found exactly what he expected: an older man who had obviously died from a gunshot wound to his back. Nothing particularly enlightening. He dropped the blanket into place. “Ideas? Suspects? Did the neighbors say anything?”

“Mrs. Moore.” O’Neill motioned to the house beside them. “She saw another man over here for the past several days, but didn’t know his name. She heard the shot and called it in, but she didn’t see the shooting take place.”

“Could she describe the man?” Marx waved for the coroner’s men to take care of the body. He turned back toward the house.

“Forties, tall, dark hair, somewhat handsome.” O’Neill followed Marx into the house. “Not the most helpful description, is it?”

“Hmm.” Marx glanced around, looking for anywhere that Hartley might have kept personal papers. Fingerprint powder still showed on the doorknobs and other commonly touched areas. Malone from the technical department was thorough and efficient. Marx would find Malone’s report on his desk when he returned to his office.

A soft knock thudded on the front door. O’Neill went to answer. He came back a moment later, escorting a woman.

And what a woman. Tall, maybe an inch or two taller than Marx, with a proud bearing and a haughty expression in her intense green eyes. She turned to survey the room, finding herself out of

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place in the comparatively humble surroundings. Her hair and makeup were flawless, and she perfectly filled out a coordinated wardrobe of the newest and most expensive style. Her handbag alone probably cost more than a year of Marx's salary.

"This is Miss Elaine Hartley," O'Neill said, snapping Marx out of his daze.

"Oh." Marx stepped back, finding her somewhat intimidating. He motioned to the chairs near the radio. "Miss Hartley . . ."

"My father . . ." She seemed to look down on him. A slight sneer twisted the corners of her mouth as she evaluated the furniture. Moving stiffly, she chose the better of the two chairs and settled onto the edge of it, then crossed her legs.

Killer legs. Marx shifted his attention elsewhere and swallowed hard. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but . . . your father . . ."

"What happened?"

He had the sense that she already caught on, and she was surprisingly unemotional about it. She took a dainty handkerchief from her purse, wadded it while showing off her precisely manicured fingernails, and dabbed at her eyes without smearing her makeup.

"He was shot this morning, outside near his pigeons," Marx explained. "One of the neighbors called the police. She said she'd seen another man over here for the past few days. Do you have any idea who that might have been?"

"That could have been Barney Fletcher," she said coldly while adjusting the way her skirt draped across her knees. "Another pigeon keeper, and a friend of my father's."

Marx looked away and forced his thoughts back to the dead man outside. "Can you tell me how to get in touch with Mr. Fletcher?"

"Through the Avian Society. It's a little building downtown, across from St. Francis Park, a combination of a pigeon keeper's association and birdwatcher's club."

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Lowan found Patsy Gilmore sitting in one of the chairs in front of his desk, carefully holding a paper bag on his lap. Rita glanced up from behind her desk with an expression of relief. “Thanks for coming so quickly.”

Patsy hopped off the chair and held out the paper bag. “Yeah, thanks. Can you help?”

“We will have a look at it.” He motioned for Patsy to set the bag on the desk, then opened the top. Inside, he found an ordinary-looking pigeon, ruffled grayish feathers with barred wings and an iridescent throat patch. Most conspicuously, it held one bloody wing at an awkward angle.

“Well?” Patsy fidgeted and lowered his voice. “What’s it say? Can it tell you what happened?”

“At the moment, it can only tell me that it is frightened and in pain.” He closed the top of the bag.

“What about the message? It has a message on its leg.”

“A message?” Lowan checked inside the bag again, then reached down to nudge the pigeon. A small metallic tube had been strapped to one leg. He gently lifted the bird with both hands, avoiding the injured wing. “Can you detach the canister?”

Lowan tried to telepathically impart as much of a sense of calm as he could. Despite the relatively high intelligence of pigeons, his ability to communicate with birds was limited, and did not include having conversations with them as Patsy imagined. If he did too much to relieve its pain, it might begin to thrash around without any regard for its injured wing. He couldn’t fix broken bones. At the moment, he had enough of his own trouble with broken ribs.

