

CHAPTER 1

Midnight was approaching. Soft wind blew across the prairie, gathering scents of wildflowers and scattering them on the doorsteps of the town of Destiny. In the spectral light of the moon, shadows streaked across the ground, pausing occasionally to regroup and confirm their target.

A rather plump tabby cat sat on the other side of some train tracks, inhaling delicately. The wind told her an owl was nearby, but it held no fear for Henrietta Sinclair – she had faced ghosts, talking ravens, bald eagles ... And she still had all of her nine lives.

The coyotes burst through the tall grass and pounced on the cat, which was not there anymore. They exchanged a flustered look and then glanced up. Henrietta was crouched on a branch of a tall poplar tree, watching them with bemused interest. She flicked her tail. The leader of the pack kept a straight face while the others pretended to sniff something on the ground. *Definitely the trail of a field mouse here. An entire town of field mice. Wasn't that exactly what they had come here for?* After making two laps around the tree, the hungry pack set off on a new hunt.

Henrietta resumed her Zenlike pose and considered her options. She knew she should head home, but the night was still young. She winced as an owl fluttered by, screeching like a banshee. It was getting too crowded here. Henrietta dropped down from the tree and landed noiselessly on all four feet. There was a certain pressing matter to attend to, a matter requiring decorum. She slunk across the tracks and padded toward a mini-mansion at the edge of town. It had a lovely garden, clipped and pruned to perfection, with soft peat moss that was every cat's dream.

While Henrietta busied herself in a row of white lilies, someone opened the window in the bedroom upstairs and sighed deeply. The flow of carbon dioxide immediately attracted a swarm of whining mosquitoes, which were breeding in the rain barrel below.

“Nasty bloodsuckers.” There was the sound of poison hissing through the nozzle of a spray bottle held by a frail hand with a steady aim.

Miss Rea, the oldest living person in town, took another deep breath and shuffled across a plush carpet back to her bed. She was not supposed to be up and walking around, not on those prescription pills the doctors tried to dope her with. But a month ago there had been a massive storm that damaged power lines and affected many businesses – the local pharmacy among them. Without the medication holding back the pain, old memories came flooding back as well. Memories of a life so strange that even she, who had lived it, had difficulty accepting it. She ducked under a blanket and pulled it up to her chin, a shield against all the Things lurking in the dark.

Well, almost all of them. Except the tall one occupying the far corner of her bedroom. There was no shield against Him.

“I can see you, you know,” she quavered.

Was there the faintest rustle of a black robe pooling at bony feet? The slightest shift of weight under a scythe so sharp it could slice moonlight?

“For crying out loud, get on with it. I have nothing left to live for,” Miss Rea challenged.

Another sound came – this time from the hallway. Someone was coming up the stairs.

The darkness in the corner intensified, as if Death was considering a swift move, and then vanished as yellow light poured into the bedroom through an open door. A short, plump woman with an air of motherly fussiness walked in.

“Señora Carlton? Are you okay? I heard voices.”

“It’s Miss Rea, for the hundredth time. And, yes, Maria, everything is hunky-dory.”

The nurse, who was a native of Mexico, heaved a sigh. She loved her charge dearly, and she dreaded the day when Miss Rea might die. But it wasn’t going to be tonight, not on her watch. She looked around the room suspiciously, in case a robber was lurking somewhere, and turned on a floor lamp. There was no one else except for the old lady looking all innocent.

“Were you talking to yourself, Señora?” Maria hazarded a guess.

Miss Rea checked to see if Death was still hovering in the corner, but only a coat rack occupied the space now.

Phew, that was close.

“I was practising my lines for the opening ceremony. I’m afraid I’ll forget them,” she lied.

“Señora Carlton, you should be resting, not worrying. All you’ll have to do is smile and cut the ribbon. The Centennial will be so grand!”

Miss Rea snorted. Destiny was a rural community proud of its traditions and resistance to change, but “grand” was hardly the way to describe it. Maybe she should just stay home and disappoint everybody, including the gullible Maria. She rolled her eyes.

“When is the ceremony again? I am sure I have nothing to wear,” she scoffed, exasperated.

Maria smiled to herself and reached for a crisp, neatly folded newspaper. She always ironed it, just like she had seen on a TV program about Buckingham Palace. Then she settled into an armchair by the bed and opened *The Destiny Observer’s* special Centennial edition with a map for tourists from faraway places like the city of Saskatoon, whose residents rarely ventured into remote rural areas.

“There is going to be a pancake breakfast, live music, a speech by the mayor ...” she read from the Centennial lineup.

“Boring, boring ...”

“... King Foo,” Maria frowned and focused on the tiny letters that danced on the page.

Kung fu? Miss Rea felt a wave of mild interest. So old Lin Ying was still at it, kicking and flying through the air like a monkey. Unless, of course, it would be her grandchildren performing.

“Kung fu,” the nurse corrected herself and continued. “There will be festive floats and an antique car show, starting at the museum.”

“Ugh ... Same old beat-up farm trucks, just like last year. Just like every year. Why even bother going?”

“No, no,” Maria shook her head, “they are bringing a Cadillac.”

“Whose Cadillac? Not mine, I should hope. Over my dead body!”

Maria crossed herself twice and picked up the newspaper again.

“The Centennial Car Show will commence at 2 p.m. in front of the Heritage Museum. In the lead will be Mike Gonzovich with his ‘Bad’ Cadillac (see pg. 2), followed by a Model A Ford, also from his collection ...”

“Bad Cadillac? Give me that paper! And my reading glasses, please.”

The newspaper changed hands. Miss Rea scanned the text and, with her eyebrows raised and her mouth pursed, turned to page two. She muttered under her breath.

The “Bad” Cadillac by Nicky Reed, junior correspondent

On the fateful day of August 28, 1932, a black Cadillac Town Car descended upon the innocent town of Destiny. It belonged to none other than Patrick Kilpatrick, a.k.a. Scarface, the leader of the Irish Mob in Moose Jaw. While his lieutenant, Fat Louis, drove the car north, Scarface himself headed south in a similar car – an old rum-runner’s trick. But the police were already waiting at the U.S. border and arrested Scarface as he was trying to cross over. He did not resist, unlike Fat Louis, whose car was chased on a grid road before it collided with a tractor and rolled into a ditch. It seemed to be the end

of the gang, and it certainly was for the Cadillac. The car was forgotten for decades until a year ago, when car collector Mike Gonzovich bought the wreck at a police auction and restored it to its former glory. He will present it at the Centennial Car Show along with his Model A Ford. Watch out, Destinians, the "bad" Cadillac is back!

"Señora Carlton, are you all right?"

Miss Rea glared at the newspaper, willing it to burst into flames. Slowly, she removed her spectacles and closed her eyes. Images of a past carefully buried like a treasure chest flitted across her mind. So, the game was on again. Fancy that, after all these years. One last string to tie, one last enemy to smite. She had better prepare herself.

Tossing the newspaper aside, she commanded: "Maria! Fetch me my hat box. It's on the top shelf in my closet."

"Do you want to try on your new hat?"

"What? No, the other hat box. The leather one."

Maria nearly clicked her heels to obey. *Señora Carlton should have been a general*, she thought.

After a loud crash in the deep recesses of the closet, the nurse emerged with a round box made of cracked black leather. She deposited it in front of Miss Rea and craned her neck to see what kind of fashion monstrosity it would reveal.

The old lady popped the lid open. She removed the wads of paper and looked at Maria.

"What do you see?"

"A hat, a bottle of whisky and the Holy Bible in a wooden case."

"You are correct about the hat and the whisky," Miss Rea said dryly and put on the felt hat. It was small and black and oval-shaped, with a net that could be pulled down to obscure the face. She tilted it roguishly to one side, fingering the decorative flowers and a glittery star-shaped ornament nesting among them.

"Are those diamonds?" Maria breathed and reached out with her hand, only to have it slapped.

“What do you think?”

“I wouldn’t know, Señora. I’m just a poor nurse from Mexico, married to a poor Metis horse whisperer.”

“Love conquers all except poverty and toothache,” quipped Miss Rea sagely. Then she took a swig from the bottle and unclasped the wooden case with a carved cross.

“*Madre de dios,*” Maria exclaimed as she grasped the Virgin of Guadalupe medallion around her neck and stepped away from the bed hastily.

A tiny gun with an inlaid pearl handle nested where the holy book should have been. Maria crossed herself three times, her brown eyes full of questions.

“Señora, why do you need a gun? Who are you expecting?”

“The Pinkerton Detective Agency,” she said through her false teeth.

CHAPTER 2

I was sitting in a booth in Jade's Chinese Restaurant, filling my stomach with pancakes and my notebook with town gossip. Jade's was where everyone liked to go for breakfast, and you had to get there early to beat the crowd. In the farm country this meant 6 a.m. sharp. It was also the only time when "The Three Musketeers," as my mother referred to my father and his buddies, were able to get together with yours truly, Nicolas Reed, tagging along.

I glanced at my reflection in a tarnished mirror on the wall and wondered if I looked my age (13) and if I had changed much since the year before. In case you have not read about my first great adventure, here is a brief summary of it:

On a faraway foggy coast of Nova Scotia, on Talon Island, I came into the possession of an old trunk with a false bottom that concealed a treasure poem. I realized I had stumbled across an ancient mystery involving medieval soldier monks known as the Knights Templar. Their Order suffered a cruel fate at the hands of the greedy King of France, who wished to extract all of their secrets and confiscate their treasure. But by the time his seneschals arrived at the Templar commanderies, all of the valuables were gone. The Templar fleet was missing too, and I came to know what had happened to it. In the process of deciphering the clues laid out by the poem, I met the ghost of a Templar knight, Jean Baptiste de Saisi, who had been guarding the fabled treasure of his Order since 1307. Because he was about to fade, he was in need of a young apprentice. After a series of tests of character, I took the Templar oath of poverty, chastity and obedience and was knighted by Jean Baptiste. The brief but magical

ceremony was witnessed by my raven friends, Hugin and Munin, whose clan adopted me as an honorary member. Thus I became privy to not only Templar secrets but also the mysterious world of talking ravens in the service of the Norse god Odin. Needless to say, it was imperative that I stay behind in Nova Scotia to perform my duties as the new guardian of the Templar treasure, which must remain in its stone repository until mankind is ready to be apprised of its existence. My parents, whom I told about my knighting but who did not take me seriously, also fell in love with the island where we were staying and decided to buy a house there. Unfortunately, we couldn't afford one and my oath of poverty precluded me from using the Templar gold for this purpose. Broken-hearted, I ended up returning to my hometown of Destiny, Saskatchewan, leaving the ravens to hold down the fort until I returned. In the meantime, I prayed that a miracle would happen – such as winning the lottery – but my mother said “God helps those who help themselves,” and so I decided to get a part-time job to help my parents raise the money for our move.

An article I had written for *The Destiny Observer*, a local weekly newspaper, won me an internship with the editor-in-chief, and that's where I was spending most of my free time these days. I even had my own office – a dusty archive at the back of the building full of old paper editions that had to be scanned and uploaded onto the Internet. It was here that I had come across a 1932 blurb about a police shootout involving a gangster car from Moose Jaw – the same car whose wreck was about to be auctioned off. I alerted Mike Gonzovich, a local mechanic and car fanatic who specialized in hopeless cases such as this one. He bought it for \$1,000, towed it to his shop and worked on it every night, refusing to show it even to his best friends, who were now sitting in the booth with me, smacking and slurping.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the prettiest one of all?” asked Mike, musketeer number one, and nudged me in the ribs. Hastily, I dropped my gaze and took a bite of my pancake. It was sweet, starchy and sticky, just the way Lin Ying, the owner of Jade’s, thought us Canadians liked it.

“Leave him alone,” said my father, musketeer number two. “Nicky’s a good kid.”

“He works too much,” rumbled Tybalt D’Ark, musketeer number three. He looked thoughtful as he stroked his ZZ Top-like beard and took a measure of me through the slits of his blue eyes. Clearly, he didn’t believe work was the best way to spend one’s summer, but I was not about to tell him the real reason behind my fervour, which was to buy a house on Talon Island and resume my role as the guardian of the Templar treasure.

“I hope he doesn’t end up like Mike, who lives alone in his shop,” Tybalt pointed his fork at the hulk of a mechanic whom no one could imagine without his blue coveralls, starched white shirt and frayed yellow cap.

“What?” Mike protested. “Am I not the most eligible bachelor in Destiny now that I have a \$300,000 car?”

The buzz in the restaurant died down as if someone had pushed a mute button.

“Figuratively speaking,” Mike hurried to explain, waving at the patrons to get on with their meals and conversations.

“Is that old Cadillac really worth that much?” my father asked.

“Al Capone’s car sold for \$341,000,” Mike whispered, which meant he was shouting a little less loudly.

“But our Scarface was no Al Capone,” Tybalt pointed out. “Wasn’t he just a local rum-runner or smuggler?”

“Scarface was the biggest, baddest gangster on this side of the border,” Mike said stubbornly. “His armoured car was a legend – in fact, it had been a gift from Al Capone. Can you imagine what a collector would pay for it?”

“Oh no, are you going to sell it?” I asked, feeling disappointed. Everyone knew Mike Gonzovich had spent all his free time with the antique car. He was obsessed with it and had poured his soul into it. How could you put a price tag on that?

“Nah,” Mike shook his head and hooked his thumbs under the suspenders of his coveralls. “I could never sell it. That car is my family’s legacy.”

“How so?” Tybalt asked and fussed with a napkin to remove sticky maple syrup from his groomed beard.

“Most people don’t know this, but the reason why the Cadillac stopped in Destiny was because it had blown a tire. Fat Louis himself chose my grandfather’s shop to make the repairs. He also made Grandpa polish it 10 times until it shone like a mirror,” Mike related.

“That would make a great follow-up story for the *Observer*, wouldn’t it, Nicky?” my father turned to me, and I nodded enthusiastically. I flipped through the pages of my notebook until I found a grainy photo from the 1932 article I had cut out.

“Is this your grandpa in the picture?” I asked and turned it so that Mike could see. He glanced at the yellowed newspaper clipping showing a group of men, most of them in uniform, posing with the Cadillac and pointing at the bullet holes.

“Nope, I reckon that’s the Pinkerton agent.”

There was silence in our booth while we digested this new revelation. *Pinkerton ... Where had I heard that name before?* Strangely, I thought it had been in a bedtime story told by my father.

“But of course,” Dad slapped his thigh. “The Pinkerton Detective Agency. Nicky, do you remember I once told you about Jesse James, Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch? They were pursued by Pinkerton!”

