

Wrath of the Lost Birds

Jeffrey Carl

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CHAPTER 1

I always hated Halloween. I knew why, it just was not something I wanted to dwell on. Nowadays, it was filled with so much happiness for my family. There were so many things to enjoy. Against a backdrop of longer nights and shorter, often cloudy days, Halloween had its role in the seasonal transition. To see my three children, Sean, 10, Erin, 8, and Christian, 6 ½ enjoying the holiday while they were still the perfect age has been magical for them and me.

My wife, Kaitlyn, had the children gather around the kitchen table making skeleton cookies out of sugar cookies, marshmallows, and chocolate chips. Erin insisted on putting whiskers on her skeletons. She was sure it was the right thing to do for our cat, Brian. Sean called it “Stupid”, and Christian chimed in after him, calling it “Sthupit” while keeping his eyes on some chocolate chips for himself. Erin would have none of it.

“It’s not Sthupit. If we can have skeletons, so can Brian. All animals have skeletons.

“If Erin wants a skeleton with whiskers, that’s fine with me.” Kaitlyn said. That just makes it a ‘scaredy cat’”.

I was sitting in the family room, which was just an extension of the kitchen space. The family room lights were off, which gave me a façade of privacy and solitude, if only provided by

lighting effects. The TV, awkwardly mounted above the brick fireplace and mantle, had an NFL football game on. It was half-time. The Buffalo Bills were behind the Miami Dolphins, 13 to 7. I rubbed my forehead and pushed back my hair, silently cursing the coaching of the Bills, the failing defense, my receding hairline, and my boss, who loves the Dolphins, and who happens to be my brother-in-law.

The announcer came on the TV “And now your half-time news break from WIVB Channel 4, Buffalo”. The screen flashed a 3D spinning graphic of the station call letters which landed just behind the Buffalo skyline. “Police are still looking for the eleven-year-old boy missing in Williamsville for two days now. We are now going to a live report outside the Williamsville police headquarters. Chalice, what’s the latest?”

The camera switched to a remote reporter at the police department. “The police aren’t saying much about the case right now. They continue to ask for anyone with information to come forward and contact them at the number on the bottom of your screen. All we know is that the boy left his parents’ house to go to his cousins five blocks away, and he never made it there. There was an amber alert issued late yesterday with a picture of the boy and what he was wearing. We’ll be on the scene all night in case there are any new developments.

My stomach was sick. The missing boy, Jerry Manderson, was the younger brother of a girl in my climate science class at the University of Buffalo. She was one of my favorite students right now; always interested in some of the topics that I held dear; renewable energy, biomedicine, and hydrogen power. No family should have to go through the fear and terror that family was going through, and it was stressing me deeply.

“Police continue to say there is no evidence of danger to the public. There is no reason to keep children at home this Halloween, especially if parents are with their children. There will be

a town-wide curfew at 9PM for all outdoor Halloween activities, as there has been in the past. And now for the weather with meteorologist Andrew McCauliff.”

“Thanks Frank, the weather looks good tonight for those young trick or treaters and for the search parties for young Jerry. Temperatures should be in the mid to upper fifties across the region, with smoky skies from those continuing wildfires in Canada. That should make for an interesting moonrise tonight around 6pm.”

“Interesting?” I thought incredulously. “It’s not interesting. It’s horrifying. Do people realize we’re burning down hundreds of thousands of acres boreal forest, never touched by man, not that far away from this area? It’s not just a forest fire, it’s our world telling us something, and we need to listen to it. The news needs to do better to tell people what’s really going on.”

Kaitlyn eyed the news, and she saw my level of stress was building by just watching it. “Hey Sam, what time did you want to go to your sisters’ house?” She asked to divert my attention.

“Yay – Aunt Nancy! And Susan and Bobby!” Erin exclaimed. Kaitlyn was happy our kids have good relationships with their cousins. Certainly, our adult relationships were more of a challenge. Nancy’s husband, Kevin McKinley, was the Dean of Environmental studies at the University of Buffalo. I had recently switched from being a professor of criminal investigations to an environmental sciences professor, so I could focus more on educating and energizing students around the climate crisis. Kevin, as the Dean, was not being enough of a climate activist, and I felt he should use the role to advocate. I think it is his job to do it. Kevin would say he is trying to strike a balance between being a public servant and being the activist that I and others wanted him to be. He usually ends up pleasing no one, especially me. I have tried to like him, but he flip flops on almost every issue that comes up. It is more than a single issue; it is

part of his makeup. He placates the new anti-science trend that has appeared in the local media and schools. He let slip in several conversations that this is only way he is going to move up in the university career bands. The less I saw of Kevin, the better.

I've been sure Kevin was not right for a higher career band in the University, just like I've been sure Kevin was not too happy with me switching careers and becoming a self-proclaimed environmental specialist. The truth was that many environmental professors started in other specializations, so I was not out of line. The climate specialty was too new to have its own pipelines of students turning professors. Kevin and I were now related. Our issues were at a stalemate. Things needed to change; it was too important.

"Is Kevin going to be there?" I asked.

"As far as I know, yes, but he may be out trick-or-treating with the kids." Kaitlyn replied. But I knew he would probably be home reigning over the excessive decorations he had put up in his yard.

"I'll bet he'll be home," I replied. "He'll be sitting out in his front yard asking for compliments from everyone that walks by. Are you done with the cookies yet?"

"Not yet, we just have two batches left to bake." Kaitlyn confirmed.