He held it still while Patsy tugged on the canister, finally finding the clasp. Patsy pulled it loose and held it up, making a triumphant noise.

“Good.” Lowan put the bird back into the bag and closed the top.

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Patsy twisted the canister open and pulled out a tiny scrap of paper. He unfolded it and pressed down the edges, holding it flat on the desk. “All jumbled letters and numbers. What do you think it means? Gosh, when I tell the guys about this . . .”

“It is the beginning of an intriguing problem.” Lowan glanced at the paper, but couldn’t decipher it. He went around to his side of the desk and reached for the telephone.

“Who are you gonna call?” Patsy rolled up the note and stuck it back into the canister.

“I plan to call the zoo, to ask Director Bloom what I should do with a pigeon. Rita, the number?” She flipped through her files and gave it to him. He dialed and waited. A few weeks earlier, Bloom had helped him with a case involving a missing flamingo, which had also been in need of veterinary attention.

“Milford Falls Zoological Society, Director Bloom speaking.”

“This is Lowan. I have an injured pigeon, possibly with a broken wing, and I was wondering if you could recommend a veterinarian.”

“Our vet is here today. You can bring the pigeon over. Is it a wild bird, or have you taken up keeping pigeons?”

“An associate of mine found it injured. It had a canister attached to its leg, so I would assume it belongs to someone, but there was no useful identification. We can be there in twenty minutes.”

“I’ll have the vet ready.”

Lowan hung up. While Rita called for a taxi, he examined the pigeon’s canister. The message capsule looked about an inch high. Convenient for sending secret messages, while not impeding a bird’s flight. He tucked it into his pocket and instructed Patsy to carry the bag.

Twenty minutes later, the two of them made their way around the zoo admissions building to the director’s office. Lowan knocked, then stepped inside.

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Director Bloom waited with another man, who held a black medical bag. Patsy reluctantly handed over the paper bag. “Is it gonna be okay?”

The veterinarian carefully took the bird out, holding it with both hands. He pulled the wing away from its body and inspected it from several angles. “The good news is, I don’t think it’s broken. Do you know how this happened?”

Lowan sensed that the question was redundant. “I was hoping that you could tell me.”

“If I had to guess, I’d say this bird has been shot. It’s very lucky that the bullet missed the bone, but it won’t be flying anytime soon. If this was a racing pigeon, it might never compete again. Where did you find it?”

Patsy shrugged. “Downtown.”

“Can you keep the bird here for a few days until I locate the owner?” Lowan turned to include Bloom in the conversation. “I will cover any expenses.”

“Yes, we can find a place for it,” Bloom said. “If you’re looking for the pigeon’s owner, you might try asking at the Milford Falls Avian Society.” He brought out his telephone directory and flipped it open.

Lowan found the address. He glanced sideways at Patsy, who still crowded near the veterinarian and fussed over the pigeon. If the bird had been shot to prevent the message from being delivered, the situation could be far more dangerous than he had anticipated.



Chapter IV

“I think spies did it.” Patsy walked beside Lowan and fidgeted, annoyed by the slow pace. He shuffled his feet, jumped ahead for a few steps, and then turned back to wait.

“What would attract the attention of spies in Milford Falls?” Lowan paused to observe several passing pedestrians. The Avian Society was headquartered in a small brick house across from the park. A familiar black car sat at the curb, but since it was a common make, he could have been mistaken about the identification.

“The secret plans for a . . . uh . . . I dunno.” Patsy glanced across the street at the park. Lowan watched his thoughts zip back and forth between exciting and improbable explanations.

A few other shops and offices lined the street, not far from the downtown area. A woman strolled past with a large gray poodle on a leash, groomed to resemble a topiary. She glanced at Patsy, wrinkled her nose, and kept walking. Patsy stuck his tongue out at her back.