“Are you talking about the Wild West?” Tybalt leaned forward, his beard sweeping the crumbs on the table. A biker and a bar owner, he was rumoured to have run with

the Hells Angels – rumours he never bothered to deny. When I asked my father if it was true, he said the farthest away Tybalt had been was Lloydminster on the Alberta border. My mother thought he was a harmless poser whose dreams were bigger than his courage to leave Destiny. And that was good enough for me.

“Why would Pinkerton come to Destiny, population 200?” Tybalt persisted.

“To catch Scarface, who sent Fat Louis in his stead?” I ventured. “But why? The RCMP were already on his tail.”

“Wait a minute,” Tybalt tugged on his beard and looked into the distance. “Was Scarface the one who died ranting about a million dollars he had hidden?”

“No, you must be thinking of Dutch Schultz and the Devil’s Face,” my dad corrected him and turned to me. “Dutch Schultz was another notorious gangster. Just before he died, he was in a delirium and talked nonsense about a treasure. All his words were duly recorded and analyzed, but no one has been able to decipher them.”

I felt a cold sensation running down my spine, which I had learned to recognize as a premonition.

“Grandpa said they were looking for something,” Mike nodded. “I don’t know what, but I saw the slashed tires and ripped upholstery inside the Cadillac. Someone had even pried the floorboards up and removed the armour plating from the doors, which was ridiculous. Butchers, the lot of them.”

“But did they look in the pit of Gonzovich Auto?” Tybalt joked and winced when Mike’s steel-toed boot stomped down on his foot.

“What, without my grandma knowing? We couldn’t get anything past that woman.”

Everyone laughed and returned to the remnants of their breakfast, chewing on food and information. Lin Ying stopped by our booth to refill our coffee cups and asked if anyone wanted a fortune cookie. Only Mike and Tybalt did.

“Don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone,” Mike’s all-knowing cookie said. He frowned and looked at the wizened Chinese lady, who just nodded merrily and shuffled off to the kitchen in her embroidered slippers.

“What does she mean by that?” he asked and passed the thin strip of paper to me. I tucked it in my notebook, where I kept track of anything of interest.

“Maybe she knows something you don’t, like where the million dollars is,” Tybalt grinned and broke open his cookie.

“What does yours say?” Mike asked.

“You’re firing on half of your cylinders,” Tybalt read, much to everyone’s amusement. “Daft old lady.”

“*Au contraire*, my French friend,” Mike smirked. “Always trust the wisdom of Lin Ying.”

“What do you think, Nicky?” my dad nudged me. “Was the Pinkerton agent looking for a stolen million dollars?”

It was certainly a tantalizing idea, and it would explain why Scarface had sent his right hand, Fat Louis, so far away from Moose Jaw. But how could a million dollars be overlooked? How could it possibly fit in the upholstery or inside a tire? No, it would have had to have been something much smaller and very special if a high-profile detective agency was working with the Canadian police to retrieve it. What could it have been?

“I don’t know, Dad,” I said truthfully, “but if it’s still in Destiny, I’m going to find it.”

CHAPTER 3

Plato the parrot was hanging upside down from his perch in the newspaper office, his bright-green tail feathers spread like a dancer's fan. I tried to keep a serious face, but it was difficult not to laugh at his antics. He had the agility of a monkey and the intelligence of Odin's ravens, of whom he reminded me often. It lessened the pain of being parted from my Nova Scotian bird friends, Hugin and Munin, as well as Ariel de la Mer, a native artist and shaman who helped me keep an eye on things on Talon Island. It was she who had sent Plato to me, along with a bracelet made from white and purple beads. Tied to the exotic bird's foot was a rolled-up message in runic writing that said *refugium*. Refuge. The runes were Hugin or Munin's doing, which only deepened the mystery. I tried calling Ariel, but she had gone on an art tour, and the ravens had no phone service. With a sigh, I accepted Plato into my flock of rescued animals and hoped that someday I would get his full story.

"Plato wants cashews," the parrot announced and vaulted himself back into an upright position. He danced to the end of the perch, craning his red-ringed neck to observe the mental labour taking place at the nearby desk.

"After I solve your puzzle, you green devil," said Marcia Malinowski, the publisher and editor-in-chief of *The Destiny Observer*. She was a family friend and technically my boss, although I mostly volunteered and received the occasional pay in cash under the table.

"What's breeze on six?" she twirled her pencil in the air and then bit its end.

"Zephyr?" I looked at Plato, who blinked. A year ago I would not have known that Zephyr was the Greek god

of the west wind. But spending time in Plato's learned company had taught me a few things. He had an aptitude for any type of puzzle – verbal or mathematical – and often astounded us with his eidetic memory, which seemed to record every thread of conversation in the room. He could also mimic sounds, including coyotes howling and cats meowing, which had led to a close brush with death at the paws of my five felines. Nobody messed with Henrietta, Toby, Sheba, Pauline and their big brother Samilian, especially not an upstart parrot.

At my mother's suggestion, I had moved Plato to my office, which was really just a dark corner in the crammed archive room at the back of the *Observer*. Understanding his precarious position, Plato worked hard to earn his keep by creating wicked crossword puzzles for each new edition. Before Marcia would put them in print, she insisted on solving them herself, which could take a while. I had been standing in front of her desk for a half an hour now, twiddling my thumbs and trying to keep a straight face, when Plato reached for our boss' ear.

"No biting," she warned him without even looking up. Plato froze in mid-bite and withdrew his sharp rosy beak, looking affronted. He turned his back to us and started fussing with his feathers. Soon he would start pulling them out, one by one, or threaten to chip at a floorboard behind Marcia's desk.

"What kind of parrot is he again?" Marcia asked offhandedly.

"He's an Alexandrine parakeet," I quipped. "*Psittacula eupatria*, named after Alexander the Great. He found them in Punjab, India, during a military campaign and sent them back to Greece as gifts for royals."

"Huh. You two have found each other. But, Nicky, you should get out more. Join the hockey team or the Ukrainian dance club. A boy with your brains should not spend the summer in a musty newspaper archive, working for free for a cranky old woman like me."

I blinked, unsure about how to respond to this torrent of unexpected praise and sharp-edged honesty.

“You are not old,” I managed to say. “And I like being here. This is the intelligence central of Destiny.”

She gave me a wry smile and smoothed her unruly auburn curls worthy of a Medusa. In the afternoon light oozing between the slits of the window blinds, her hair shone like *orichalcum*, a gold-like metal from Atlantis. Zephyr, Medusa, *orichalcum* ... That’s what happened to you when you spent time in the company of Plato. You started to think like a Greek philosopher. Perhaps Marcia was right – I should get out more. But there was nothing to do in Destiny during the summer months, which was why I had chosen to spend my time at the *Observer* in the first place.

There was a small plucking sound, and a green feather drifted to the floor.

“All right, all right, you little genius. You have earned your cashews,” Marcia gave up.

The top drawer of the editorial desk was opened and a plastic container with a red lid produced. Plato forgot all about self-mutilation and hopped down to feast on his favourite nuts. While he munched, Marcia stroked his back and he reciprocated by rubbing his emerald head against her moustache. A result of a hormonal imbalance, the bristles were usually kept under control by means of plucking, waxing and sometimes bleaching. But when a newspaper deadline approached, my boss’ sole focus was on work, leaving her facial hair to grow with the tenacity of a Roundup-resistant weed.

“Um, do you have anything else for me to do?” I averted my eyes from the moustache and turned to go back to my desk.

“No, you can take the rest of the day off. Go to the park, chase a ball ... Chase a girl,” she rolled her eyes and waved her hand dramatically. “Who will you take to the prom if you don’t meet any girls?”

“I’m only 13 and I’m home-schooled,” I argued, feeling my cheeks bloom with a crimson flush.

“Things will change, mark my words. You don’t plan to become a monk, do you?”

That was a good question. Just recently I had borrowed a book from the library about the Knights Templar, who were described as warrior monks living in celibacy. I had some questions about the subject and had approached my mother, who promptly sent me to my father. According to him, voluntary celibacy led to a lot of problems and he would not recommend it to anyone. It means you can’t have a girlfriend or a wife, ever. It means you’ll always be alone. Like Jean Baptiste de Saisi, whose lonely ghost I had encountered on Talon Island and to whose cause I had so hastily pledged myself. He must have been celibate in his lifetime and could explain all about it. I really needed to talk to him, only he had joined his spectral comrades aboard a ghost ship that could be anywhere in the Atlantic Ocean right now.

“Sorry, kiddo,” Marcia interrupted my gloomy thoughts and nudged Plato toward me. “I didn’t mean it. It’s just that life is short and we have to make every moment count.”

“Precisely. I was going to write a follow-up story on the ‘bad’ Cadillac,” I said and rummaged in my pocket for the old photograph I had shown Mike at breakfast.

“What am I looking at?” Marcia squinted at the fuzzy picture.

“Mike says it’s a Pinkerton agent!”

“Mike Gonzovich?” Upon hearing the mechanic’s name, she gave an involuntary jerk and dropped the photograph as if it had spontaneously combusted.

“Yes. His grandfather fixed the Cadillac for Fat Louis and then towed it to Prince Albert after the crash. He was questioned by the RCMP and a Pinkerton agent.”

“You keep saying that. What’s a Pinkerton agent?”

“Well, I haven’t done much research yet, but Pinkerton is a very old and famous private detective agency.”

“I’ve never heard of them.”

“They got hired to protect trains transporting money and to chase bandits.”

Marcia whistled and picked up the photograph again. She turned it over to check for any inscriptions on the reverse side, only to find none – just like I had. Then she handed it over to me along with Plato, who resembled a feathery sack of cashews.

“Run with it, Nicky. Don’t let me stop you. You have till next week to submit the first draft.”

I grinned like a happy Halloween pumpkin and put Plato on my shoulder. He had snatched the photograph, holding it between the needle-sharp tips of his beak as if it were a trump card.

“One more thing,” I stopped in a mid-pivot. “I’ll need to make a long-distance phone call.”

“Where?” Marcia asked suspiciously.

“Well, the Pinkerton Detective Agency is in the United States. They probably have a huge archive. I’m hoping they’ll send me a copy of this old case.”

“*One* call – and keep it under 15 minutes. You know we operate on a shoestring budget these days.”

I knew it very well. Newspapers were dying left and right, along with magazines and books, which were being replaced with unlimited and free content on the Internet. The *Observer* survived thanks to the unwavering support of our subscribers, most of whom were elderly citizens wishing to see themselves on the front page with a big birthday cake, surrounded by their grandchildren. Unfortunately, the next time they made the news was most often in an obituary, so we had no choice but to try to appeal to the younger generation, who wanted to be entertained instead of informed, according to Marcia. I believed I could write a piece that was both entertaining

and informative, and my article about the antique gangster car was just the beginning.

“One call it is then,” I promised and rushed to the archive room. Some of my excitement must have transferred to Plato, because he jumped down, landing on top of the telephone, ready to punch in the Pinkerton phone number I had written down in my notebook. I sat down on my old, creaky chair and picked up the receiver.

“Now,” I nodded to the parrot, who loved numbers even more than words. He got busy with the phone’s buttons, and when I heard the call going through, I motioned for him to be quiet. To my disappointment, my precious one call went into voice mail. I had no choice but to leave a detailed message, which got cut off prematurely. With any luck, someone would call me back. Maybe. Probably not. I sighed and turned my computer monitor on, ready for another futile search on the Internet for snippets of information on Pinkerton in Canada. I became so engrossed in my task that I didn’t hear when somebody walked in and coughed politely.

“Excuse me,” a voice said in clipped and strangely accented English.

“What?” I turned away from the computer screen and blinked.

There, in the doorway, stood a boy my age, eyeing me inquisitively, a gaze I returned with equal curiosity. He must have been transported here by a genie, so silent was his approach and so exotic his looks. A red turban, tightly swirled around his head. Prominent black eyebrows, raised slightly in an unspoken question. Dark, solemn eyes rimmed with black pencil. Kohl, I later found out. From the chin down, he was dressed more casually, in a starched shirt with short sleeves, a pair of cotton pants and open-toed sandals, sans socks. A steel bracelet dangled on his wrist.

“Excuse me,” he repeated. “I hope I am not interrupting. I am here about the ad.”

“The ad?” I said and winced as Plato climbed onto my shoulder, using his beak and talons as cleats.

The boy produced a neatly folded scrap of newspaper that I recognized as *The Destiny Observer’s* classified section.

“Indian tutor wanted. Inquire within,” he read out loud. “Do you want to learn Punjabi or Hindi?”

“But I didn’t place this ad,” I started to protest and then bit my tongue. “Plato!”

The bird whooped and cocked his head, all innocence. The Indian boy frowned, wondering if this was some kind of a joke, and then smiled, flashing a row of snow-white teeth.

“*Tubada nama ki hai?*” he asked and reached for the bird. “What is your name?”

“I am Nicky Reed, and this is Plato. He does things behind my back sometimes,” I explained and handed the green miscreant over.

“Ramesh Rai,” the boy introduced himself and let Plato hop onto his arm. But the parrot had other plans. He flapped his wings, and we ducked instinctively as he rose in the air, landing on top of Ramesh’s red turban.

“Oh my gosh. Plato!” I motioned for him to climb down at once, but he turned his back to me, fascinated by Ramesh’s headgear and pondering the best way to attack it. “I am so sorry. He can be very naughty.”

While Ramesh did his best to unhook the parrot’s claws from the folds of his turban, another voice rang out behind us, causing everybody to freeze.

“Hi, I am here about the ad.”

Ramesh and I spun around and stared as a slender beauty took a graceful step forward, into the melee of the archive room. She smiled shyly and tucked a strand of jet-black hair behind her ear. It was shaped like a delicate scallop shell washed up on the seashore by a gentle tide. I shook my head a little. What was I thinking? A perfunctory glance at Ramesh revealed that he, too, had discovered a

poet inside of him. I nudged him with my elbow to bring him back to his senses.

“Indian tutor wanted. Inquire within.” The mysterious girl looked from me to Ramesh and back. “I am Metis. I can teach you Michif.”

“How about Cree?” Plato tweeted and danced on Ramesh’s turban. I groaned inwardly, praying he would not have an accident.

“I can teach you both,” she said, not the least bit surprised by the fact that she was to tutor a talking bird.

“Here, do you want to hold him?” I asked and grabbed Plato as if he were an unruly chicken. He squawked and tried to bite my fingers, which already bore scars from our previous struggles.

“What’s your name?” Ramesh asked, stealing the question from my lips.

“Maya.” There was that shy smile again. “Maya Dumont.”