"How about I stay here and put your last batches in, and you can head over to your sister's house? Trick or Treating time is precious, you can't waste any time!"

"Oh-yeah!" Sean said, "can we go? I told my friends I would meet them there. Can we go?"

"If it's okay with your father," Kaitlyn said, "I'll take you over and your father can meet us there." She turned her attention to me. "But you will be there, right?" she asked emphatically.

“Absolutely. I wouldn’t miss it.” I said in a mostly earnest, partly forced voice. The earnest part was wanting to share the time with my children on a day they cherish. The forced part was the ghost of memories from my childhood, a therapist muddled cauldron of guilt, fear, shame, and youthful awkwardness that has always been brought back from the dead this time of year. I was twelve years old, and my parents put me in charge of taking my sister Nancy trick-or-treating in our neighborhood of nearby Clarence, NY. The bargain I struck was I would get to go out alone with my friends until 8 p.m. if I took my sister out early just before dark. I would be allowed to collect candy while out with my sister, so the deal was a good one. It all worked out fine until their last street, when we approached the Curtiss house. The lights were on, but there were no decorations inviting kids to approach. Despite my objections, Nancy insisted on going to the door.

The world seemed to slow down as we approached the front porch of the house. With the noise of the street way behind us, the home seemed deadly silent. It was dimly lit overgrown shrubs at least as high as my sister and her Barbie costume. Just as we set foot on the front porch, a dog started howling and barking inside. I jumped backwards, but Nancy’s face lit up a little bit, and I could see a slight smile. It sounded like trouble to me; aggressive, loud, low, and menacing. Nancy, undaunted, maybe oblivious, approached the door and rang the bell. The dog doubled its excited howls. I waited at her side, terrified, but bound to see it through. The door creaked open and an old woman’s face filled with wrinkles appeared in the glass. Behind her was her husband, struggling to hold the dog. A German Shepherd, it looked even bigger than I had imagined. The bark carried its volume right through the door.

“Don’t worry about Prince,” Mrs. Curtiss soothed, “he’s more bark than bite. I’ll open the door a little bit and give you some candy”. She wedged herself into the door opening and

cracked the door open. Her hand appeared with two Reese's cups, Nancy's favorite. Nancy came closer to grasp them.

"Trick or Treat!" Nancy said, though the timing seemed to be off.

"Trick or Treat to you too!" Mrs. Curtiss replied. As she did, Prince broke free of Mr. Curtiss and charged open the door. Mrs. Curtis barely had a hand on the latch of the storm door, so Prince had an easy time exploding the door open. Nancy flew back across the porch and landed just at the top of the cement stairs. She tumbled and flew off the porch, her arms and legs scraped through the skin as her costume ripped against the sharp edges of the cement stairs. I caught the storm door in my face, with the top pane of glass shattering onto my face. Mrs. Curtiss fell forward to the porch, clutching her side and breaking her glasses. Luckily, I closed my eyes, but the glass made some pretty good cuts across my face and forehead. Mr. Curtiss ran outside to help.

I never even felt the cuts on my face, In the excitement I forgot about them and ran to help Nancy. She was curled up on the ground as the dog moved to attack her. He was biting and clawing at her. I kicked him in the ribs with a kick that would make the football team proud. The dog howled as he ran away to the bushes on the side of the house. I knelt to Nancy, but she was locked tight in a ball. Mr. Curtiss stood between the dog and us, keeping him away. Soon Nancy loosened herself a little and started to cry. She complained her ankle hurt, and I helped her try to get up. Her ankle gave way when she tried to put weight on it. We gathered ourselves as best we could (not forgetting our bags of candy) and with Nancy's arm around my shoulder, we made our way towards the street.

Something spooked Prince, and he was not done with us, he was still in a protective mode; aggressive and mean. He lunged at me just as Nancy and I were in the street. As he

jumped at me, I pushed Nancy to the grass, and I fell on her to protect her. Just then a time a car was coming, too fast to stop. Prince got clipped by the front bumper, and then he was run over by the passenger side wheels. I watched at eye level as Prince was pulled under the car. The fatal thudding, grinding sounds of the car rolling over the bones and body were just a few feet away from me. The car came to a stop just past the dog, and I was left face to face with what remained of the dog and his still twitching body.

The rest of the night is still a blur. Mr. and Mrs. Curtiss were so upset. Prince so much more than just a dog to them. They had lost their son in the Afghanistan war, and Prince had been their son's dog. He was all they had left of him. Mrs. Curtiss went inside and called her daughter to come and help them; she lived a few blocks away. Mr. Curtiss walked us home because we lived just a few houses further on the road. He paid special attention to say how brave I was to try to help Nancy, but I could see the disappointment in everyone's faces. That night at the hospital I got stitches, and my sister got a cast for her sprained ankle. It was one of the most demoralizing nights of my life. How could things have gone badly so quickly? Was I responsible for my sister's injuries, and Prince's death? There was no convincing my adolescent soul when all the adults around were either mourning the death of their pet or showering my younger sister with sympathy. I was alone in a way that I had never been before.

I have replayed the events over and over as I lay awake late at night. Forgetting was not an option. Now I know the best I can do is to learn to live with it. That means every Halloween I am going to deal with some sort of depression or at least heightened anxiety. Kaitlyn knew this about me, and she tried to be understanding about it. She knew news like the missing child triggered my anxiety. She knew I would try my best with the kids her crazy brother-in-law, but it

would not be easy. By taking the kids to her sisters and letting me come separately she was doing her part to understand my struggles.