Lowan made a scolding motion. He turned toward the house, which was almost directly adjacent to the sidewalk, with no front yard. Two steps up onto the narrow cement porch, then inside. The door opened into a narrow, short hallway.

“I’m sorry, I can’t give out information about members.” The secretary’s voice drifted around the corner.

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Lowan and Patsy stepped into the next room. The room felt small and cozy, with several comfortable chairs near a fireplace. Bookshelves and oil paintings of various types of birds lined the walls. Marx stood in front of the desk and showed his badge. "I'm investigating the murder of Mr. Jacob Hartley, and I'd like to ask Mr. Fletcher a few questions."

"Oh . . ." The secretary's eyes widened, then she turned to glance at Lowan.

Marx followed her motion, spinning around toward the doorway. "Don't tell me you're already working on the same case. How did you get mixed up in this?"

"My young friend found an injured pigeon," Lowan explained, motioning to Patsy. "We came to ask if anyone is missing one. A man has been killed?"

"Yeah." Marx stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Jacob Hartley, found shot this morning outside of his pigeon coop. His daughter thought another pigeon keeper might be able to tell me more."

"Then it may be related." Lowan spoke quietly enough to exclude the secretary. "According to the veterinarian, this pigeon may have been shot. Perhaps it belonged to Hartley, and found itself caught in the line of fire."

Marx turned toward Patsy. "Where'd you find it?"

"Downtown." Patsy shrugged. "The west side of downtown, somewhere around Fifty-Second Street, in an alley behind a bakery."

"Alright." Marx avoided the question of why Patsy had been there instead of school, but it crossed his mind. "Hartley lived on the southwest side, so if it was his bird, it must have been headed north. Uh," he turned back to the secretary, "how far do pigeons go? If a bird belonged to Hartley, and was headed north, where might it have been going?"

"A pigeon can fly up to six hundred miles in a single day," she said, showing off her knowledge. "But they don't typically leave the area of their coop on their own. If it belonged to Mr. Hartley, it

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might explore or forage nearby, but it would come right back to its coop. It wouldn't decide to just take off and fly north, unless that's where its coop was, and it was headed home."

"Oh. Miss Hartley said that Mr. Fletcher was familiar with her father's pigeons. Maybe it's nothing, but do you think he could identify this one, or come to Hartley's house to tell me if any are missing?"

"Miss Hartley could have done that herself. She keeps her own pigeons, and she knows her father's."

Marx's eyebrows moved closer together. "She didn't seem like the type to get her hands dirty."

"She loves pigeons," the secretary objected. "She's one of our most active members. She and her father have that in common, for sure. And Mr. Fletcher. If you ask me, the two of them . . ." She hummed suggestively and blushed. "Mr. Fletcher stopped in a little while ago to ask if Miss Hartley had been here. He hasn't been able to contact her for a few days, and he was worried about her. He said he went to her house this morning and found that her pigeons weren't being cared for, and that one was missing."

"That may be the one that was found injured," Lowan said. "We took it to a veterinarian, and I will pay for its care until it can be returned to the owner."

"That's very nice of you. Maybe Mr. Fletcher could identify it. He was going to look around for the missing pigeon, since, like I said, pigeons don't usually just fly away and disappear on their own. You might find him across the street in the park."

"Thanks." Marx stepped toward the door. Lowan and Patsy followed him outside. They watched for traffic, then crossed the street together. "I should've asked what he looked like."

"I imagine that he will be the one searching for a bird." Lowan glanced around. St. Francis Park wasn't exactly crowded, but there were a good number of people enjoying the warm, spring weather. A handful of cottony clouds drifted across the pale blue sky. The park covered less than an acre, but featured trees and grassy areas, walking paths, a pond with ducks, and several benches. The new

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leaves should have appeared vibrant, but his color vision was still somewhat compromised by exhaustion and pain.

Marx set off down the path, taking purposeful strides and glancing around. Lowan fell behind, unable to match his pace. Beside him, Patsy fidgeted.

“Go look for anyone birdwatching.” Lowan made a shooing motion in Patsy’s direction. “If you find a man, ask him if he is Mr. Fletcher and bring him to us.”