“Ramesh Rai.”

“Nicky Reed.”

Ramesh and I eyed each other. Something had sprouted between us – something we were both unsure of. A seed of friendship. A thorn of jealousy. Maya, too, had felt it and instinctively moved between us, to separate us. Deftly, she took Plato from my hands and whispered something in his ear in a language I did not understand. It got his attention and put him under some kind of spell, for he didn’t even blink when she blew in his face suddenly.

“There. He won’t cause you any more trouble,” she laughed and returned him to me as docile as a sleepy chick.

“What did you do to him?” Ramesh asked.

“It’s a trick my father taught me. He’s a horse whisperer,” Maya shrugged and shook her black mane a little, her eyes alight with mischief.

“Wait a minute, do you live on that horse ranch near St. Louis?” I had suddenly remembered reading about a Metis man who took in lame horses and nursed them back

to health. He also ran a therapeutic equestrian course, where people healed their sorrows by bonding with the animals.

“I do. My family owns the ranch. We’ll be bringing horses to the Centennial this weekend. You can interview us if you’d like.”

“Sure, that’s a great idea,” I rose to the task, completely forgetting about Pinkerton and the “bad” Cadillac.

“My family will be there too,” Ramesh asserted himself. “Our restaurant, Kismet, will have a food tent.”

“Kismet?” I asked. “Is it in that rundown building at the end of Main Street?”

“It was rundown when we bought it, certainly, but we have since renovated it – every little bit of it. I can give you an interview too.”

“Um, that’s business advertising. Marcia’s department.” I pointed at my boss, who was dozing in the front room, her broad chest rising and falling in regular intervals, occasionally interrupted by a loud snore.

“I’ll tell her when she wakes up,” I smiled sweetly. “Now, what about Plato’s Michif lessons? You can hold them here, in my office. I’ll make space.” I pushed a tall stack of newspapers out of the way.

“I have a better idea,” Ramesh stepped forward, taking charge. “How about we hold both Michif and Hindi lessons at Kismet? There’s music and food and,” he added victoriously, “we even have an Indian ring-necked parrot. Her name is Devi.”

Nothing could trump that – I had no choice but to agree, if a little uneasily, to Ramesh’s proposal. We would meet the following morning at Kismet, after our parents dropped us off on their way to work. That gave me plenty of time to research Pinkerton and think about ways to impress Maya Dumont.

CHAPTER 4

“Mom,” I asked as I fiddled with my dinner, “do you know Ramesh Rai?”

“I don’t think so, honey. Who is he?”

“An Indian boy, as in East Indian. He came to the newspaper office today.”

“Wait, didn’t an Indian family buy that old restaurant – the one that used to be a bank?” my dad said as he heaped more spaghetti onto his plate. Mom gave us a look of disapproval. Dad was eating too much, and I was not eating enough, in her opinion.

“Kismet, that’s what it’s called now. What a strange name for a conservative town like Destiny,” she mused. “So, how did you meet Ramesh?”

“It’s funny, actually. Plato advertised for an Indian tutor, which I didn’t know about because I don’t do classifieds, and Ramesh showed up.”

“To teach him Hindi?” my dad asked, and I nodded, spaghetti swaying across my chin. Dad chuckled, and Mom shot us another scolding look.

“But then someone else came about the same ad,” I said casually.

“Who?” Mom arched her eyebrows.

“A girl, Maya Dumont,” my voice jumped a little. This puberty thing was really annoying and downright embarrassing at times.

“Dumont ...” Mom rolled the name on her tongue like a piece of toffee. “The Dumonts are Metis from Batoche.”

“Of course, the Battle of Batoche!” my dad exclaimed, slapping the table with his right hand and making the dinnerware jump. “The North-West Rebellion, 1885, led by Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont. The Metis rebelled

against the government, and the whole thing ended in disaster. Did you know the soldiers that were sent to Batoche stole a bell from its church and it wasn't returned until 2013?"

We shook our heads in silence and waited for more. I was vaguely familiar with the Metis uprising, but I didn't realize Maya could be linked to its protagonists.

"There is a cemetery and a museum up in Batoche," Dad continued. "We should all go there. Why haven't we gone there?" Dad turned to Mom, who turned to me. I was usually the one who suggested field trips, but for the past year I had been so engrossed in the study of the Knights Templar that anything else seemed less important.

"Maybe we could stop by the Dumont ranch in St. Louis after we go to Batoche. Maya told me her father is a horse whisperer and that I could get an interview."

"I didn't know you were interested in horses," my mother said, sounding surprised, and winked at my father.

"Of course he isn't. He wants to take another look at the girl," Dad nudged her.

"My interest is purely professional. It's for the *Observer*," I blushed. "We need new and exciting content to attract a younger subscriber base."

"Sure, sure. I'll tell you what you can write about," Dad leaned toward me and lowered his voice. "The St. Louis Ghost Train."

"The what?"

"The St. Louis Ghost Train!" he made a scary face. "Haven't you heard about it, my son?"

"Uh-uh," I replied, stuffing more pasta into my mouth. "St. Louis has its own newspaper, and Marcia said we can't cover what they write about."

My mom rolled her eyes and took my hand in hers.

"Honey, Marcia Malinowski is my friend, so I shouldn't badmouth her, but she was not cut out to be a journalist. She took the business over from her father, something I advised her against. She had a promising career in curling

– did you know that? But instead of becoming a top athlete, she chose to do her filial duty and sacrificed her own happiness for a dying small-town newspaper. Don't make the same mistake.”

“I'm not,” I struggled to free my hand. “I like the *Observer*. It's better than being bored or getting into trouble. Besides, now that I have been putting the old editions on the Internet, we are getting a lot of hits from all over the world.”

“I think it was your article about that gangster car that did that,” Dad patted me on the shoulder, a look of pride on his face. “A lot of people are coming to see the Cadillac at the Centennial. Mike is already so nervous about all this exposure that he can't sleep for fear someone will steal the car out from under him.”

We laughed and finished our dinner in a merry mood. I offered to wash the dishes so that my mother could put her feet up and listen to my father talk about his almost-finished documentary, *The Faces of Destiny*, which was supposed to be screened after the Centennial. I also wanted to listen, but my mind was elsewhere and manual labour was the best cure for it. For a while I forgot the image of long black hair framing an oval face with doe-like eyes, but it returned to torment me when it was time to go to bed.

“Maya,” I said to the waxing moon, my nocturnal confidante visible from my window. I pulled a quilt over me and thought about everything that had happened that day. Before long, several furry shapes slunk into the bedroom and positioned themselves around me. I put my arm around the thick neck of Samilian, who purred like an idling motorcycle, and surrendered myself to sleep.

I dreamed about an island in the northwest Atlantic, surrounded by drifting fog. I caught a glimpse of the moon swimming on the surface of the ocean. No, not the moon ... I reached out to touch the reflection and saw the eyes of Jean Baptiste, whose face was one with the Luna.

He smiled, and the night echoed with his voice, but I could not make out the words. Where was he? Feeling desperate, I waded into the icy water, disturbing his image.

“*Attendez-moi!* Wait for me!” I cried at the moon overhead, which was empty of any faces.

CHAPTER 5

Every night – no matter how deep its darkness – gives way to dawn. At first, there was just a faint glow on the flat prairie horizon, tickling my eyelids like the whiskers of a cosmic cat. I was not ready to wake up yet, but the tickling was persistent, until I realized it was coming from Sheba, who was sitting on my pillow and sniffing at my face. If I didn't get up, she would start drooling on me.

“All right, all right ...” I pushed her away and sat up. Outside my window, which faced the east, a solar light show was under way.

“Come on, kitties, there's lots to do today. How about we start with your breakfast?” I hopped down to the floor and tiptoed into the hallway. The house was quiet – my parents were still asleep. I gestured for my pets to be silent, and they fell into a single file behind me, tails at half-mast.

“Where is Henrietta?” I looked around for the most adventurous of the cats and saw her sitting by the back door, ready to be let out.

“No breakfast for you? Okay then. But don't go on the road and don't leave presents in the neighbour's garden,” I warned her and opened the door.

My cats were generally well-behaved, but there was a new bylaw enforcement officer in town who, after cracking down on dandelion offenders, was now cracking down on stray dogs and cats. Henrietta was too chubby to be considered a stray, but she refused to wear a collar, and who knew what would happen if she ended up in the clutches of the bylaw enforcement officer. She would probably try to lick him to death.

I watched the remaining four cats eat their breakfast and groom themselves. Then I unleashed them into the

world and went to the kitchen to make 15 blueberry pancakes for me and my parents. Freshly squeezed orange juice was next. Should I go out in the garden and pick some strawberries? The grass was probably still wet with dew. While I deliberated, the warm scents from the kitchen had wafted under the door of my parents' bedroom and awakened them. My mother appeared first, slippers shuffling, her dark hair a haystack.

"Nicky, did you make all of this by yourself?" she asked, taking in the feast laid out on the dining table.

"Are those pancakes?" came a muffled voice from the master bedroom.

"Yes, and there won't be any left if you don't get up soon," Mom yelled and laughed. "He loves pancakes. Thank you, Nicky. This is wonderful."

"I just thought I'd get an early start," I replied, secretly pleased with myself.

"Why? What have you got to do today?" my father asked, joining us at the table.

"Take Plato to a language class at Kismet, check my messages at the newspaper office in case Pinkerton called me back and call them again if they haven't – if my boss will let me," I added. "I have till next week to solve the mystery of the 'bad' Cadillac."

"That's not a lot of time to find the treasure," Dad cautioned as he poured an ample amount of maple syrup over his stack of pancakes.

"Do you even know what the treasure is?" Mom asked me, passing Dad some blueberries.

"Nope," I shook my head and sliced through my stack of pancakes. "That's why I called Pinkerton and asked if they would fax me a copy of the case."

"I doubt they will give it to you – it's probably confidential or classified," my mother said. "But it doesn't hurt to try."

"Uh-huh," I nodded, my cheeks full of food.

“Well, I, too, will be busy today,” she continued. “I have a board meeting at the museum. They are going bonkers over this Centennial celebration. The mayor’s wife has come up with a last-minute idea of a fashion show. The problem is we have no runway and no time to hobble one together. It’s too bad, because she managed to borrow some rare costumes from Miss Rea’s own closet.”

“Which time period?” asked Dad, maple syrup dripping from the corners of his mouth. My mother reached over and dabbed it with a napkin.

“The Roaring Twenties. They would go perfectly with the car show and the gangster theme, but I’m afraid we’ll have to scrap that idea.”

“Why don’t you organizers wear the costumes? I can see you as a flapper,” he winked knowingly and winced when he received a kick under the table.

“What’s a flapper?” I asked, sensing something scandalous my parents would now have to explain.

“Flappers were women who challenged the societal status quo. They wore skimpy dresses, showed bare legs, cut their hair short and danced at wild parties,” my mother said. “They also smoked and drank alcohol, which you should never do.”

“I promise I won’t,” I assured her and tried to imagine my mother as a 1920s rebel flapper.

“But that’s a great idea,” she turned to my father. “With the costumes, I mean. I could even drive with Mike in his antique car.”

“You’ll be driving with me, baby,” Dad said and put his arm around her. “Mike can drive with Marcia as a flapper.”

“Sure, when pigs fly,” she chuckled and shook her head to indicate it was time to change the topic of conversation. “I am going to call the realtor this afternoon,” she announced and looked at us expectantly.

“Are we ready to put the house on the market?” Dad asked, and I squirmed in my seat.

“I think we should. There will be thousands of people coming to town this weekend. Maybe one of them will fall in love with our quaint little house on the prairie.”

“We’re not on the prairie – we’re in town,” my father corrected her.

“Of course we’re on the prairie. It’s right there, safely behind the train tracks. Nobody actually wants to live *on* the prairie, which tries to bite, sting and suck your blood every time you set foot outside.”

“But if we sell our house, where will we live?” I asked, suddenly feeling unsettled by the prospect of pulling up roots.

“Well,” my mother smiled, “if you still want to move to Nova Scotia, Ariel has found something for us.”

“We can’t afford anything big,” my father reminded her. “Even if we sell this house for a good price, it won’t be enough to buy a waterfront property. I have high hopes for my new documentary, but there is no guarantee it will win any prizes.”

“That’s why we are not going to buy a house,” she said mysteriously. “There’s an old church for sale in Seal Cove, on the cheaper end of Talon Island. It comes with five acres of intact forest. So, what do you think?”

A church?

“What kind of church?” Dad asked cautiously, although I did not see how this mattered. Living inside any church was a completely alien concept for me.

“A Baptist church, I think.”

“Baptist, you say? Nicky, didn’t the Templars revere John the Baptist?” Dad turned to me and took my stunned silence as a yes.

John the Baptist. *Jean Baptiste*. The memory of the previous night’s dream hit me with the force of a squall. Was that why he had appeared in my dreams? Had his spirit come to tell me something – to encourage us to grab this opportunity? It could not be a mere coincidence.

The entire universe must have conspired to place this old church in our path. We had to buy it. We had to!

“Nicky, who is Jean Baptiste?” asked my mother, who had been watching me intently.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Jean Baptiste. You were talking about him in your sleep last night. And you were sleepwalking again.”

“I used to sleepwalk as a child,” my father shrugged. “It’s completely normal when there is a full moon. Don’t worry, he’ll grow out of it.”

“Yes, dear, but you didn’t speak Latin or French when you were sleepwalking,” she argued and scrutinized me further.

Suddenly busy with the remaining slice of pancakes, I kept my eyes on my plate, not knowing what I should say. Ever since the night of the total lunar eclipse in Nova Scotia – when Jean Baptiste had transferred his knowledge and memories to me – strange things had been happening. I thought I had it under control, but apparently I didn’t.

“Mom, do you remember what I told you last summer about being knighted?” I started shyly, unsure of her reaction.

“I remember. It was right after you got hit on the head by that dreadful man, Chester Seaboyer.”

“He didn’t hit me – he threatened me with a knife.”

“But he locked you up in the lighthouse and you were all traumatized. No wonder your imagination went into overdrive.”

“It didn’t. I *was* knighted by a Templar ghost, and the ravens were my witnesses,” I dug my heels in.

“We believe you, son,” my dad said soothingly, as one might to a mental patient. “So what do you think about this Baptist church?”

I hung my head and wondered if I was from a different planet. Maybe it was for the best that my parents didn’t fully grasp the mission I was on. Once they did, I would

have to answer a lot of sensitive questions about the treasure of the Knights Templar and the origin of the ravens – something I was not quite ready for.

“I don’t think I’ll be any weirder if we live in a church,” I said finally.