CHAPTER 2

I helped Kaitlyn get the kids into our Subaru.

I stood in the road and watched as the car turned onto the main road. My eyes were drawn to the sky, where a waxing moon rose. soon to show itself as the main source of light for the evening. The October full moon is called the hunter's moon. This did not look like the moon of my childhood. The full moon in Western NY was so different than the moon of northern Virginia. The southern weather made the moon soft and yellow, hanging in the sky like a portrait in a child's room. Puffy clouds suspended the gentle orb as it slowly laid to rest for the evening. In Western New York, the moonlit sky was blue grey with skat clouds strafing across its face, tossing, and turning from the unfettered winds blowing across Lake Erie. In Williamsville, the moon looked like it could not wait to escape the chaos of the clouds until it found a place to rest for the night.

After coming inside, I put one of the batches of cookies in the oven. I reread the cooking time from the cookbook, thirteen to fifteen minutes at 350 degrees. That meant it would be at least thirty minutes before I would need to leave for Nancy's house. The Bill's football game

was just going to another commercial after the Dolphins kicked another field goal. The score was 16-7. My cell phone rang. It was my good friend and co-worker, Rick. He was a peer professor, teaching undergraduate biology. He was an ornithologist, loving birds and photography. Western New York has a highly regarded bird sanctuary just thirty miles east of Williamsville, which was a treasure to him.

“Sam how are you?” he asked, expecting an issue.

“I’m doing okay.” I said, though Rick knew I was probably lying.

“Did you hear about that kid in Williamsville?” He asked.

“Of course I did. It’s awful. I hope they can find him.”

“Oh, then you didn’t hear? It’s been on twitter, or X or Y, or whatever they call that now. They found the boy, but it isn’t good.”

“What happened?”

“Well, they found him, but it was gruesome. They are not officially announcing it yet. They found him in a field out in Akron, torn apart badly, I heard. They said it was like some animals or animals were feeding on him. But there aren’t any animals around here that would do that. Maybe a wild boar, but there haven’t been any reports of them around here for a couple of years. Not to mention, how did he get from here to Akron? It’s a good forty miles away. I don’t think they know. But something terrifying is going on.”

I hung my head. What a horrible thing. “Why are you telling me this Rick? Is there some way I can help?”

“Well, I know you are a little strung out at Halloween, but Sam, with your background in criminology, can you think of any possibilities that might be here? Any local- potential suspects or profiles? Who or what would do this to a child’s body? Could a person do it? Or an animal? I

got a call from the town police. They wanted to reach out to anyone who may have theories on what is going on.”

“Yeah but...” I tried to interrupt.

“They don’t have a lot to go on. People may be in danger. They want to know all possible theories, no matter how out of the box they are. They brought in the State Troopers, but they may even bring in the FBI.”

“That sounds serious, Rick.” I said. “If I can think of anything I’ll let you know.”

As I drove my Tacoma close to my sister’s house, I could see it was one of the most popular houses offering trick or treating, and the bright lights attracted a crowd to the yard. Kids with happy faces were running in and around the inflatable dragons, witches, pumpkins, and Peanuts © characters. Kevin was busy handing out candy as Nancy complimented the kids and their parents on their beautiful (mostly store-bought) costumes. I saw Nancy’s Subaru in the driveway, I was glad to think our children were in the mix, having a great time.

I parked in the only available spot several houses away. I clicked my key-fob and the lights blinked off, and the doors audibly clicked locked. “That would have been considered magic only a few years ago,” I thought. “Now it’s standard equipment.” A strong breeze kicked up, strong enough to tassel my hair out of place. By the time I corrected it, the breeze kicked up into a gale wind, bending the trees, and creaking the boughs down towards the road. I could hear the low roar of the high branches bending against the force. It swept into the yard which was so well lit against the black of the night. The inflatables started to bob and weave in the wind, their lanyards straining against ground stakes. Some of them broke free and started whirling and whipping across the yard.

Little Bobby McKinley was alarmed by the wind and was running to his father when one of the lanyards from the mouth of the inflatable dragon swept across his ankles. The lights were flashing on and off, the eighteen-foot witch poised sinisterly in the yard continued her warnings and evil laughter even as she was knocked sideways onto her back, cackling at the sky. A loud popping noise filled the night with terror. To the children, it sounded like gunfire. That was my first reaction also. When I considered the sudden wind and the popping noise, I knew it was probably a tree fallen across power lines, causing a transformer to blow, which then provided the loud popping noises. Then the lights went out, and all was dark for a moment. Some of the children screamed, some called for their parents. Some of the teenagers laughed, confident of their safety, despite the inconvenience.

I ran back to my truck to get a 2500 lumen flashlight I bought at one of the local big box stores. I grabbed it and checked the beam; it was working okay and would be bright enough to light up the yard, or pinpoint anything smaller. As I ran back to the house, the wind subsided, suddenly and suspiciously. The electricity in the house came back on, provided by Kevin's black start generator. The Halloween decorations and lights, however, did not come on. They must have been plugged into an electrical outlet which was considered unnecessary in case of an outage. But the darkness in the neighborhood was only starting.

From the sky above, I heard a shrill screech in the sky. It was distant at first, but piercing, nonetheless. It echoed across the trees and rooftops the way a hoot owl sounds when it is calling in a forest, only louder and shriller. I thought it must be from an airplane headed for the nearby Buffalo airport, noisily lowering its landing gear. The next screech was much louder, and much closer. People in the yard turned their heads to the sky, frightened and guarded.