Patsy scampered away in the opposite direction from Marx. Lowan found a bench near the pond, took a seat, and observed the location from there. Ducks glided across the surface of the water. A family with two small children spread out a striped blanket nearby and began unpacking a picnic basket. Noon had already passed. He would go somewhere for lunch after this, and invite Patsy along. They could both use a good meal.

Overexertion brought back the aching in his ribs. He breathed slowly, slid his hand under his jacket to find the sore spot, and concentrated on healing. Fixing broken bones was beyond his ability, but if he could manage to reduce the pain long enough to get through the afternoon . . .

Minutes later, he sensed Marx approaching again. As he neared, Lowan turned to face him. The strain caused by the twisting motion was still uncomfortable, but not completely unbearable.

“Found half a dozen birdwatchers, but no Fletcher,” Marx reported. He glanced past Lowan. “Maybe that’s him.”

Lowan carefully stood and turned around, which was easier than twisting while seated. Patsy trotted toward them, several paces ahead of a man with a pair of binoculars around his neck.

“Whew.” Patsy plopped onto the park bench and panted. “I ran all over, but I found him.”

Fletcher might have been in his mid-twenties, tall, with dark hair and a handsome face. He made a friendly motion and quickened his pace slightly, but didn’t break into a jog. A dozen yards still separated them.

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A sudden sense of danger made Lowan wince, jarring his ribs again. He spun around, not sure which direction the feeling had come from. People strolled by. Several walked dogs. The family settled onto the blanket and distributed sandwiches. Their children were more interested in watching the dogs and the ducks.

Ten yards away, a man reached under his coat. Lowan's heartbeat thudded in his ears. Time slowed. His breath caught in his lungs. He reached for Marx's arm, trying to point, but couldn't move fast enough.

A gunshot echoed, searing his nerves. A wave of panic crashed over the park, amplified by every person in the vicinity and overwhelming his telepathic senses to the point of nausea.

Fletcher crumpled over and collapsed. The gunman bolted away.



Chapter V

Women screamed, ducks scattered, dogs barked and jerked against their leashes, dragging their owners in every direction. The man at the picnic site pushed his children down and covered them. Marx took out his gun.

With this many bystanders, he didn't dare shoot. He sprinted after the gunman. By now, the man had too far of a lead. The chaos between them prevented Marx from gaining ground.

Lowan caught his breath and tried to recover his senses. The confusion began to subside, but everyone still appeared stunned. Several walkers caught loose dogs, untangled their leashes, and got them back under control. The family on the blanket hugged their crying children. A few ducks settled into the far side of the pond.

Patsy peered over the edge of the park bench. "Gosh, is he dead?"

"I . . ." Lowan focused in Fletcher's direction, not feeling any distinct living presence. "I believe so." He stepped close enough to confirm his suspicions, then turned away and motioned for Patsy to follow. He reached into his pocket for a nickel and handed it to him. "Find a telephone and call the police."

"Sure." Patsy took one last glance at the body, then sprinted in the direction of the Avian Society.

The crowd gathered closer, murmuring to one another, pointing, and staring.

"The police are being called," Lowan said. "Please stay back."

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The instruction was somewhat redundant. Most people knew better than to disturb a murder scene. Marx pushed his way through the crowd while holding up his badge and introducing himself. He broke into the circle of space around the scene and instructed a few people to move further away. Standing over the body, he glanced down and sighed.

“I sent Patsy to find a telephone,” Lowan said. “He could reach one the fastest.”

“Good.” Marx crouched down and checked Fletcher for a pulse, sighed, then began searching his pockets. He pulled out a wallet, a set of keys, and a thin, pocket-sized book. “Huh. What do you make of this?” He handed the book to Lowan.

It was a codebook left over from the war. Lowan opened the pages, scanning the pages of letters and numbers and the corresponding columns of meanings. “I may have more information about this. The pigeon that Patsy brought to me was carrying a coded message. The pigeon may have been shot down to prevent the message from being delivered.”