“Yay!” my mother clapped her hands in delight. “Let’s see if we can do it then.”

“It’s going to need a lot of insulation. Those old churches were not built for comfort,” my father remarked. “It’s going to be a fixer-upper.”

While my parents discussed all the possible pitfalls of such an investment, I tried to get used to the novel idea of inhabiting a church. Did it have a bathroom and a kitchen? My mother was probably imagining how she could shape the place to her liking, while my father wondered how much it would cost. Amid their dreams and worries, I bobbed like a glass float in an ocean of uncertain exuberance. What would Hugin and Munin say? The cats would be excited to romp around Talon Island again. Plato would be moving with us, of course, unless I could find him a new home here in Destiny. I decided to keep this news under wraps for now, at least until after the language class at Kismet.

CHAPTER 6

“Kismet. Best of Punjabi cuisine. Fully licensed,” I read out loud and studied the ornamental sign in the shape of the Taj Mahal. Still dripping golden paint, it spoke of Kismet’s ambition to become the town’s top eatery. I felt sorry for the nearby Chinese restaurant, underfunded and shabby in comparison. How long would it be before Jade’s would feel the pinch? And I thought newspapers had it tough ...

“*Tubada nama ki hai?*” Plato chirped and turned around, causing his cage to rock from side to side.

The feathered linguist was eager to explore the wonders of Kismet, and so was I. If the storefront was that opulent, what did Ramesh’s room look like? I imagined he lived like a raja, surrounded by silver platters of juicy mangoes and sticky sweets, while his grandmother stood over him with a large fan of peacock feathers. No matter what I was about to see, I resolved to not be jealous of him. I reached for the gilded door, only to find it locked.

“Hello? Anybody home?” I rapped on the glass with my knuckles. Plato was busy biting the bars of his prison – any longer and he would figure out how to lift the latch.

On the other side, a dim figure approached. It was Ramesh, smiling from ear to ear and wearing a metal colander on the top of his head.

“*Namasté*, Nicky,” he said when he let us in. “Welcome to Kismet.”

“What are you wearing, the helm of invisibility?”

“Oh, it’s for my protection, in case Plato decides to attack my turban again.”

“*Tubada nama ki hai?*” an innocent voice piped up from inside the birdcage. Ramesh chuckled and led us through

the dining hall to the back of the restaurant. We padded softly over an oriental carpet, our movement causing pink and saffron curtains to sway at the foot of tall windows. There were booths separated with dark wooden panels and lotus-shaped lamps. The air was spiced with burning incense and vibrated with the tones of an instrument I didn't recognize.

"Sitar," Ramesh explained. "My grandmother listens to sitar music whenever she misses India, which is all the time. She thinks we should never have come here."

"Why?"

"Can one replant a baobab tree?"

"I don't know. I've never tried. Does she dislike Destiny?"

"Not so much dislikes as distrusts. She suspects the Chinese restaurant is trying to put us out of business."

"How?"

"Well, they lowered their already-low prices and ... er ..."

"And?"

Ramesh stopped and looked around to make sure we would not be overheard. Then he cupped his mouth and whispered into my ear. "Grandmother claims the Chinese are tunnelling under Kismet."

"Why would they do that?" I asked, my imagination firing up.

"I am not sure, but when she suffers from insomnia, she paces downstairs all night. She swears she has heard voices coming from underground."

"Um, maybe she should just ask the Chinese family about it. I am sure they have a perfectly logical explanation."

"Don't tell her I told you, please. She has been on edge all week. We are supposed to have our grand opening during the Centennial, plus the food tent and a float in the parade. Last night my mother said the baby was coming early and my father had to rush her to the hospital in Saskatoon."

“Congratulations! Is it going to be a boy or a girl?”

“Twins, one of each,” he said sheepishly. “But let’s go to the kitchen or Grandmother will think I am up to no good.”

We came to a beaded curtain behind which a woman was singing in the sweet but melancholic voice of one who is all alone in the world. The beads parted as we stepped through, and the song trailed off.

“Ah, welcome, welcome,” Ramesh’s grandmother said when she saw us. She was very tall and dark-skinned. She wore a canary-yellow sari, which she adjusted expertly, sending the cluster of bangles on her arms into a cacophony of metallic jingles. Just like Ramesh, she wore a turban, which gave her a look of officialdom. Her kohl-rimmed eyes narrowed into slits, as if she were taking aim, ready to shoot an arrow of judgment at us boys.

“*Tubada nama ki hai?*” Plato intoned for the third time that day.

“Ah!” she melted instantly and bent down to look the Alexandrine in his beady eyes. “I am Sarita Rai – you may call me Mrs. Rai. And you must be Plato and Nicky.”

“You’re right,” I beamed. “Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Rai, and thank you for having us. Plato can’t wait to meet your ring-necked parrot.”

“Devi is upstairs, in the closet. She hides among my ceremonial clothes,” Ramesh explained. “Here, would you like a samosa?”

A platter of fried cone-shaped pastries was stuck under my nose.

“He calls these samosas!” Mrs. Rai rolled her eyes dramatically. “What did I tell you, Ramesh Rai? You were supposed to make proper samosas, not Vimanas!”

Not knowing what a samosa or a Vimana was, I put Plato’s cage down and reached for what looked like dough filled with spicy potatoes. I wasn’t entirely sure I liked it, so I sampled another one.

“Always with his head in the clouds,” Mrs. Rai’s tirade continued. “Abnormal investigating – that is all he ever thinks about.”

Ramesh went red and took a deep breath. When he spoke, it was with great patience, as if he had explained it to his grandmother numerous times.

“*Paranormal*, not abnormal,” he enunciated. “And I think about other things too.”

“Good! Because you cannot have a career investigating fairy tales. With your talent, why not become a police inspector? Your cousin Sanjeet is a police chief. He gets benefits and a fat pension. If you had a stable career, I could finally sleep at night.”

“But I don’t want to chase criminals, Grandmother. I want to solve mysteries, like the legend of the flying Vimanas.”

“There he goes again,” Mrs. Rai wailed, “on and on about the Vimanas. Why is God punishing me thus?”

“But Grandma, can’t you see?” Ramesh wasn’t to be bullied easily. “The ancient gods want me to solve this puzzle. They were the ones flying inside the Vimanas. And they still do, only now we call them UFOs.”

“Ramesh Rai, stop blaspheming!” Mrs. Rai wagged her long index finger at him. Fascinated, Plato followed it to and fro as if it were a metronome.

“I just seek the truth,” Ramesh said quietly and lifted the colander to point at his red turban. “As every Sikh is required to do.”

“What’s a Sikh?” I asked, glad to change the topic of conversation before daggers were pulled.

“Sikhs are warriors dedicated to understanding the truth – the ultimate reality. That is what I have been taught, and that is what I must do,” Ramesh explained.

“Oy,” Mrs. Rai said, putting her hand to her forehead, “now I have a headache. If you want to seek the truth, then do so, but please choose a backup career like policing. Now go upstairs and take the fried Vimanas with you. I have

to make new samosas for the Centennial. From scratch, because of you!”

“They are delicious,” I assured her and licked the crumbs off my fingers. She smiled and patted me on the cheek. “Um, is Maya already here?” I asked Ramesh, who was trying to extract Plato from his cage.

“She has been delayed,” he answered. “She left a message – something about a poncho she lost at midnight. Come, I will show you my room.”

We backed out of the lioness’ den and went up a steep flight of carpeted stairs. There was a hallway leading to several rooms with doors closed. The one nearest the stairs had a poster of a hovering UFO and the words “I want to believe.” Undoubtedly, this was the portal to a UFO hunter’s room.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Ramesh said as he pushed the door open with his foot and let us in.

“Wow,” I said as I looked around the tiniest bedroom in the world. It was more like a closet with a view of the back alley and a chain-link fence. In order to broaden his horizons, Ramesh had decorated the walls with things that inspired the higher mind. There was a huge map of the night sky and pictures of crop circles. As I scanned the colourful display of Ramesh’s interests, my eyes came to rest on a drawing of what resembled a conical flying palace.

“Is that a Vimana?” I asked and tried to show it to Plato. But the sharp-beaked genius couldn’t care less about the ancient flying craft – his head swivelled this way and that in search of the female parrot.

“Yes,” Ramesh said softly. “That is a Vimana. Tell me, Nicky, why did gods need machines for travel?”

Why indeed? I didn’t know much about deities, except a few tidbits about the Norse god Odin. He was a wanderer and a shape-shifter who borrowed the minds of ravens and sometimes stray cats. He was an elemental, an ancient mind entangled with this world and endlessly

intrigued by it. Pure consciousness that did not need a machine to reach the far corners of the universe because it was already everywhere.

“They didn’t. Only man needs wings of steel,” I observed.

“Precisely. I believe an advanced civilization predated *Homo sapiens*. A civilization mankind worshipped and tried to emulate. One that taught us science and agriculture.”

“One that was destroyed by a cataclysm ... but not before securing its precious knowledge and technology and saving it for posterity,” I added, feeling the hot coals inside my soul glow.

“Atlantis,” shrieked Plato on Ramesh’s shoulder and attacked the alien colander.

Atlantis. And I, the keeper of its lost scrolls, which were transported to Nova Scotia by the Knights Templar, who wanted to save them from the medieval Inquisition.

“You know about Atlantis?” Ramesh asked and risked taking the colander off his head.

“Plato and I talk about it all the time,” I said. “You see, he is named after the Greek philosopher Plato, who wrote a treatise on the lost island of Atlantis.”

“Fascinating,” Ramesh said, struggling with the furious bird, who was sometimes set off by the most ordinary objects, especially headgear.

There was a muffled chirrup inside Ramesh’s closet, which caused Plato to freeze and snap his head in that direction.

“That’s Devi. She must know there’s another parrot in the room. You must excuse her poor linguistic skills,” Ramesh said and sidestepped to a slatted door in the wall, behind which a delicate green parrot with a black ring around her neck was hiding. Had I not known better, I would have thought she and Plato were identical, save for their size.

“*Tubada nama ki bai?*” Plato asked, but Devi just yawned and started preening her feathers.

“Maybe you can teach her to talk,” Ramesh said as he let Plato join his new friend. “I wish you luck, buddy.”

Momentarily free of claws and murderous beaks, Ramesh and I returned to studying the walls. There was a map of Saskatchewan with red pins on Nipawin, North Battleford, Maidstone and Cold Lake. I assumed they were places of reported UFO sightings, spread across the northern half of the province. Destiny was not among them, to my relief. I could handle ghosts, talking ravens and even the occasional pagan god, but aliens gave me the shivers.

“This one on Nipawin happened in 1933,” Ramesh said, pointing at the map. “It’s perhaps the most famous UFO sighting in Saskatchewan.”

“That’s amazing. I’ve never heard of it – and I’ve lived here most of my life. You should write about it for the *Observer*. Although you’d have to go easy on the local folks and not scare them with aliens. How about an article about the St. Louis Ghost Train instead? It’s paranormal but safe.”

“Who’s talking about the ghost train?” a slightly breathless voice sounded from behind us. “Sorry I’m late.” Maya squeezed into the room.

“Where’s your poncho?” I asked, noting that she was wearing a pink summer dress and flip-flops. Her toenails were painted ruby red.

“What poncho?” she frowned.

“Your message said you were delayed at midnight by a poncho,” said Ramesh, staring at her toes, which wiggled happily.

“Oh,” she laughed in a voice best described as silver chimes.

Silver chimes? Stay focused!

“Panchita, not poncho, and Midnight. They are horses. Midnight is an Arabian stallion – and a very unruly one at that. Panchita is a pony. My mother named her after the Mexican folk hero Pancho Villa. The horses escaped

from their corral – one of them had kicked a hole through the wood, although I don't know if it was Panchita or Midnight. Probably both of them working in tandem, as usual. I had to catch them and bring them back.”

“Did you?” I asked, imagining Maya riding on an Arabian stallion.

“Of course! I always do,” she said, tossing her hair.

“Um, welcome to my room,” Ramesh pulled her closer to him, which meant I had to sit down on his bed to make space.

“It's a little small, but I like what you've done with the walls,” she appraised the bedroom. “Are you into UFOs?”

“Ramesh is a paranormal investigator,” I explained, ignoring his frantic gestures for me to remain quiet. “I'm trying to get him interested in the St. Louis Ghost Train.”

“I've seen it,” Maya made a gesture with her hands to indicate an orb shape. “It's not a flying saucer but an earth light. It hovers over where the train tracks used to be – that's why they call it a ghost train.”

“Why do you think it follows the old railbed?” I wondered and wished I had brought my notebook. This was shaping up to be a perfect story for the Halloween edition of the *Observer*.

“I don't know,” Maya shrugged and ran her hands over her dress to straighten out non-existent creases. “If you'd like to investigate, my family can take you to it. But brace yourselves – it's a real spook light, and it will come if you call it.”

Ramesh and I exchanged a quick glance. Curious? Always. Afraid? Never. Especially not if we wanted to impress Maya. We nodded in unison.

“Maybe we could go after the Centennial,” she suggested. “And now, can we get the lesson started?”

“Okay,” came from inside Ramesh's closet, and it was not Plato's voice.

“Devi, you can talk!” Ramesh clapped his hands and went to the closet to extract the two parrots, who were already as thick as thieves.

Since the language class did not involve me, I found a comfortable spot on Ramesh’s bed and stuffed some pillows behind my back. My plan was to just listen and maybe pick up a few Indian words, but mostly I wanted to observe Maya’s animated face and fluid movements without being observed myself. Somewhere between Hindi greetings and Michif introductions, I started to doze off.

“My grandpa had an eagle once,” Maya was saying, and Plato, the class clown, started making eagle noises.

Eagles ...

Ahead of the wall of dark clouds, a young eagle was gliding on a path of fiery sunlight. His cry carried far and wide across the cove. Yngvi the raven had assured me the raptor would do our bidding, but I was on edge – would the arriving native people be sufficiently impressed? “Come on, you sod,” the raven muttered close to my ear. The eagle wheeled over our heads and descended, tearing the Beauseant from its pole with its talons and carrying it away. I felt a surge of pride at the sight of the black-and-white banner of the Knights Templar unfurling in the wind for the last time. “It will be the elder grandmothers who will decide your fate,” Yngvi hissed. “But first let the shaman look at you.” I studied the canoes in Seal Cove and met the clouded gaze of an old blind man with a white stripe in his black hair that gave him the likeness of a badger. Suddenly, a ripple passed across the shaman’s face, distorting it. When it settled, it was not a man that I saw – it was a woman. “Ariel?”