I covered my ears and cowered in the yard; the sound was so painful. As I did my flashlight beam flashed to the sky. There, in the light of the beam was a black soaring object passing overhead. It soared silently above us, except for the awful screech. What alarmed me most was the size of the object. Its profile looked like a huge bird, perhaps a hawk. But it was much bigger than any bird I had seen. It was more like the size of a small airplane.

I ran towards the house, refocusing the light on the yard. Little Bobby lay on the ground where he had become tangled in the lanyard. “Bobby, get up! Get in the house! I yelled. “Everyone, take cover inside. We need to be careful.”

Then it happened. Bobby slipped trying to untangle his feet from the lanyards.

“Dad! Come and help me!” he cried.

Kevin turned to look at Bobby, not sure what the issue was. “Sure buddy, I’ll be right there. I have to open the garage for everyone to get in.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sean appear from the garage and head towards Bobby, waving his arms and yelling at the sky. “Bobby, stay down! Don’t move!”

In the skies above the roofline, the gigantic bird changed its flight, and dove downward, wings tucked into a V shape downward. My flashlight caught it as it reached the roof level, its mammoth claws tucked behind it. With a small brake using its wings, it slowed down enough to extend its claws first, directly at Bobby. The claws clasped his yellow costume around him and grasped him firmly into their clenches. His brother Sean stood only a few feet away from the bird, physically pushed back by the flaps of the birds’ wings. Then the bird, with its orange eyes gleaming, looked at Sean and flapped its wings as he carried his brother away. The bird flapped twice and took off across the lawn strewn with stumps and deflated animal balloon carcasses. I

kept the flashlight on it as it rose above the roof and tree line surrounding the house. It circled around the house twice, then landed on the very top of the roof.

The crowd below gasped as the bird landed. Bobby's yellow costume could be clearly seen held between the claws of the bird and the roof.

The bird turned its head sideways as if to look at the commotion below him in the yard. The yard was now wasted with the wreckage of deflated inflatable decorations, skeletons, goblins, and gravestones. Kevin and Nancy looked up at the horror, speechless.

"Let him go! Let him go!" The crowd yelled as soon as they saw that it was the boy he held in his claws.

Another screech pierced the air, this time closer and more brutal than the others. I cowered again, but this time I kept the flashlight on the monstrous bird, and poor little Bobby.

We all watched in shock. Bobby didn't move, but if he did escape, he would surely roll down the roof and fall over twenty feet onto the pavement below. The first shock of the crowd broke and strained to see the boy in the relative darkness of the roof.

Bobby screamed. He had gained consciousness and turned around to see the situation he was in. Some of the adults rushed to see. They could either stand back and watch, or they could get close to the edge of the roof in case he fell, but they could not see him if they did.

"Don't move!" they yelled.

"Stay still!"

"We'll come and get you!"

"Just stay still!"

I shined his flashlight on the boy. The beam cut the blackness like a knife and lit the situation on the roof like a macabre reality show.

“Go through the window and get him!” someone yelled.

“They’re already on it! Someone else yelled.

“I’ll get a rope!”

“Someone go get a mattress, in case he falls, or a sheet, to catch him if he falls!”

Well-meaning parents gathered around, with their own cadre of costumed ghouls, skeletons, political characters, and all the classic Halloween characters.

The dormer window opened, and Kevin poked his head through, trying get a visual of the situation.

“He’s on the other side of the roof!” someone yelled. “He’s six feet up from you around the corner.”

Kevin wasted no time turning around and trying to get his feet through the window, trying to find a position that would allow him to get out of the window. His wife, Nancy, was smaller than him and would more easily manage the situation with her yoga and stretching experience. Kevin would not hear of allowing her help. His body and his ego too big to get through the window, he continued his awkward contortions to get out the window.

I kept the beam of my flashlight wide enough to capture the action in the dormer window, the bird, and Bobby on the roof. Bobby tried not to cry, but Kevin could hear his whimpering from around the corner.

Kevin wriggled out of the window and grasped onto the window ledge to keep from falling. He got his feet under him, scrambling. “Give me the gun!” he yelled.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.” Nancy replied back.

“Damn it! Give it to me!”

Nancy handed a shotgun through the window to Kevin, who could hardly even stand on the steep grade of the roof. Kevin clicked off the safety and checked the gun, then looked at the bird. If he shot the bird and Bobby was released, they would have to catch him below.

“Are you ready below?” Kevin asked.

“Ready!” Somebody yelled, part of a circle holding a blanket under the edge of the roof.

Kevin stepped out of the window and aimed the gun at the bird, far enough above Bobby not to be a concern. His foot slipped as he fired, and the gun went off, clipping some of the tips of feathers on the left wing of the bird. The recoil of the shot threw Kevin completely off balance and he fell to the roof, rolling downward to the edge of the roof. The bird screeched loudly, piercing our ears again. With a single flap of its wings, it flew off the roof, over the crowd and into the distance, with Bobby clenched in its claws. Bobby screamed. Nancy screamed. Kevin fell off the roof, hitting the blanket held by the crowd. They partially broke his fall. They were expecting a fifty-pound child, not a two-hundred-pound man.

The crowd in the yard, men, women, and children, were in full view of the horror. One of the men must have realized too late that he had a weapon on him, but he was not prepared to use it. He started futilely shooting at the bird as it exited the sky.