“A coded . . . what?” Marx straightened up and turned to face him.

“Le’me through.” Patsy jostled among the crowd, out of breath again. He touched Lowan’s arm. “I used the phone at that bird house. The cops are on the way. They didn’t believe me at first. I had a hard time convincing them, but they said they’d send someone.”

“Good.” Marx glanced from Patsy to Lowan. “You should take him home after this.”

“Yes, I—”

Sirens wailed closer. A patrol car stopped at the edge of the park. Officers Sullivan and O’Neill jogged toward the group of bystanders, then spoke with Marx.

Lowan backed away and slipped the codebook into his pocket. He would return it to Marx later. After decoding the pigeon’s message.

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Patsy followed him away from the crowd. “You’re not gonna make me go home, are you?”

“It would be the wisest course of action.” Lowan glanced back at the murder scene, where Sullivan and O’Neill drove the crowd farther away. An ambulance stopped behind the police car. “However, before we leave, I have another question for secretary of the Avian Society.”

“Alright.” He raced across the street and up the steps to hold the door open for Lowan.

It took considerably longer for Lowan to follow the same course. He ascended the steps carefully, gripping the railing, then stepped inside.

The secretary’s panic flowed down the hallway. He found her speaking frantically into the telephone. She looked up, apologized to her conversation partner, and set the phone down. “Is it true? I mean, about Mr. Fletcher?”

“Yes. The police are in the park at this moment, but the shooter escaped.” He took the codebook from his pocket. “Do any of your members use their pigeons to send coded messages? Can you tell me anything about this?”

“Yes, that was Mr. Hartley’s project. He handled pigeons and coded messages during the war, and it was a nostalgic hobby for him. He and his daughter sent messages that way, and they were beginning to get Mr. Fletcher involved in it.”

“I thought that pigeons only fly back to their own coop, so that if you wanted to send a message, you took it elsewhere and then allowed it to fly home.”

“Nine times out of ten, that’s how it works. They trained their pigeons to fly back and forth to each other’s houses. He would feed her pigeons at his house, and she would feed his at her house.”

“I see.” If the pigeon did belong to Miss Hartley, that would explain why it had been shot at her father’s house, and then flew north. Assuming that was what happened. “May I have Miss Hartley’s address? If the injured pigeon belongs to her, I would like to return it.”

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“Of course. Just in case it isn’t hers, and someone else comes in to report a missing pigeon, would you leave your name?” She went through the files and copied the address onto a piece of paper. The phone rang. She answered it, becoming instantly flustered. “Yes, I can’t believe it either. I only spoke to Mr. Fletcher an hour ago . . .”

Lowan left one of his cards on the desk, took the paper, and turned away. Patsy followed, then stepped ahead to open the door. “You’re not gonna make me go home now, are you?”

“I had intended to visit Miss Hartley first.” He waved for a taxi, then climbed into the back. After Patsy trotted to the opposite side, he gave the driver the address.

Patsy stared out the window and fidgeted. Within twenty minutes, the taxi stopped in front of a small bungalow situated in the middle of a large, shady lawn. Lowan asked the driver to wait, then stepped out. Patsy ran ahead.

Finally reaching the porch, Lowan crossed to the door and knocked. No response. The mailbox was packed with several days of letters, bills, and advertisements. He set his hand against the door and extended his telepathic senses inside as far as he could reach. He found something small, perhaps a cat, and it was hungry. “No one is home.”

“Hmm.” Patsy peered through the window. “I don’t see anything.” After a moment, he leapt off the porch and jogged around to the side of the house.

Lowan followed at a slower pace. They found the coop behind the garage, housing maybe a dozen pigeons, difficult to count accurately as the birds moved around. Some flitted back and forth inside the coop, others foraged in the yard and nearby bushes. He located a covered bin of mixed seeds and grains, millet, sunflower seeds, barley, and corn, and scooped some into an empty trough inside the coop. The birds instantly flocked to it. “It seems as if she has not been home for some time.”