“Ariel?” a girl’s voice echoed over me. Something was tickling my face. It was Maya’s hair. She was watching me with bemused concern, and I sat up, dazed and confused by what had just happened.

“Where did you go?” asked Maya, sitting down next to me. “Your body was here, but your mind was elsewhere. Do you always talk in your sleep?”

“Uh, I must have dozed off. I have strange dreams at full moon.”

“In the middle of the day?” Maya scoffed, clearly not buying it. “So, who is this Ariel you dream about?” she repeated and watched as I touched the purple and white beads on my wrist. “Did she give you that bracelet?”

I was not ready for a barrage of questions, so I simply nodded, fiddling with the beaded circlet. Of course I knew who Ariel was – my artist friend from Nova Scotia. She was descended from the L’nuk who used to camp on Talon Island. They were the ones who had found the stranded Templar knight, Jean Baptiste de Saisi, and helped him survive. Ariel was the last one of her line. She had long black hair that turned white on her temples – just like the shaman from my vision. He had to have been her ancestor! And Yngvi ... Yngvi was the legendary forebear of Hugin and Munin. He made a pact with Jean Baptiste, who bound the raven’s Clan Rune to him. A sinking feeling came over me, of being sucked back into a time before my time, of remembering someone else’s life. I got off the bed hastily and rubbed my temples.

“Can I have a glass of water, please?” I said, turning my face away from Maya’s hawk eyes.

“How about mango juice?” Ramesh offered, pointing with his chin since his hands were occupied with two chattering parrots.

“Thank you.” I downed a glass of the sweet thick liquid gratefully. “That’s much better.”

“Ramesh, what do you call it when someone is in two places at once?” Maya asked, not ready to let go of my weird episode.

“Bilocation,” he said and handed one parrot to her. “My grandfather could bilocate. He used to scare the wits out of engine drivers who saw him standing on the train tracks when he was in fact taking a nap at home. Bilocation is not unusual in India, but it’s not as common as reincarnation.”

“What’s reincarnation?” I was curious. Ramesh was a walking encyclopedia of the paranormal. Of course, the best “people” to ask about my experience were the ravens, but Hugin and Munin were far away. Besides, they were quite paranormal themselves and therefore hardly objective.

“Reincarnation means rebirth. It happens when a soul is born again. Some people even remember their past lives. That happens a lot in India.”

I pondered this for a while, but I didn’t think I was suffering the effects of bilocation or reincarnation. I had stood on Talon Island while slumbering on Ramesh’s bed, but the timelines were off by over 700 years. Moreover, I knew I was not the reincarnation of Jean Baptiste. I had met his ghost and seen him walk away in search of his dead comrades. The only way I could explain my vision was that his memories, which he had transferred to me, were trying to integrate themselves with mine. It was a matter of a mental overlay, with a few bumps in the process. I relaxed considerably and wiped the salty sweat off my forehead.

“What are you smiling about?” Maya narrowed her eyes, suspecting there was a whole other conversation going on that she was not a part of.

“I was just remembering an old friend, that’s all.”

But was that really all? Was I simply remembering Jean Baptiste’s life on Talon Island in the 1300s, or was I gradually *becoming* him?

“As long as you don’t forget about your new friends,” Maya patted my hand, touching the bracelet. “Come, let’s go outside. You need some fresh air. I’ll walk you back to the *Observer*. I told my mother to pick me up there.”

“I’d come too,” said Ramesh mournfully, “but I have to stay here and help Grandma with the samosas. She has put the ones that look like Vimanas in a box for you.”

My day was getting better and better. Not only had I gained a glimpse into Jean Baptiste’s early years on the island but I had also been called a friend by Maya. And, on

top of everything, I was getting free Indian food, to which I was becoming addicted.

“Great. But I will need help with Plato if I am to carry five pounds of samosas.”

CHAPTER 7

Agent Pinkerton was seated comfortably in a booth with the best view of Main Street. He had been quite surprised to find an authentic Punjabi restaurant in a hole like Destiny and planned to take full advantage of it. His stingy employer would not like the expense, but his employer was not here in this mosquito-infested backwater of Canada to do the bloody job. Agent Pinkerton deserved some pampering for his willingness to leave the United States and venture into the wild north. His eyes ran up and down the menu, zooming in on the spicy section.

“What will you have, sir?” asked an old woman in a yellow sari and a turban.

Sikh, estimated age 60, five feet six inches, 140 pounds, knows how to handle herself, left-handed.

“Aloo Gobhi with coconut rice, mango juice and Singhara Halwa for dessert.”

“Ah, sir is a true connoisseur. Unfortunately, we cannot prepare Singhada Halwa as they were out of lotus flowers in the Co-op today. May I suggest a suitable alternative?” Mrs. Rai said smoothly and chastised herself for forgetting to take the lotus dessert off the menu. The nearest grocery store that carried lotus flowers was probably in Toronto.

“How about some Punjabi Achar?”

“Mango pickle? Excellent choice, sir. You must be from a big city, surely, to possess such intimate knowledge of Punjabi cuisine.”

“Uh, no, not at all,” he lied. “I’m just a simple plumber,” he racked his brain for a Saskatchewan town she would not have heard of, “from Nipawin!”

“Nipawin ... Nipawin,” the woman muttered and then smiled widely. “Isn’t it famous for flying saucers?”

Agent Pinkerton bit his tongue. Now what had he gotten himself into? He had never been to Nipawin and knew nothing of its extraterrestrial phenomena. Not wishing to dig himself into a deeper hole, he gave a light shrug and a noncommittal smile.

“My grandson Ramesh told me so. But then he sees UFOs everywhere. He even made samosas shaped like Vimanas. Would you like to try one?”

“Absolutely. We must be supportive of young talent.”

The woman took the menu from his hands and glided away in her bright sari. She reached the bottom of a staircase near the kitchen and tilted her head up to listen to the sounds upstairs. Then she bellowed in her deep voice: “*Ramesh! Thale a’o!*”

The agent leaned back and transferred his attention to the street outside. His white van was still there, parked across the road in front of a hair salon with a storefront resembling a saloon. An elderly lady with purple hair was walking by it, giving the vehicle a quizzical look. “Prairie Plumbing,” the decal said and even listed a fake phone number. Oh no ... now she was dialing it! Why hadn’t he used something different? Like “Prairie Rocket Fuel.” No matter, he was only going to be here for a day or so, he hoped. He took out his tablet and pulled up the case file.

“Nicolas Reed, a.k.a. Nicky Reed. Male, age 13.” How odd that “the asset” should be in the possession of a juvenile. Agent Pinkerton studied the photo of a red-headed boy with blue eyes and high cheekbones. Nicky Reed certainly did not look dangerous or callous; nor did he have a criminal record. Was he innocent, perhaps? A dummy used by his friends to hide the asset? Agent Pinkerton moved down the timeline and paused at the boy’s visit to Nova Scotia last year. Only one person he had met there classified as a troublemaker: Ariel de la Mer, a native artist and now an activist in the anti-fracking movement. Then there were the Sons of Odin. He had been unable to crack down on them or even profile them,

so elusive was their Internet presence and so strange their code language full of Nordic allusions.

Someone was coming down the stairs, and Agent Pinkerton slumped, pressing himself into the corner of his booth like a spider feeling its web vibrate. A group of loud teenagers passed by him: a girl flanked by two boys. They carried a cage with two green parrots, one of whom spooked and flapped his wings, sending the other parrot into a frenzy. "Okay, okay, okay," it shrieked. At the sound of the commotion, the old Sikh woman came out of the kitchen and exchanged a rapid stream of Punjabi with the boy in the turban. Her grandson, no doubt. The other boy stood uncertainly while the Indians bickered and agreed to their suggestion to leave his parrot behind.

Nicky Reed. Got you.

Agent Pinkerton averted his gaze and pretended to be fascinated by a Harley-Davidson motorcycle outside. He could feel someone's eyes on him and suppressed a smirk. He had found the boy. Small for his age, all elbows and knees, open to authoritative pressure and emotional manipulation. Taking the asset from Nicky Reed was going to be as easy as taking candy from a baby.

CHAPTER 8

“What was that about?” Maya asked, laughing, as we left Kismet and walked down the street together. I was carrying the box of samosas that Mrs. Rai had given me. The cage had to stay behind, along with Plato, who had refused to leave the restaurant.

“I think Plato really likes Devi. He probably doesn’t want to be away from her,” I said thoughtfully. Something wasn’t quite right, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Aw, that’s so sweet. Plato is amazing! He really has an ear for languages – I have never seen anyone learn Michif so fast. And Hindi too. He’s as sharp as a tack. Where did you get him?”

“Um, he was a gift from friends,” I explained.

“From Nova Scotia?” Maya shot me a speculative look from underneath those long lashes of hers.

“You’re quite sharp yourself,” I praised her in the hope that the flattery would stop the line of questioning. She responded by hooking her arm around mine.

“What are you doing?” I asked, suddenly feeling nervous. I could not dislodge her arm without dropping the samosa box.

“I’m just walking with you.”

“But what if someone sees us?” I asked, noting a couple of elderly citizens gossiping on the street corner. They went quiet as we passed them by and then resumed their conversation in hushed tones.

“Are you afraid of being seen with me?” she asked, pulling away from me a bit.

“Of course not,” I assured her. “I’m just not used to ...”

“Walking with girls? That’s okay. This is the first time I’ve walked with a boy. But don’t let it go to your head. We’re just friends, right?”

“Right.”

“Hm,” she sighed and turned her head up to catch more sunlight, which gave her black hair a blue sheen, something I had observed on the ravens’ feathers.

“What are you smiling at?” she asked and looked away, dropping her eyes demurely.

“You remind me of someone. Your hair – it’s the same colour as ... Never mind.”

“The same colour as Ariel’s?” There was that probing tone again. When I didn’t answer, she retracted. “I’m sorry. Uncle Hernando says my tongue is so sharp I might cut myself.”

“Uncle Hernando? That’s not a Metis name, is it?” I asked, bypassing the minefield of my secret past.

“No, he’s from Mexico – just like my mother. He’s a priest, and he used to hear confessions from gang members. Los Lobos, one of the drug cartels, decided he knew too much and was going to kill him. He and my mother escaped to the United States on top of a freight train. They lived in Los Angeles for a while, but when Los Lobos found out he was there, it threatened him again. My uncle asked the Church to transfer him farther north, and he ended up in Canada.”

“Wow ... I had no idea. That’s quite the story. Do you think he would agree to be interviewed for the newspaper?”

“Probably not. Now that the paper is on the Internet, the gang would know exactly where to find him.”

Maya was right – our little newspaper was now being read around the globe, which had advantages as well as risks. I didn’t want to expose Father Hernando to danger or to attract a murderous gang to a peaceful town like Destiny. He was not the first – or the last – refugee to find a new home in Canada.

“You can talk to him, though,” Maya added casually. “What he hears in the confessional stays in the confessional. He can’t repeat it to anyone.”

“Why would I need to confess to your uncle?” I bristled. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“But I can tell you have a secret and that it bothers you. I just thought sharing it with someone like my uncle would take some of the pressure off. I didn’t mean any offence.”

“None taken.”

Priests. Confessions in the dark, extracted with fire and iron and pain. I knew all about the medieval inquisitors who had tortured the Knights Templar after the arrests in 1307 and forced them to confess to things they had never done. How could I confide in a Catholic priest and reveal that I knew the fate of the Templar fleet and the location of the treasure? The Church had a long memory, I was certain, and it would be most unwise to trigger it. No, the only person I could confide in was another Templar.

“Nicky, you’re burning up,” Maya said and touched my forehead. “We need to get you away from the sun.”

“We’re almost at the newspaper office. I think I’ll stay inside for a while,” I said hastily.

“So what are you going to write about next?” she asked, forgetting all about confessions.

“Actually, I’m still pursuing the Cadillac. You know ... the antique gangster car?” I asked and continued when she nodded. “It turns out the Pinkerton Detective Agency followed it all the way to Destiny, looking for something valuable.”

“Pinkerton?” Maya frowned and came to a stop. “Miss Rea is afraid of them!”

“Really?” I paused too and shifted the samosa box in my arms. “Why? How do you even know her?”

“Well, that’s easy. My mother is her private nurse. Miss Rea read your article and started acting strange. She said Pinkerton was coming.”

I stood like a pillar of salt, with the occasional bright flash of synapses connecting in my brain. Miss Rea, who was almost as old as the town of Destiny, would have been a young woman in the 1930s. Had she witnessed the crash of the Cadillac first-hand? Had she been questioned by Pinkerton about it? But what had made her afraid of the agency, and, more importantly, what had convinced her of its imminent return? There was that feeling again – that chill at the bottom of my spine ... that prickling in my thumbs. Something was in the air, something was coming, and I was going to meet it head-on.

“Do you think Miss Rea was involved somehow?” I asked.

“Miss Rea? She’s a saint! A cranky one ... but a saint. Just ask my mother.”

“If I could just interview her, ask her a few questions about her youth ...”

“Okay, okay. I will get you an interview. Leave it to me.”

“Thank you. I’ll be waiting by the phone. You can call me at home too, at any hour.”

“What will your parents think of that?” Maya giggled.

“I’ve already told them my interest in you is purely professional.”

“I see,” she said, a little disappointed. “Professional it is then.”

We resumed walking, and before we knew it, we were in front of the *Observer*. I asked Maya if she wanted to come in, but she refused, seeing her mother’s car rounding the corner. I had to back into the office, loaded with the samosas and all, which allowed me to look at Maya one more time. I felt I was being roped in, and that I had to resist it, but my will equalled that of a moth drawn to a flame. The sooner we moved to Nova Scotia, the better.

“Where have you been?” Marcia cried when she saw me. “And what have you brought me?”

“Samosas, compliments of Kismet, the new Indian restaurant.”

“Ooh, free food! Yum. I might give Kismet a discount on advertising. Where’s Plato?”

“At Kismet and in love with an Indian ring-necked parrot,” I explained and let Marcia free me of the box, which had started to ooze grease.

“Well now, good for him. He’s been depressed lately. By the way, you have a message.”

“I do? From Pinkerton?” I stood at attention.

“Um, no. Hold on. From Tex Van Rifle,” Marcia squinted at her microscopic handwriting. “He is a car collector from Texas. Tex from Texas – that’s funny.”

“Are you sure he wanted to talk to me?” I said, deflating considerably. Why was I being ignored by Pinkerton?

“That’s what he said, kiddo. It’s about the Cadillac. Do you want to call him or not?”

“Yes, of course. May I?”

“If it’s for the follow-up story, you may. But keep it short and to the point.”