I lowered my flashlight, in disbelief of what I saw. I heard sirens in the distance. Police would soon be approaching the house. I hoped that someone was tracking the direction of the bird, but it had all happened so quickly.

The local police arrived quickly and started to secure the area, taking names, sending everyone home and asking them all to write down what they saw. Our children were asked to go to the basement playroom, and one of the neighborhood moms agreed to go with them for

support. The state police arrived around 8pm, called in because of the spreading threat of the birds and the general danger to the public. An investigator introduced himself to the four parents.

“I’m Captain Phoeni Brooks. Initially, we look at this as a missing persons investigation, just because we don’t know what is really going on just yet. So, while everything is fresh in your minds, we will be asking a lot of questions. We know this time is hard for you, but please help us because the first few hours after a situation like this are often the most crucial.

The questions lasted over an hour, and then there was a lot more discussion. Captain Brooks got on the phone and briefed her superiors. There was going to be a press briefing later in the evening, but they were not sure when.

Kaitlyn agreed to take all the children to our house for the night, and Nancy agreed to go with her, to help provide them with the most comfort they could.

Leaves and acorn shells crunched under my tires as my Tacoma pulled into my driveway after 3am. Surely the kids would be asleep by now. My mind was a swirling mess of high-speed thoughts crashing and burning on a bonfire of theories, ideas, connections, and loss.

Kaitlyn came to me as I entered through the laundry room door connected to the garage.

“Did you see? It’s all over the news. So awful. What are we going to do?”

I looked at her blankly. My mind could not adjust to the conversation she was looking for. I dropped the flashlight and my jacket on the kitchen table and moved closer to her. I was stone cold with outward emotion, until the warmth of her hug came through. I truly loved her. There was a re-connection that happened in that hug.

Kaitlyn pulled away and looked at me. She said I looked twenty years older. She was right. My face was ashen, my arms and body were cold. Maybe I was even hypothermic.

“Let’s get you warm,” she said kindly. She took me by the hand, led me to the couch in the family room, and covered me with a blanket.

“I’ll make some tea.” She said. But there was no need, I was already asleep.

CHAPTER 3

The knock on the door came at 7:15am. Kaitlyn scurried by me, just stirring from sleep on the couch, to see who it was. She was wearing a bathrobe, tied around her waist. Captain Phoeni Brooks was on the other side. “Good morning, Mrs. Wilson. Sorry to bother you. We’re here to pick up Mr. Wilson.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “He’s still sleeping. He didn’t let me know there was anything going on this morning.”

“I’m up, I’m up,” I grumbled in the background. “I didn’t tell you they were picking me up this morning. I’ll be ready in ten minutes.” I was already up off the couch and headed for the shower.

“Wait, who’s picking you up?” Kaitlyn asked as she followed me to the bathroom. The door shut in her face, but she continued at the door. “Sam, what’s going on?” She could hear running water and a flushing toilet in the bathroom.

“I’m going to work with the police on this. I said. “I should have never gone to bed. It’s always the first forty-eight hours that are most important in cases like this, but the state police were going to be working on it all night. You’ll see more stuff on the news today, but they aren’t

telling the full story. More people are missing, and the same sort of creatures have been seen around Western New York and Canada. We have to find little Bobby as soon as possible.”

“Are there more of them? Oh my God. What are they?”

“We don’t know. Our best guess is that these freakish predator birds came from somewhere else. Anyway, stay inside. Keep the kids and the dog inside and tell everyone else. They are some form Osprey or other predator. There probably are more of them.”

“That’s the craziest thing I ever heard of.” Kaitlyn replied. “What about Bobby? Is he alive?”

“We don’t know. We’re not positive where he’s been taken or anything. That’s the priority right now.” I burst out of the bathroom, headed back to the bedroom. I’ve got to get dressed, get my guns, get some food, and get out of here. Can you rustle up some coffee for me?”

Kaitlyn was trembling with the news that there were more, and that there was imminent danger still going on. “Poor Little Bobby, I hope he’s okay.”

I dressed, got my guns and ammunition out of the gun locker in the bedroom, scooped up some food and coffee from the kitchen, and headed out the door to the NYS Trooper SUV waiting in the driveway. To my surprise, Kevin was in the car. He was dressed in a bright blue Kobalt jacket. He always had to be trendy, and with a little edge. There were early rising neighbors out watching the activity, hoping for some sort of information to gather from the goings on.

Five minutes later the SUV was heading 90 mph west on interstate I-90 towards Akron. We pulled off at one of those strange dirt-paved exits near an overpass to get off the Interstate, since there was no close direct exit. Brooks gave us a few new details as we were driving.

“We’ve found a group of these birds in a field outside Akron. By first estimates, there are fifty of them. They are anywhere from fifteen to almost twenty-five feet tall and have a wingspan of up to thirty feet. There are reports of more flocks all over the northern tier, upstate New York, Ohio, and Southern Ontario. Farmers are saying they are missing livestock, anything from turkeys to chickens to sheep and pigs. Apparently, going after humans was a new thing since so many people were outside for Halloween.”

We pulled into the back of a Truckstop along NYS route 5. There were tents and trailers set up. Our SUV pulled up next to a tent called “Drone Operations”. Brooks, Kevin and I entered the tent. Screens were hastily mounted on poles, with nearby tables for drone operators.

“There! There they are!” Someone exclaimed. We gathered around the sixty-five-inch display.