“Yeah.” Patsy looked around, but didn’t find anything else noteworthy. They walked back to the taxi. “What now?”

“We will return to my office and decode the message.”



Chapter VI

Marx hurried down the back hallway of police headquarters. He'd missed lunch, but wasn't hungry anyway. He had barely an hour left to change and get a haircut before the funeral. In the meantime, he needed to start his report before forgetting anything.

Feeling his pockets for his keys, he realized he didn't have Fletcher's codebook. Lowan must have forgotten to give it back to him. He'd stop over there after the funeral to pick it up. It must have been overlooked in the confusion, since he couldn't imagine Lowan deliberately taking evidence.

His office was already unlocked. He twisted his doorknob and pushed the door open. Unlike the other offices, his door didn't have a window.

Inside, he found his desk chair occupied. Miss Hartley, again with her skirt arranged to show off her admirable legs. She'd changed into black, with a little lacey veil on her hat, screening her eyes. Despite the color, the dress hardly seemed appropriate for mourning. It showed off her figure far too well, accentuating every curve in the most flattering way.

"Uh, hi." Marx suddenly felt speechless, as if all the words had drained out of his head. He usually had trouble speaking under stress, and finding her in his chair counted as stressful.

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“Have you found out anything about my father?” She said it like she had anything but her father on her mind.

He left the door open and didn’t step any closer to her. “Not yet. It’s barely been two hours. What can you tell me about Fletcher?”

“What about him?”

“I spoke to the secretary at the pigeon club. She seemed to think that the two of you were close . . .”

“He wanted to be, but I didn’t. He wasn’t my type.”

“Oh. I also heard you keep pigeons, and you’re familiar with your father’s birds. Why didn’t you tell me that earlier?”

“Was it important?”

“It might be.” He didn’t feel like he was getting anywhere. “Are you missing a bird?”

“I haven’t checked recently. They do fly around, you know.”

“Why haven’t you been feeding them?”

“Who told you that?”

“Fletcher told the secretary at the pigeon club that he was trying to get ahold of you, but you weren’t home, and your pigeons were starving.”

“If he showed up, I’m glad I wasn’t home. And he must have been exaggerating about the pigeons. I fed them this morning. Like I do every morning.”

“Fletcher’s dead.” He hoped to shock her out of that impenetrable haughtiness. “Somebody shot him in the park, a few minutes ago.”

“Oh?” One perfect eyebrow arched. That was all. “Like I said, we weren’t close. Did you catch the murderer?”

“No.” Indigestion burned in his stomach. For a murder to happen right in front of him, while he’d been too slow to do a thing about it . . . “He got away.”

“Too bad.” She stood and stepped toward him, a slinking step accentuated with a twisting motion in her hips. “I’d like to tell you more about my father. Maybe we could get together and talk about it.”

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“No.” His voice squeaked. He cleared his throat and moved back, almost out into the hallway. If she stepped any closer, he’d end up stuttering.

“No? I don’t bite, Lieutenant.” She eased forward, locking her eyes onto his. “Do I have to call you that? You have a name, don’t you?”

“Look.” He made a point of checking his watch, bringing his arm up to block her advance. “I have somewhere important to go at two, and I still have to get ready, so I really don’t have time right now—”

“Lieutenant.” Someone in the hallway touched his back.

Marx spun around, finding Officer Mackay behind him. Like everyone else in the department, he wore a black mourning band.

“Lieutenant, I just wanted to make sure you know about . . . two o’clock,” Mackay said.

“Yes, I’m just about to get ready. Could you show Miss Hartley out?”

Miss Hartley followed Mackay down the hallway, moving with her agile, slinking stride. She glanced back at him. Marx let his breath out and tried to stop shaking. He still had to change, then find a barber who could get him in for a last-minute haircut.



Lowan spread the pigeon’s message out on the desk and weighed down the edges with coins, then flipped through the codebook. Columns of letters and numbers ranging in groups of three to five lined the pages, each corresponding to a word.