“I know. Under 15 minutes.”

I grabbed the slip of paper with Tex’s phone number and retreated to the archive room, leaving Marcia alone with the samosas. I hoped there would be enough left to take home to my parents at the end of the day. Just as I was reaching for my old beat-up telephone, it rang loudly, making me jump. *Please, let it be Pinkerton!* But it was not to be.

“Howdy. Tex Von Reifen here. Are you the boy who wrote about that Cadillac Town Car?” a man’s voice barked.

“Yes,” I replied, trying to keep frustration out of my voice.

“Well, I need a little help here. I’m thinking about flying up there to buy it.”

“Sir, I don’t think it’s for sale.”

“C’mon. Everything and everybody is for sale. You just gotta name the right price. That mechanic ... do you have his number? You see, I can’t find it anywhere.”

“Mike Gonzovich? He does not advertise his phone number,” I said cautiously.

“That’s the guy, yeah. How does he expect any business if no one can call him?”

“He doesn’t. People just bring their cars to him. His reputation is the best kind of advertising.”

“Good Lord, do I have to beg for his number?” Tex Von Reifen pressed on, annoyed and amused at the same time. “He’s playing hard to get, isn’t he? Do me a favour then and tell him to hang on to the Cadillac until I come. Comprendre?”

“I can do that. But why are you so interested in Mike’s car?” I asked and reached for my pen and notebook.

“Are you going to quote me?”

“Don’t you want your name in the paper?”

“You’ve got some gall, kid. Tell you what – once I have the keys to the Cadillac, you can ask me all the questions you want. Until then, let’s keep my inquest quiet. I don’t want some Alberta oil-patch baron to drive up the price.”

“Aha. Just one more question. Are you associated with Pinkerton?” I shot from my hip.

There was a pregnant pause on the line, and I thought I heard a muffled curse masked by hasty coughing.

“Just a dry throat, sorry,” Tex excused himself. “Sit tight and don’t cause any trouble. I’ll be in Destiny for the Centennial. Are there any hotels up there, or do y’all sleep in igloos?”

“No, in the summer we sleep outside with our sled dogs. Too hot inside an igloo. But for American tourists we have a hotel. The Destiny Hotel – famous for its atmosphere and hospitality.”

“What are the room rates?”

“I don’t know. But you should rent a room quickly – there will be lots of people in town this weekend.”

“I’ll get my assistant on it. See you on Saturday then. I’m coming to the antique car show. Look for a Stetson® hat.”

The phone went silent, but I barely noticed, so furiously was I writing down every word of our conversation. Now I had a third name on my list of people connected to the old Cadillac. Pinkerton, whose agent had been on its tail in the 1930s. Miss Rea, a very old lady who feared the detective agency’s return. And, finally, Tex Von Reifen, a mysterious Texan with deep pockets and an agenda. I wished Plato had been with me so I could run this new information by him. I would be picking him up the next morning, before the restaurant opened. Hopefully he would be calm by then and ready to return home.

I decided to leave another message for Pinkerton and then spent some time on the Internet researching Tex Von Reifen. Not surprisingly, he was a former head of an oil-field company and was now investing in wind farms in northern Texas. He was single, with no family, and his only passion seemed to revolve around antique cars. Nothing out of the ordinary, really. Nothing ... except for that silence when I dropped the name “Pinkerton.”

I still didn’t know what was so special about the Cadillac or its owner, mobster Patrick Kilpatrick. And why had Pinkerton followed his car north? The RCMP must have informed them that Scarface was headed south. The only explanation was that Pinkerton was not interested in the man but his car. Or, rather, the car’s cargo, which seemed to have disappeared in Destiny. Scarface must have had a safe house here ... or an associate.

Miss Rea. Had she been his cohort? Her reaction to my article suggested she was no friend of Pinkerton. But did it prove she had been a friend of old Scarface? No, it was only my conjecture. I needed more information. Should I even pursue it? Tex had mentioned trouble. Whatever the trouble was, it all centred around the Cadillac that was lying in wait in Mike’s garage. I had to warn him.

“Can I make a local call?” I yelled at Marcia.

“Uh-huh,” she replied, her voice muffled by a samosa. I punched in the number for Gonzovich Auto and waited.

“Mike,” I said when he picked up after only 21 rings, “there’s a man coming all the way from Texas to buy your Cadillac.”

“Oh yeah? Well, it’s not for sale.”

“Maybe you can let him drive it for a couple hundred bucks,” I joked.

“I’ll put his name on the waiting list then. The mayor was here five minutes ago, trying to tell me I should let *him* drive the Cadillac in the parade.”

“What did you tell him?”

“What do you think? I told him to go to hell.”

“Um, Mike, remember that the phone lines cross sometimes and the neighbours might actually hear you.”

“Good! They should know the mayor is trying to destroy me. He can’t stand the thought that a Gonzovich has picked himself up from the dust. But I will show him. It’s prom night and the canal all over again!”

Utterly confused by Mike’s rant, I jotted everything down and wished him a good day. I wondered what would happen when Tex Von Reifen showed his face at the Centennial. A fist fight with Mike or the mayor? Definitely some shoving over who would be driving the Cadillac. We should get a TV crew to record the event. *Nicolas Reed, reporting live from the scene of the biggest street fight Destiny has ever seen ...*

“Nicky!” cried Marcia from the front office. “Stop daydreaming and help me with this tourist guide. We don’t want people getting lost in Destiny on Saturday.”

No one could possibly get lost in Destiny, which was laid out on a flat piece of land and only had a few streets. There was the highway on the west side, the railroad on the south side, a lake to the east and fields of canola everywhere else. The most prominent landmark, a bright-orange grain elevator, could be seen from miles

around. I could argue all of the above, but I bit my tongue.
Sometimes it's wiser to stay silent.

CHAPTER 9

Maya must have worked her magic because later that afternoon I got a call from her mother, who was Miss Rea's nurse. My father and I were to come to the Carlton house for tea at 4 p.m. We were also supposed to bring a camera, which was a good sign. We wanted to impress the old lady with our punctuality and appearance, so we arrived a half an hour early, wearing our best clothes, our teeth brushed and hair combed. Just as we were pulling into the driveway, we noticed that someone else was already there – a minibus with the logo of the local church.

“Uh-oh,” Dad said. “Church ladies. I didn't know they were coming too.”

I watched as a group of determined women laden with casseroles and trays covered with napkins spilled out of the minibus and marched to the front door. There was no way I would be able to speak to Miss Rea alone, not with 20 pairs of keen eyes on us. I could feel my hopes wither in the scorching sun, but it was too late to turn back. Maria the nurse appeared in the doorway and was waving at us to come in.

“Dad, there are too many people.”

“Don't worry, son,” he assured me and grabbed his video camera. “I will find a way to distract them.”

We entered the grand house, which seemed bigger on the inside than it looked from the outside. The optical illusion was the result of a high ceiling and several skylights that shed soft light on a row of life-size portraits of serious men in massive frames hanging on the walls.

“Those must be Miss Rea's dead husbands,” my father murmured. “She is the most married woman in Destiny.”

“Is that Doc Carlton?” I asked, pointing at one of the men, who had an old-fashioned stethoscope around his neck.

“Yes, her first husband and a legendary physician in these parts. He was born on a farm near Destiny. The two of them met overseas during World War II. Miss Rea worked as a field nurse in France. They fell in love exchanging glances over an operating table. They got married during a ceasefire and came here after 1945. He was the love of her life, and none of her later husbands quite filled his shoes – or so your mother thinks.”

I stood under the portrait of Doc Carlton, returning his self-absorbed frown. So Miss Rea had been a war bride, which sounded very romantic, but that didn’t explain how she knew about events that had taken place in the 1930s. Had Doc Carlton told her about the Cadillac and Pinkerton? It was a possibility.

“Dad, you said Miss Rea was married several times. How come her last name is still Carlton?”

“Ah, now that is a story by itself. Your mother says that Miss Rea didn’t want to dilute the Carlton brand so she made every new husband change his last name. She’s a singular woman, Miss Rea is. I can’t wait to get her in front of my camera.”

Maria appeared around the corner and wrung her hands nervously. She looked at my father shyly and said apologetically: “Señor Reed, I am afraid Señora Carlton is taking a nap. Would you and Nicky follow me and have some cake and tea? This way, please.”

We were ushered into the living room where every chair, chaise lounge and settee was occupied by a twittering woman either sipping tea or nibbling on a slice of cake. The hive-like noise subsided a little when we walked in, only to pick up and intensify when the door closed behind us. We were trapped.

I hid behind my father, who introduced himself to the ladies and asked them how they would like to be in

the Centennial fashion show. They surrounded him in an instant and pushed me off to the side, which suited me just fine. Unattended, I walked around the room full of antiques and souvenirs from around the world. The biggest ticket item had to be the tall grandfather clock made of porcelain. I put my ear to it and listened to the tick of the clockwork, which measured the last hours of an old lady's life.

"It's from Venice."

I let go of the clock instantly, afraid I had left greasy fingerprints on its pristine surface. Who was speaking to me? I couldn't tell, but it was someone small, hidden under a crocheted blanket on a pink recliner. I cast a glance at my father, who winked at me and turned to the women, asking them to step outside, where they could practise their catwalk steps. With the unity of a school of tropical fish, they poured through a French door leading to the garden.

"Have the biddies gone?" The blanket stirred, and a face like a year-old crabapple appeared. A pair of rheumatic eyes swivelled in their sockets, performing a quick reconnaissance of the room.

"Yes," I said and stepped closer to the mistress of the house, Miss Rea. "Why were you hiding from them?"

"Not so much hiding as avoiding. What did they bring me this time?" she asked, sniffing the air like a cat.

"Casseroles and cakes. Tons of them."

"Ha! They think I'm ready to kick the bucket, and they want to make sure I don't leave the church or the town out of my will. There is a lot of money at stake, you see."

"Maybe you should leave it all to Ducks Unlimited," I suggested and looked around me. The place was crammed with gilded furniture, vases and portraits, and there was even an Easter egg studded with diamonds.

"Maybe I will," Miss Rea snorted. "That's a Fabergé egg made by my father, a clever forger from Dublin. It

is the only fake in this room, except for my teeth, but it's priceless. Do you know why?"

"Um, because your father died and it's the only thing he left to you?" I guessed.

"You're quite the whippersnapper, aren't you? He did die, eventually, but first he went to prison. I was just 16 years old at the time, with no one else to turn to. But he always took care of me – even from behind bars. He begged his worst enemy to give me a job so that I would not starve. Can you guess what my first job was?"

"Hm. Selling flowers? Busing tables? A nanny?" I had no idea what kind of jobs were available to underage girls a hundred years ago.

"A typist. Dreadfully boring," Miss Rea gave a wry smile.

"Is that why you became a war nurse, to escape from the oppression of poverty and boredom in Ireland?" I asked, remembering what my father had said in the hallway.

Miss Rea laughed and rummaged in her recliner, producing a bag of mints. She popped a couple of pieces into her dry mouth, where they rattled against her dentures like dice in a cup. The air around us thickened, smelling of menthol and rising suspicion.

"Who do you work for, son?" she asked softly, never taking her eyes off me.

"*The Destiny Observer*," I said with pride and reached into my pocket for a press ID. I handed it to her and she took it, turning it over and running her knobbly index finger along the edge.

"Laminated. Nice. Did you make it yourself?"

"No," I tried to hide my acute embarrassment. A forger's daughter would know how to spot a lie. "My mother made it for me. She thought it would make me look professional."

“It would, if she hadn’t put little hearts in the corners.” She sucked on her candy with the power of a bathtub plunger and gave the ID back.

“Do you have any tattoos?” She leaned forward and grabbed my hands, turning them palms up and down again.

“No,” I struggled in her vice-like grip. *How could an old lady be so strong?* “My father said I couldn’t get a tattoo until I was 18 and had a decent job.”

“Good lad. Are you a knight?” she asked yet another strange question and released me. I staggered backward and sat down on the nearest chair. Why was she talking about knights? Nobody knew I had been knighted, save for Hugin and Munin and my parents, who thought I was being cute – or mental.

“I asked if you are a knight. Answer me.”

“Which chivalric order?” I evaded the protruding rock in the rapids of truth.

“The Order of St. Patrick.”

This got me really puzzled. I had never heard of such an order; nor did I understand how it fit into the picture.

“Is it Irish?” I asked, figuring it had to be since she had talked of Dublin earlier.

“Alas, no. It’s British, although it was meant for Ireland. I believe the last knight was created in 1921.”

“Then I couldn’t be one, could I?”

“I had to make sure,” Miss Rea made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “Now, let’s proceed to your curious interest in the old Whiskey Six.”

“Excuse me, are you talking code? What’s a Whiskey Six?” I asked, slightly exasperated, and wished I had brought Plato the code breaker with me.

“The Cadillac,” Miss Rea took pity on me. “Although, to be accurate, the McLaughlin Six Special was the one called Whiskey Six. It had six cylinders, 50 horsepower ... A perfect car to smuggle liquor in.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked, eyeing her with growing respect.

“Oh, my husbands must have told me. This little town used to be full of moonshiners – did you know that? They even dug a tunnel under the train tracks, all the way to the grain elevator, so they could load crates without being noticed. Do you know who Diefenbaker was?”

“Of course. He was the 13th prime minister of Canada.”

“Well, before he got into politics, he was a lawyer in these parts. He defended our mayor’s grandfather in a moonshine case!” she laughed.

I stared with my mouth open and quickly pulled my notebook out. I proceeded to record Miss Rea’s revelations spuriously. There was a rap on the French door, behind which the mayor’s wife was peering inside. We didn’t have much time.

“I just have one quick question,” I said and bit the end of my pencil.

“Shoot,” Miss Rea chuckled, clearly in the mood to indulge me further.

“You said that the Cadillac was a Whiskey Six. But I don’t believe Scarface executed his ruse just to save a case of liquor from the police. What was so important that he risked his life to save it?”

The smile vanished, and the pupils widened for a heartbeat. Miss Rea looked away, her jaw grinding the mint in her mouth to powder.

“You are not asking the right question,” she said haughtily.

“What ...?” I began and then rephrased the question. “*Who* was so important to Scarface?”

“Bravo. You have gone from *what* to *who*. And how much,” Miss Rea muttered under her breath, looking at the church ladies, who were pouring into the living room. I wished I could quiz the old lady further, because she was such a well of information, but there was no chance of that

now. The women descended upon Miss Rea, who obliged them by sampling everyone's cake and casserole. She told my father she was too tired for a video recording and to come back another day.