“This drone is just three quarters of a mile west of here over a farm field. You can see the birds gathered just outside a chicken farm. Over here, look at this. There is a pile of food and trinkets they have collected. They seem to be coming back and forth with food and trinkets and piling them here. Then some other birds come in and take some of it away.”

“That’s where Bobby would be.” I said. “And I bet you anything these birds, although they are a new species to us, they are just doing what they have always done, just never in our world. How can we get to that field?”

“That will take some time to get approvals, Brooks said.”

“Approvals? We don’t have time for approvals. We need to go, and we need to go now. Let’s get some good weapons and head on over there.” Kevin said. “I don’t care about some damned farm animals that might be there, there are some humans in that mess. One is my son! We need to get them out of there.”

Brooks looked at me, conflicted.

“What if this was your kid?” I said. “Would you wait for approvals? We have all the firepower we need right here.”

Brooks agreed. “It’s a hell of a risk. We don’t have the proper clearances, nor have we gone through the briefing we need. But lives are at risk, which means I have discretion to do what is reasonably needed to save life. Meet me out front in fifteen minutes. I’ll get twenty troopers armed who want to go do this. We’re going to need ATVs and all the equipment to go with them. We’ll work on the appropriate clearances while we’re in search and rescue mode.”

In twenty minutes, six All Terrain Vehicles were outside the tent, each with two to four troopers geared up and ready to go.

Brooks called them to attention using a bullhorn. “We have two goals here. One is a search and rescue mission. The other is a defensive mission to protect ourselves from these creatures. If we must eliminate them, we will. That means shooting them down, which may not be easy. Each one of these things is larger than a moose, or an elephant, although they probably weigh a whole lot less. Plus, we don’t know how well they fight.”

The troopers in their ATVs yelled their approval. I sat in the first vehicle, with my AR-15 at my side. Kevin and Rick were in the back. We left the truck stop and turned onto a mud-dirt power lines road for the lines that were feeding the rest of New York State cheap renewable electricity generated by Niagara Falls, seventy miles away. We reached a farm road stretching out to the north and took it. We saw what we were looking for between a line of trees planted as a windbreak between the fields. One of the troopers said they looked like awkward shaped RV motor homes, only taller and shaped like giant mounds of hay. As soon the birds heard our

motors, the head of the birds swiveled to look at our caravan, while their bodies remained straight forward.

“We’re going for the element of surprise here. They know we’re here, but they don’t know what we are up to. Let’s get in, get whoever we can out of there and leave.”

We drove our line of ATVs directly at the birds. Six of the birds turned towards us and extended their wings in the air in a threatening stance. The thirty-foot wingspans filled the sky, as tall as most of the trees on the sides of the roads. I wondered if we were under-powered. Brooks ordered them to hold their fire until they were already inside the perimeter of the bird’s circle. Unfortunately, someone got too excited. One of the troopers in vehicle four started firing. The birds became alarmed, at first screeching and calling each other, then taking flight, circling above the ground. The troopers started firing at the birds in all directions, but their speed and agility flying proved difficult for the best of their aim. One of the birds circling had a few feathers missing from its left wing. I assumed that was the lead bird, the one that had taken little Bobby.

I spotted the pile of food just ahead. While the birds had moved their attack to the air, it gave us the opportunity to get to the pile quickly. Once there, we quickly scouted around for any people. What we found were scattered turkeys, sheep, coyotes, and ground hogs. Kevin spotted some clothing in the pile. We pulled off some debris, and there we found a young girl, dressed in black as a witch. Kevin reached her first and started pulling her out, trying to see if she was alive. As we laid her separately from the rest of the pile, she started to move. She was breathing, and there was hope for her.

Kevin picked her up and held her close to his face. Though she was not conscious, he whispered “I’m here for you, girl. We’re going to bring you home.” He started running towards

the ATV. A predator spotted him running from the air and changed course to come after them. Brooks trained the scope of his gun against the incoming giant bird and started rapidly firing at it. The bird screeched as the bird as it was killed just before impact. The body slammed into the ground just behind Kevin as he was almost to the ATV. I loaded the girl into the back of the ATV and went to help Kevin. He was knocked down, but I was able to get him up and running back to the ATV.

“Here’s another one!” one of the troopers shouted. I looked and saw the woman waving from the other side of the pile. Kevin turned and ran without looking, hoping it was Bobby. He turned the corner of the pile and stopped in his tracks. There in the pile was Bobby, still in his yellow costume, lying on the ground. Kevin ran to him.

“Bobby! Bobby! Can you hear me? I’m here now. You’re going to be okay!”

Bobby rolled to his side, but the hope was short lived. Alpha, the bird Kevin had shot, was diving down for him. Bobby screamed and pointed at the bird, coming quickly. Kevin turned and saw the giant claws of Alpha as they reached out and grabbed him mid-body. He screamed and fell into the clutches of the bird, He was shaken violently and became unconscious. Alpha did not land. He picked up Kevin and flew into the air again.

“Hold your fire!” Brooks called over the megaphone. “You might hit the man.”

We watched as Alpha circled above us. We could see Kevin’s bright blue coat clasped in his talons. With a final screech, turned his wing and flew away from the group to the North. Brooks got on the radio to call in the situation, hoping that someone could start tracking the bird.

I ran around the pile to Bobby, he was crouching on the ground, crying and sobbing. “Bobby, it’s me, Uncle Sammy. We’ll get your dad; we’ll bring you home. You’re safe.” I

picked him up. He was so cold and hypothermic. I held him close and watched the sky for any birds as I ran back to the ATV.