Patsy pulled the codebook out of his hands. “So, we just look up the numbers and it gives us a word?”

“Yes,” Lowan said. Rita stared at them longingly from her desk across the room. He motioned for her. “You may join us.”

She sprinted the distance and slid into the chair beside Patsy, leaning forward to look at the message. Seventeen characters long,

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without spaces. “So, the message has to be between four and five words, but where are the divisions between the characters supposed to go?”

“We will try each combination until we find one that makes sense.” Lowan leaned back in his chair, sitting stiffly upright. While Rita divided the characters into groups, Patsy flipped through the book and gave her the corresponding answer.

“Battalion?” Patsy said.

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Rita’s pencil scratched on a notepad. “Try X5M47.”

“Mustard gas.”

“I hope not. How about just X5M?”

“Train.”

Rita scribbled again. “We’ll start with that, I guess. 47Q?”

Their voices blurred. Lowan slipped his hand under his jacket and touched his ribs again. Broken bones caused a constant drain on his energy. Another month stretched out like an unendurable eternity. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly.

“That’s it!” Rita exclaimed.

“What?” Leaning forward too quickly sent another electric jolt through his side. He held his breath and waited for his eyes to stop watering.

“The message is *train robbery Saturday help*. That’s tomorrow.”

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Lowan, a private detective and telepathic alien, teams up with Detective Lieutenant Marx, an introverted underdog, to catch a clever jewel thief terrorizing Milford Falls.

Book 2: Shamrock Hunt

When a famous Celtic medallion—the prize for a charity raffle—is stolen, Lowan competes with a rival private detective to find it in time for the St. Patrick's Day parade. Meanwhile, Marx investigates the murder of a history professor and faces off with a lifelong enemy.

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After writing a newspaper story about the crimeless village of Harrisonville, Tom Nanning is ambushed and left for dead. When Lowan investigates, he finds himself trapped in a small town with a murderer hidden among its quirky residents.

Book 4: Orchid Hunter

While Marx investigates a murder committed via April Fool's prank, which renders alibis useless, Lowan dives into the black market orchid trade to recover the main attraction stolen before the Easter flower show. Both investigations lead to a thirty-five-year-old tiger attack in the jungles of Borneo.

Book 5: The Great Flamingo Robbery

When the mangiest flamingo is stolen from the zoo, Lowan is called in to investigate. He never expected to get mixed up with a beautiful ruby thief or a South American dictator.

Book 6: The Unicorn Staff

The murder of an archeologist and the theft of a staff made from a unicorn's horn lead Lowan and Marx on a wild quest for answers.

Book 7: Lowan's Circus Tricks

Lowan's search for Eloise Meer leads him to a traveling circus in dusty Dry Creek, Kansas. But the only Eloise at the circus is a ring-tailed monkey. Hunting for clues, he joins the circus and promptly finds himself framed for murder.

Book 8: The Starmaster

The Starmaster is hunting for aliens—and he's after Lowan.

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A movie is being filmed in Milford Falls. The script might solve an old crime for which an innocent man was framed, if the real murderer doesn't stop the production first.

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Lowan and Marx take a vacation at a cabin in the woods. But their plans are disrupted when the woman in the next cabin claims that she saw her husband kill a man.

Book 11: The Pigeon Wing Murders

A wounded carrier pigeon with a coded message, a train robbery, and a stolen racehorse add up to one of Lowan's strangest cases yet.

Book 12: The Mattison Matter

When Tom Nenning is framed for murder, Lowan must work quickly to clear his name. He finds himself enmeshed in a case of corporate theft involving the radio company he works for, and misused city funds linked to the mayor's office.

Book 13: The Unicorn Curse

When a madman starts killing the remaining members of the *Bearance* crew with a harpoon, Lowan and Marx suspect that the unicorn staff hadn't been aboard the ship when it sank. To find the truth, Lowan goes undercover at a secret million-dollar auction aboard the killer's luxury yacht.

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