I had a distinct feeling she wanted to tell me more about the Cadillac. Who? – not what? – was the right question. And how much? But what did that mean? I was in desperate need of Plato's counsel, but the feathered thinker was having a sleepover in Kismet. It was already five o'clock, and parrots go to bed early. It would have to wait till morning.

CHAPTER 10

Plato was snoozing inside Kismet, with his head under his wing, when strange noises woke him up. He listened attentively with his sharp ears, which were made to detect stealthy cats, constricting snakes, swooping raptors and crazy monkeys. In his case, they were also programmed for human languages, regional dialects of Mexico being his forte. But the sound that had awakened him was of a mechanical nature – there was thumping and scraping underground as well as faint scratching on the other side of the restaurant door.

Should he investigate or hide? Were he and Devi in danger? The little Indian parrot was fast asleep, blissfully unaware of the possible threat. Plato felt a surge of adrenalin and male protectiveness. He would sidle noiselessly to the end of the perch and climb out of the open cage onto a wooden partition, from whence he would take off and fly to the chandelier. It offered the best vantage point in the dining room, which was now mostly dark. *Should he leave Devi alone in the cage?* He nudged her, but she just paused in her snoring and smacked her tongue. The least he could do was close the door on the cage so that neither a python nor a hawk could get to her.

Plato had barely grabbed a purchase on the rim of the chandelier when a section of the floor down below lifted, with a little bit of scraping. It was a trap door! That meant there was a subterranean tunnel, just like Mrs. Rai had suspected all along. Too bad she had taken a sleeping pill before retiring for the night – she could have been poised over the hole with her kirpan, a Sikh dagger, waiting to strike at the conical bamboo hat that was rising from the tunnel, followed by a hand holding an ancient carbide

lamp. Plato realized this was no demon from Hades but the old Chinese lady. He was about to trill *Ni hao* in his best Mandarin when the lock on the restaurant door clicked and someone new crept in. A man exuding dark intentions – the one who had given Plato the evil eye earlier today. The so-called plumber from Nipawin, as per Mrs. Rai. His charade might have fooled her but not Plato, who could spot a secret agent with his eyes blindfolded.

The bamboo hat ducked back down into the tunnel, and the trap door slid quietly into place as the sinister plumber walked softly across the plush carpet, with the help of a flashlight. He went straight for the cage and picked it up. Plato put his foot over his beak to stop himself from shrieking. He should be raising hell right now, calling for help, pecking the thief's eyes out. But his training had taken over, overriding his natural instincts. *Listen. Remember. Report.*

“Okay, okay,” Devi muttered in her sleep. The pretend plumber studied her for a few seconds, noting the black ring on her neck. He must have realized this was the wrong parrot, because he put the cage down and looked around. Up above, Plato pressed himself flat against the chandelier and observed as the man proceeded to bug the cage by installing a tiny mirror in it. No doubt it contained a wireless device that could record Plato and maybe even zap him with a deadly beam. There was no way he'd set foot in that cage now. That left him with only one course of action. When the restaurant door opened again, the Alexandrine flew over the agent's head and out into the night.

CHAPTER 11

The following morning I knocked on the door of Kismet, eager to collect Plato, only to find out from a rather crestfallen Ramesh that the parrot was gone.

“What do you mean ... gone?” I asked. “What happened to him?”

“We don’t know,” Ramesh said apologetically. He was visibly perspiring under his red turban, the symbol of truth. I was sure he wouldn’t lie to me, but it was difficult to accept that a bird could go missing inside a locked restaurant.

“Does Devi remember anything?” I asked and watched as the ring-necked parrot groomed herself in front of a round mirror above her perch. The Rais must have installed it there to make the parrots feel more at home. I sighed and scratched my head. This was typical Plato, hiding and making everyone concerned for his safety.

“She wasn’t able to offer any useful information. She just said ‘okay,’” Ramesh wrung his hands.

“Don’t worry,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. “Plato is probably asleep in a closet or playing a trick on us. One time he hid inside my boss’ old bowling bag and kept imitating the ring tone on her cellphone. She couldn’t figure out why the phone was ringing when it was turned off. He can be a real pain when he’s bored. Which is too bad,” I raised my voice in the hopes of reaching Plato’s ears, “because I think I’ve made a breakthrough in the Cadillac case.”

“Really?” Ramesh raised his bushy eyebrows. “Come, sit. Tell me everything.”

“Sure.” I pulled out my notebook and found the right page. “Yesterday my father and I went to Miss Rea’s house.

She is ancient, but don't underestimate her. She sees and hears everything. Her father was Irish and went to prison for making forgeries. He even made a Fabergé egg, so I assume he faked art and luxurious items. Nevertheless, he wanted his daughter to lead an honest life, so he got her a job. First, she worked as a typist, which was rather boring, and later she trained as a field nurse. It was during World War II, when she met her first husband. He was a doctor from Destiny, and he brought her back here after the war. He knew all kinds of stories about shady dealings in our town. For example, the current mayor's grandfather was a bootlegger!"

"What's a bootlegger?"

"It's someone who makes moonshine."

"What's moonshine?"

"Illegal alcohol. And the mayor's grandpa got busted for it!"

"Did he go to prison?" Ramesh frowned.

"No, Diefenbaker got him off. He was the 13th prime minister of Canada, but he started his career as a country lawyer. This was actually his first case. I should write about it for the *Observer*."

"But won't the mayor be upset that you are besmirching his grandfather?" Ramesh sounded worried.

"How can I besmirch him? He made illegal alcohol and was arrested."

"And walked free, which suggests he was innocent. Instead of making a public enemy of the mayor, you could curry favour by writing about how John Diefenbaker, the 13th prime minister of Canada, cleared his grandfather's name."

"Huh. But that's not investigative journalism," I objected, feeling my enthusiasm deflate.

"I know. It's politics," Ramesh smiled cunningly.

"Have you been reading Sun Tzu again?" I asked, referring to an ancient Chinese general famous for his strategies.

“My grandmother has,” he chuckled. “She wants to beat the Chinese next door with their own philosophy.”

“I hope they don’t come to blows.”

“No, she said she wants to build bridges, not burn them.”

“Oh, good. Because that’s not a headline I’d want to see in our newspaper: *Seniors’ Cat Fight on Main Street.*”

“No, my grandmother was trained in the Sikh martial arts, but she would never use her skills against a defenceless Chinese family. Instead, she wants to upstage their dragon,” he rolled his eyes. “She wants to dress as the goddess Khali, and I am supposed to go as a maharaja.”

“Why not? It would certainly draw attention at the Centennial and get your picture in the newspaper.”

“I’m still thinking about it. I want the community to like us, not to talk about us.”

“You could always stick a Roughriders flag in front of your food tent,” I said half-jokingly.

“What’s a Roughrider?”

“Don’t you know anything? The Roughriders are the provincial football team. Everybody loves them. Just go as a Roughrider and you’ll fit in.”

“I just might,” Ramesh grinned happily. “But we’ve changed the subject. Did Miss Rea know anything about the Cadillac?”

“She called it a Whiskey Six. It’s a car with a six-cylinder engine, used for rum-running.”

“She seems to know an awful lot about this alcohol-smuggling business,” Ramesh said suspiciously.

“And that’s not all. She wanted to know if I have tattoos and if I’m a knight.”

“Why?” Ramesh’s eyes popped.

I allowed myself to gloat a little. “She wouldn’t say, but I think I have figured it out.” I leaned closer, barely able to conceal my excitement. “I spent the whole evening yesterday researching gang tattoos and the chivalric Order of St. Patrick.”

“Wait, I’ve read about that,” Ramesh pointed his index finger in the air like an antenna. “My grandmother, who is a monarchist, made me memorize the names of all the kings and queens of Great Britain. I remember there were three chivalric orders in the British Empire and one of them was the Order of St. Patrick!”

“You are absolutely correct.”

“But what does that have to do with the case of the Cadillac?”

“I believe the car was transporting something that belonged to the Order and the British Crown,” I said and saw Ramesh’s jaw drop. “In 1907, a terrible scandal rocked Ireland. Someone stole the crown jewels from Dublin Castle just before the Irish International Exhibition, where King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra were supposed to visit.”

“What did the crown jewels look like?” Ramesh was hanging onto my every word.

“A diamond star called the Star of Ireland, the Cross of St. Patrick and even the ceremonial collars of the knights of the Order of St. Patrick. All gone and never recovered,” I said reverentially.

“But how could they have ended up in the trunk of the Cadillac, in the middle of the prairie in Saskatchewan?”

“I am still working on that part, but check this out.” I produced a copy of Scarface’s mug shot. “This is Patrick Kilpatrick, an Irish mobster and the last owner of our Cadillac. What do you see on his neck?”

Ramesh took the photo in his hands and studied it at length. When he looked up, his eyes were aglow, just like mine.

“A star tattoo?”

“An eight-point star tattoo, to be precise. It can’t be a coincidence, although I don’t understand how he could have gotten a hold of the Irish crown jewels.”

“Ireland experienced an upheaval, and part of it broke away from the monarchy. It is possible that the

crown jewels were stolen to exacerbate an already-volatile political situation,” Ramesh mused.

“Maybe he bought them just to show he could afford it?”

“But he never flaunted them.”

“He just tattooed the star on his neck and named his gang after it.”

“This is all very interesting, but I’d call it circumstantial evidence. Where’s the proof?”

“I don’t have any yet. I was hoping Miss Rea would tell me more, but there wasn’t enough time. My father sweet-talked her into keeping his video camera for a while, so she could record a message for the future generations on it.”

“What message?”

“It’s part of his project, a documentary about all the old people in Destiny. He really wants her testimony, because she’s the oldest person alive between Saskatoon and Prince Albert.”

“Well, she’s not going to go on camera and talk about the crown jewels. People would think she was involved somehow.”

“What if she was?” I asked, thinking of her last words to me. *Who, not what.*

“Like I said, Nicky, you’d better have ironclad proof of such allegations.”

“I intend to get it. Will you go with me somewhere?”

“Where?”

“To the scene of the crime. Gonzovich Auto. It’s not far.”

“Um, sure. I’ll just tell Grandma. But how will we get there?”

“We’ll ride my Schwinn bicycle. You can borrow my father’s bicycle helmet. It should fit over your turban. That leaves only one problem: Plato.”

“Grandmother will look for him. He’s bound to come out when he’s hungry. And if he escaped outside, which I

don't know how he could have, we might see him in a tree. What do you say?" Ramesh asked, eager to join me on an adventure.

I had a slightly oppressive feeling in my heart that I should stay behind and interrogate Devi, but her vocabulary consisted of one word, rendering her somewhat useless.

"All right," I conceded, "let's go detecting for crown jewels and Plato."

"Vintage automobiles, here we come!"

Many epithets – ranging from "prairie rust belt" to "a blemish on our town" – were used by the residents of Destiny to describe the collection of junk vehicles neatly arranged around Gonzovich Auto. Nobody knew how Mike acquired them, but it seemed to me that their number had grown since I was there last. Mike liked to say it was "work in progress," but unless he cloned himself, I doubted his plan would come to fruition.

Ramesh and I surveyed the gutted school buses, Ford and Chevrolet cars and pickups and the occasional motorcycle as they oxidized quietly in the merciless summer heat against the bright-yellow backdrop of canola fields. There had been efforts to force Mike to clean up the site, but his property was outside of the town limits and therefore not subject to Destiny's bylaws. It was a good thing we didn't get tornadoes in this part of Saskatchewan, because they would have a heyday in Mike's junkyard.

"Incredible," Ramesh breathed out. "This is a museum on wheels. Look, that's an Enfield!"

"What's an Enfield?" I asked and pushed my bicycle into the shade cast by Mike's aluminum trailer.

"The Royal Enfield was a British motorcycle made in India. How did this one get here?" Ramesh was drawn to a black-and-red speedster from the 1950s.

"It came on a ship halfway around the world," called Mike from inside his shop. "A United Church pastor brought it from India. He asked me to fix the oil leak, a typical problem with these motorcycles. 'Royal Oilfields,'

they used to call them,” he chuckled. “He sold it to me after he suffered a stroke. Do you boys want to come in?”

The big garage door was half open, and we ducked under it. Mike was humming a tune and arranging his tools, which hung neatly on pegs in the wall. As messy as the junkyard was, his garage was spotless, resembling a surgery room for vehicles.

“Wow,” Ramesh forgot all about the Enfield as soon as he saw two antique cars standing side by side in the middle of the shop. One was a Model A and the other one was the Cadillac, dark and dangerous-looking.

“Is this it? Is this the famous gangster car?” Ramesh stepped closer to it.

“Yup,” Mike pushed his cap up and wiped his forehead with a starched handkerchief. Then he produced a pair of white gloves and passed them to Ramesh, who slipped them on before touching the Cadillac. I would have to wait my turn, but I didn’t mind. I preferred to stand back and observe anyway.

“Do I smell beeswax?” Ramesh asked and took a deep breath.

“Beeswax, carnauba wax and natural oil. My own secret blend,” Mike replied. “It’s good for cars and my skin too. Don’t lean over her if you have a dangling key chain. Don’t breathe on her. Give her some space. She’s shy.”

The gangster Cadillac looked as shy as a shark. Its long and heavy body had a boxy rear and an elegantly curved front, with silvery fenders and prominent headlights. Despite its obvious heavy weight, it promised speed, like a fast-moving tank. The air around it shimmered with heat and car magic, which put all of us under its spell.

“Why do you call the car ‘she’?” Ramesh asked.

“Because she’s my girl,” Mike adjusted his cap. “Now, what are you two stooges doing here in 32-degree heat?”

“Um, we came to look for Plato and some clues,” I explained.

“That mad bird ain’t that daft. He’d roast if he hid inside any of the junk cars. And what’s this about clues?”

“I have reason to believe that Fat Louis was not alone when he came to Destiny – or that he had a local accomplice. I was wondering if you have any photographs or old receipts from 1932,” I said.

“Nicky’s all business,” Mike told Ramesh and then turned to me. “As far as I know, Fat Louis was alone, at least when he came to our shop. I can show you the secret compartments in the Cadillac, if you’d like. They were empty, just so you know. Look, two were under the floorboards in the front, for the driver and the passenger to retrieve guns and ammunition from. The biggest one was under the back seat. I made a slight modification by putting a small compartment in each door for keeping small items, like a book or a sandwich.”

Ramesh and I craned our necks as Mike demonstrated all the nooks and crannies inside the Cadillac. After a brief deliberation he let us get closer and stick our heads inside.

“The seats are so soft,” said Ramesh as he ran his hand over the upholstery. Mike laughed and even forgot to chastise him for touching the car without permission.