We packed Bobby and the young girl in the ATV. Brooks ordered us to go back to the operations center. The rest of the team would stay and look for any remaining bodies, dead or alive.

Our new driver turned the ATV to go, but he couldn't believe his eyes.

The troops were being attacked from all sides now. One came down and grabbed a trooper by the shoulders, lifting him out of his seat and into the air, then tossing him, topsy turvy, onto the ground. The trooper screamed in terror and pain. The situation was playing out repeatedly. It seemed all birds wanted a trophy, now that Alpha had taken one. Brooks pulled out his bullhorn.

“Retreat! Retreat!” He called. We sped through the killing fields towards the break of trees and to the relative safety of the power lines, which functioned as fortunate line of defense. Six of the troopers were now missing, with four more injured in the ATVs.

We pulled into the Operations Center with Bobby and the girl laying in the back seat of the ATV. I looked more closely at them when we arrived. They were both alive, although severely injured with lacerations from the claws of the birds. They were probably hypothermic. They would not have lasted much longer in the low fifty degrees temperatures. The EMTs would need to help with that. They were waiting for them with an ambulance to take him to the local hospital. I watched as they pulled away, deeply concerned if the poor children would make it or not.

Kaitlyn answered her cell phone on the first ring when I called her.

“Sam? What's going on? We haven't heard anything since you left early this morning.”

“Good news, and bad news, Kat. We found Bobby alive. We don’t know how badly he’s injured, but we have him in an ambulance. But Kevin, one of the birds got Kevin when he was trying to rescue Bobby. Kevin was just reaching out to Bobby, but he did not see the bird coming at him. It took him away, flying. We don’t know where. I’m so sorry, there was nothing anyone could do. The state police were so good. They did more than anyone could have.”

“Oh my god, you mean they got Bobby, but Kevin was taken? Oh my god. Where is Bobby?”

“They didn’t tell me where they were taking him, probably Batavia Hospital. I’m sure the state troopers will be calling you or Nancy with more details, but I wanted you to know. I’m going to follow with the troopers and Rick, to help them figure out how to find Kevin and get rid of these things.”

We went back to the drone tent that was now the situation tent for the State Troopers. Every time I entered the tent, there were new displays and more people setting things up. On the way in I noticed a new media tent, and several of the big networks were there with satellite trucks, CNN, ABC, NBC, FOX, and CBS. It was going to be hard to control the flow of information now. The key was to supply the right information. The more they knew, the scarier reality seemed to be.

The situation tent now had security. The media was not allowed in, they were to be given updates by the State Troopers or whatever dignitaries were considered proper. There was word out that the governor might be coming soon, to keep people calm. Brooks thought that was most likely to have the opposite effect.

Brooks gave us a quick update.

“They’re declaring a state of in a few hours. The Governor is coming out here to speak to the press. She’ll state that the declaration is needed to free up resources to ensure that all precautions are taken. Here’s the truth of what we know. There may be hundreds, maybe thousands of these things. We’re in touch with the Canadian Royal Mounted Police, and they are tracking these birds as they fly back and forth from forests in the North. If our friend was taken with them, we’ll have to track them north to their nests, if that’s what they have. The Mounties don’t know how or why, but they say the birds have been living in the primitive arboreal forests for hundreds of years, or more, living off the wildlife. Everything was fine until the wildfires erupted. They lost their habitat, their homes. They had to extend their habitat outside of their forest for food and shelter.

Rick added to the thoughts. “There are stories of this sort of thing from long ago that the Inuit, or Eskimos, as they are no longer called, used to tell. They told of large birds that were part of their spirit tribe, and you can see them in some of their drawings. I don’t think anyone expected we would run into these birds, it’s like finding a whole tribe of Bigfoot that just decided to move south for the winter.”

“Wait a second, you’re saying that these things, these birds, have existed for hundreds or thousands of years? All this time until wildfires pushed them out?”

“The wildfires are probably the main cause of their displacement, but also remember what climate change is doing to the Canadian tundra, the ground that used to stay frozen all year. A lot of that is melting part of the year now, making it impossible for the animals that these birds needed to prey on to live. It’s a cumulative effect, wildfires, loss of the food chain, you get it. Their world is changing, and now their change is affecting us.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We’re sending a team of people up into those forests with the Mounties to see for ourselves. Once again, it will be search and rescue first, because at least one person has now been tracked there. Based on what we find we’ll make a plan. In the meantime, the national guard, or the army, or whoever has the firepower, and the manpower will be taking out whatever birds they can find.”

“Are you saying they’re going to kill them?” Rick asked.

“Most likely, unless we can find a way to get them back to their forests.” Brooks replied.

“I get it, but it sure seems unfair. We chase them out of their habitat that they have had for thousands of years, and then we kill them because they do what comes natural to them to get food? There must be a better way.” Rick pleaded.

“If you have better ideas, let’s get you on that team going up north. But don’t take too long to figure something out, they will be killing any of these things that threaten humans, and right now it looks like they are all a threat to humans.” Brooks replied

“Get us on that team. I’m a bird expert. I’m sure there is a way to do this.”

“A bird expert? Well, ain’t that great. I guess we’re safe from chickadees and robins.”

Rick let that comment go.

Four helicopters were coming from the NYS Troopers. Pennsylvania sent three, and Ohio sent four. The province of Ontario, Canada would supply an additional four helicopters, making it a total of fifteen. The operation was named operation “Big Bird”, of course.