“Do you boys want to see the Model A?” he asked.

We shifted our attention to the much older and more ordinary Ford. It, too, was the colour of night, sitting high on its wheels with black tires. Golden letters on the grille spelled “Ford.”

“It’s cute,” Ramesh said.

“I know it’s not as pretty as the Cadillac, but Henry Ford was the first one to manufacture assembly-line cars that were affordable to the working masses. They only cost a few hundred dollars back then.”

“How much is this one worth?” I asked, estimating it at \$2,000.

“Twenty thousand dollars. I’ve restored it for a collector from Indiana. He specializes in Fords and even built a house for them.”

“He built a house for his cars?” Ramesh chuckled at this American folly.

“Built or bought, I’m not sure. The house is in the Americana style, and it’s really a car museum. He sleeps in the garage, by the way. A true car lover.”

“Just like you,” I pointed out.

“Nah, I fix them, but I don’t keep them. Plus, I don’t sleep in the shop – I have a cozy trailer.”

“Speaking of car collectors, have you talked to Tex Von Reifen yet?” I asked.

“That Scrooge?” Mike spat. “Do you know what he offered me for my beautiful Cadillac? Two thousand dollars! I spent more than that just on the upholstery.”

“Maybe he was just haggling,” Ramesh suggested and climbed aboard the Model A, where he proceeded to press its numerous floor pedals and make engine noises.

“Well, for \$2,000 I might let him drive the Cadillac once around the town,” Mike smirked. “But enough about the penny-pinching cowboy. You wanted old receipts, eh?”

“Yes, sir. And anything that could have come from that car. A chewing-gum wrapper even.”

“Hmm, then your best bet is the lost and found. It’s over there, that old tool box.” Mike pointed to the corner of his shop, where a long grey wooden tool box waited in the shadows.

“Can I keep it?” I cried, before someone else claimed it. “Please?”

“Take it. Take it all,” Mike dismissed me with a wave of his hand and walked away to answer the phone, which was ringing on the opposite side of the shop.

I lost no time and crossed the space in a few strides. I could hear Ramesh jump down from the Ford and follow me, but he was too late. The tool box was mine – along with its mysterious contents – if I could manage to open it.

“Do you need some help?” Ramesh knelt down beside me.

“Some WD-40 would be great. Look for a blue spray can,” I said and yanked on the brass locks, which had seized decades ago.

“Found it,” Ramesh returned with the can and a crowbar.

“Don’t damage it. There could be a secret compartment inside, with a spring lock and a Chinese finger trap.”

To our disappointment, none of the above materialized. The scruffy box was totally unpretentious, a utilitarian receptacle for heavy tools or, as was the case now, a road map, a pack of gum, a white scarf and something with a tangled leather strap.

“Ooh,” Ramesh dove into the tool box with greedy hands. “Vintage goggles! Can these be mine, please-please-please?”

He put on a pair of brown motorcycle goggles with a cracked lens and looked at me. We burst out laughing, and I had no choice but to let him keep them.

“I am going to try these with the Enfield,” said Ramesh and got up. “Let me know if you find a matching helmet.”

Sadly, there was no helmet – just a squished black cowboy hat. I did my best to straighten it out and rammed it onto my head. It fit me perfectly. Now, what was in the small drawers in the corners of the box? A broken screw, some bent nails and a small roll of some kind of fabric. I proceeded to unroll it and froze when I realized what it was.

“A glove?” I muttered to myself and frowned at the petite woman’s glove. It was made of lace, a material both soft and rough at the same time, with swirly designs and small beads. Too bad the other glove was missing – I wished I could bring them both to my mother to wear at the fashion show. As I deliberated what to do with the lone glove, I turned it over and suddenly felt a little wobbly. There was a star stitched on the inside wrist, a star with no fewer than eight points!

“Gotcha,” I whispered and tucked the glove safely in the back pocket of my shorts. I was convinced the glove had come from the Cadillac, where a woman must have left it behind, a woman who was part of the mission to move the stolen Irish crown jewels to safety. Was she a gangster herself? Was she Miss Rea?

Rather disturbed by my discovery and its potential to blow the lid off a mighty secret, I was unsure what to do with it. I could give it to my parents and let them deal with it, or I could bring it to the Centennial and dangle it in front of Miss Rea. What would her reaction be?

Lost in my thoughts, I got startled when Mike, who was engaged in a heated telephone conversation, started yelling into the receiver.

“Over my dead body! Do you hear me? It’s my day in the sun!” he fumed at an unknown provocateur.

I closed the tool box and sat down on it, holding on to my cowboy hat in case something in the shop exploded. Whoever Mike was talking to was trying to appease the volatile mechanic, because his voice became calmer, like the retreating wave of a crashing surf.

“Huh. Is this an empty politician’s promise or a guarantee?” he asked. “I want both water *and* sewer,” he negotiated. “How about a paved road? Okay, the road can wait. But I am not wearing a uniform – you can tell her that.”

Mike slammed the receiver down and paced in a circle before noticing me.

“This is why I’ve kept my number out of the phone book all these years,” he explained. “It was His Mayorship. He’s trying to steal my girl again.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, not comprehending.

“He’s after my Cadillac,” Mike said in a dark voice. “You’re too young to know this, but the mayor and I have hated each other for decades. It all started on prom night, when I was taking Marcia to the school dance.”

“My boss was your girlfriend?” my eyes went big.

“Yup. She and I, in my mother’s old Chevette. Piece of junk. Never buy a Chevette. They have problems with the driveshaft. The damned thing broke when we hit a pothole on a grid road. While we were standing in the dust, wondering what to do, who pulls up but the future mayor of Destiny in a red Ford Mustang,” Mike recounted bitterly.

“With only one free seat,” I predicted.

“Marcia took it without hesitation. It’s called BBD. Bigger better deal. I had to walk home and get the neighbour’s tractor to tow the Chevette back to the shop. I could never live the humiliation down, and I didn’t even try. While I toiled away in my father’s garage without pay, the mayor rose to political stardom and wealth. Why Marcia didn’t marry him I’ll never understand.”

“Could it be she still has feelings for you?”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Mike shrugged it off. “She’s just after my cars, like everyone else. But the mayor didn’t come up with this idea on his own.”

“Who did?”

“The old buzz saw. Miss Rea. She’s the one who really wants to drive the Cadillac at the Centennial.”

“But she’s a hundred years old!” I gasped. “Surely her driver’s licence has been revoked by now.”

“I know – it’s out of the question. The mayor has offered to be her chauffeur. I cringe at the idea of him touching my car with those slippery hands of his. So what does he do? He dangles a carrot in front of me: a water line, a sewer line and possibly a paved road. It would be nice to not have to wash myself in a rain barrel each morning,” Mike shrugged and put a toothpick in his mouth.

“What if you drove the Cadillac with Miss Rea in the back seat?” I asked, already scheming how I could worm my way into the car and sit beside her.

“There’s a hook. She demands a uniformed chauffeur so she can ride in style. She’s already ordered a uniform in my size.”

I had to smile at the old lady's craftiness. She knew just what buttons to push and which strings to pull to make men do as she wanted.

"But I won't be caught dead wearing a clown's uniform," Mike sputtered.

"You could wear your Sunday coveralls," I quipped and ducked when Mike tried to knock the hat off my head.

"No, I have something better. Just bring your camera to the car show," he winked at me and then looked around the shop.

"Where's your friend?" he asked suspiciously.

"Um, Ramesh is communing with the Royal Enfield," I said and regretted it instantly. Mike cursed and went outside with me trailing after him. Fortunately, his fears were unfounded. Ramesh was just standing next to the Indian motorcycle, pretending to rev it up with accompanying noises. He glanced up at us, goggles below his red turban, looking like a renegade Sikh biker.

"I didn't touch the Enfield," he said defensively. "But it's leaking oil again."

"Ho-ly," Mike cursed again and squatted down to inspect the motorcycle. "Okay boys, the fun is over. You should scoot back home to your mothers or grandmothers. The Royal Oilfield needs Uncle Mike."

Ramesh and I returned to the shop to retrieve the old tool box, which we loaded onto the long seat of my bicycle. Then we pushed it back to town, all the while looking at each tree growing along the side of the dirt road. We called Plato's name, but only crickets and crows replied, making us worried about the little fiend. High above our heads, the sweltering sun climbed to its zenith.

CHAPTER 12

It was high noon. Main Street was deserted, its concrete sidewalks and wooden fronts baked by the merciless sun. The only shade – under a trailer parked in an empty lot – was already occupied by Toby the cat, who had won it in a brief but furious fight with her sibling and occasional rival, Henrietta Sinclair. The kitties were bored out of their minds and longing to return to Talon Island, where they had experienced adrenalin adventures such as falling out of a canoe and plunging into the ocean, the latter accident of which had cost Toby one of her nine lives. Compared to that, Destiny was a town in a coma. Toby was dozing off, her triangular head dropping into dandelions, when her ears tuned into the sound of shuffling feet. She opened one yellow eye.

Two women were approaching from opposite directions – two elderly women on a collision course. There was a sudden gust of wind that hurled a ball of tumbleweed down the wide street. It bounced and rolled under the feet of a tall woman in a fluttering pink sari and a white turban. Her beaded slippers danced around a jagged crack in the sidewalk, elegantly avoiding any obstructions in her path. Sarita Rai adjusted the folds of her sari and smiled when she heard the wistful notes of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* spilling out of the open door of the nearby bar. So Tybalt D'Ark, that wannabe biker, was into spaghetti westerns. She preferred martial-arts movies herself, especially now that she had grown too old to practise the *shastar vidiya*, a Sikh combat technique. Too old and arthritic, she thought, but still able to sense the sharp edge of impending danger. Sarita stopped in her tracks and narrowed her kohl-rimmed eyes.

Six metres from her, Lin Ying smiled and bowed her head. She untied the ribbon of her bamboo hat and tossed it into the grass. The blazing sun caught the end of a silver needle holding up her hair. It was the shape of a writhing dragon. Under the trailer, Toby the cat backed deeper into the shadows. She wound her tail around her body to protect herself from the energetic field forming between the two women who, in their minds, had begun to fight.

Sarita closed her eyes to do away with visual distractions. She needed to “see” her opponent in her true form. There were two Lin Yings: one as harmful as a Chinese doll in an embroidered tunic and cotton pants, the other one as friendly as a black panther stalking its prey. There was only one way to meet a panther. Sarita opened her empty hands and crouched. The air rippled, and something leaped forward, aimed at Sarita’s solar plexus. She laughed with exultation and pivoted sideways, letting the evil intention fly by. A kirpan appeared in her right hand, its single-edge blade slicing right and left at the quickly dissipating dark energy form.

Lin Ying bowed and reached into the folds of her wide sleeves, which contained today’s mail, a veggie spring roll and two thin daggers. With utmost grace, she threw the daggers at the big Indian woman, who couldn’t have been an easier target in her bubblegum-pink sari. Inexplicably, the pink silk unfolded and formed an impenetrable wall against which the blades slid down, hitting the ground beneath with a helpless clang. *Impossible!* Like a dust devil, Lin Ying spun around and accelerated, pulling the needle from her hair and uncoiling a long braid that whipped at the Sikh woman like a cat-o’-nine tails. *Were those lead balls woven into its end?* Sarita did not wait to find out and raised her elbow quickly, directing the edge of her kirpan into the path of the braid, which split in two like a floating leaf.

“I think your hair has split ends,” she chuckled and tossed the dagger into her left hand.

“In your dreams,” hissed Lin Ying. Before either of them could think up another attack, there was a distant roar, which made their heads turn. A three-quarter-ton diesel pickup truck with a four-wheel drive and an extended cab was tearing down the broken asphalt like a charging bull. The two women hastily concealed their weapons and put on their best “me no speak English” face. When the impressive red truck pulled over by the curb, they found themselves looking up at the most important man in the town of Destiny, the mayor himself. He tipped the brim of his silver-studded black cowboy hat and motioned for them to step closer.

“Ladies,” he said with a mixture of joy and relief. “I am so glad to find both of you here. Destiny is in a crisis! Mrs. Boyko, who usually supplies perogies for all of our town celebrations, has had a stroke. We desperately need your culinary expertise for the Centennial.”

“This humble person only knows how to make Chinese dumplings,” Lin Ying made a gesture of self-deprecation.

“And I only know how to make samosas,” Sarita followed suit.

“Excellent! Between the two of you, you should be able to figure out how to make Ukrainian perogies,” the mayor said, slapping the steering wheel, which honked and made the old women jump.

“How many?” Sarita ventured.

“About 500, by Saturday,” the mayor replied, without blinking.

“Um,” she hesitated and glanced at Lin Ying, who had coiled her hair on top of her head again and speared it with the dragon needle.

“Please,” the mayor started pleading, “this town has always relied on the help of grandmothers. Where would our society be without you selfless caregivers? The whole world might collapse! Don’t let me down at the Centennial. You won’t regret it, I promise.”

“Lower our property tax by 50 percent,” Lin Ying’s voice dripped honey.

“Fifteen percent,” the mayor countered the outrageous proposal.

“Forty-five percent,” Sarita weighed in, her dark eyes flashing under the snow-white turban.

“Thirty percent, and that’s my final offer.”

The two elderly women looked at each other and nodded sharply. Then they turned back to the mayor, who was wondering how he’d explain the loss of tax revenue to the town council. Of course, he could buy ready-made frozen perogies and thaw them out with a microwave oven. But he could not afford two major restaurants in town to declare war on each other, not during the Centennial. What would it be, war or peace?

“We’ll do it,” said Lin Ying. “If you supply the ingredients.”

“They are in the back of my truck,” the mayor pointed behind him with his right thumb. “Where shall I drop them off?”

“At Kiss Meat,” Lin Ying deliberately mispronounced the name of the Indian restaurant.

“It’s pronounced *kissmeht*,” Sarita bristled.

“At Kiss Me it is then,” the mayor agreed and put his truck in reverse. It was illegal to back down Main Street, but what was the point of being the mayor if you couldn’t bend the rules now and then? He pressed the gas pedal down with his silver-tipped cowboy boot, allowing the rear wheels to kick up some dust. Had he been less self-absorbed, he would have noticed the small black cat that had been spooked by the noise and shot across his path, a traditional sign of bad luck.

When the fine dust settled, Lin Ying smiled at Sarita, who was already regretting her hasty agreement to the mayor’s scheme. Five hundred pieces of pastry by Saturday?

“I hope you know how to make perogies,” Lin Ying cackled and rubbed her hands. A 30-percent tax cut was not to be frowned upon.