Rick and I walked outside to get some air and clear our thoughts. Rick started. “We can’t just arbitrarily kill them all. They are a new species to us. I know what they have done, they have killed several people already. But you wouldn’t kill off the last of a species for that, would

you?” He was exasperated. “We need to know what these birds need to live on their own, and how to give what they need to them. Let’s see what we find out before we decide we have to kill them all. We need to know how to get them out of our habitat and back to their own. There are things we can prepare for while we are away. We need pilots to swarm them and see if we can scare them away. Just killing them could wipe them out as a species. We want to get them out of here if we can, all we need to do is to get them to go back their homes.”

“And just how are we going to do that?” I asked.

“I’m not sure yet, but there has to be a way. I need some recording equipment. Some audio recording.” Rick said.

“Why?” I asked.

“We need to record their calls. A bird species like this is going to have some advanced language capabilities. Nothing like humans, but even small birds have different calls for different situations. Different levels of warnings and distress, comfort, territorial, mating, etc. I want to record and understand what calls these animals are making. We may want to use it.”

“Makes sense to me.” I said. “Can you use your phone?”

“In a pinch, yes. But I need to get some good recordings of these things.”

CHAPTER 4

Project Big Bird took off from the Truck stop at 1100 hours. Rick and I were seated in the second helicopter, behind Captain Brooks. He got Rick and I caught up on the situation.

“There are over four hundred known birds as of now. They are spread over northern New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and southern Ontario on the other side of Lake Erie. There have been twenty deaths so far, but far more injured, and most of the population terrified in one way or another. Even with their size, they can be stealthy quiet and difficult to detect. Their huge wings make very little noise. The best way we can pick them up is either using heat sensing cameras when close, or radar when they are moving together. Even one bird can be picked up by our more sensitive radar equipment, but it is hard to distinguish between a bird and a normal blip in the system. We don’t have a highly sensitive radar up north, so we would not even pick them up.

Rick offered some of his wisdom. “There are over sixty thousand bird species in the northern part of North America. These birds seem to be most like the Osprey predators that are common in the north. Perhaps they evolved from a branch of their species, changing their size and hunting habits to support more types of food. Or maybe they pre-date the Osprey, it’s now accepted that the birds we now know are distant descendants of dinosaurs. It’s not likely these

birds have any natural predators, but who knows what we will find up north. So, if we are going to kill them, we have to come up with a plan.”

“From information the Canadians and the Ohio State police tell us,” Brooks continued, “it can take up to 50mm bullets to take one down, and that is if you are lucky enough to get a headshot. The Canadians have lost two choppers already because the birds got mad and went after the chopper. It didn’t end well for the bird once it hits the chopper’s blades, but the choppers went down, and two pilots were killed when they were attacked by the birds.”

Rick continued. “The boreal forest of North America is by far the largest in the world. It stretches from Alaska in the west all the way across Canada to the Atlantic. There is a lot of lumbering in the more temperate areas, but most of the forest has never been touched by humans or machines. It’s a natural place for evolution, and one we have not studied enough.”

The flight took three hours, the choppers crossed the A45 highway, which was the last major east-west road across Canada. North of that road, the land became flat and sparse of trees.

“There is primitive boreal forest starting about twenty miles north of here. The Inuit held the land sacred because it held the last trees in the far north. In some places, the woods are so thick it is difficult to navigate, even for them. We contacted some tribal leaders in the area. They offered to help. One of the local leaders is going to brief us on the tribal history when we get there. I hear it’s quite a story.”

I had time to watch as the trees grew thicker. The chopper approached a bank of clouds to the north. Was it possible these birds lived here, undetected, this long? And if so, what else was living here? How would they survive the harsh winters that started in mid-October and lasted until May?

Our helicopters vanished into the clouds as the land elevation slowly grew. We rose a thousand feet before starting to drop again through the base of the clouds. As we re-appeared below the cloud ceiling, we could see a pristine lake lined with hard wood and pine trees. The forest was thick and wet from some recent rains. Rick pointed ahead through the cockpit window.

“What’s that?” He asked. “That spot up ahead.”

I looked forward and saw a change in the landscape. Gone was the green forest layer of trees, replaced by grey earth and black stumps sticking out. Smoke was still seen pouring from some of the tree stumps.

“I guess we have found one of the wildfires.” I said as the chopper came over the hell-scape. “Everything is wiped out. Everything.”

“You can see the path these wildfires take.” Brooks said. “They start out like a wedge in the forest, then grow and explode as the wind pushes them around. Then the fires make their own wind, which just creates more and more devastation.”

We watched solemnly in silence as we glided over the torched remains. “It looks like a war zone.” Rick said. “It looks like someone came up here and wiped it out.”

“Of course, wildfires happen normally.” The ranger said. “But these forests haven’t seen wildfires in hundreds or thousands of years. You can see how devastating this would be to an ecosystem.”

Our helicopters approached a broad open plain at the top of one of the burnt hills. The signal was given to land. There was a concern about conserving fuel, we would need enough to get back over one hundred miles to a military base. There were several other choppers there already. The Canadian Mounties, the Pennsylvania and Ohio State Police, and the Ontario

provincial police. Military tents were set up to stand against the stiff cold breeze, under a steel grey sky that was typical for this time of year.

After exiting the choppers, we were escorted to a small tent which had a Canadian flag on the door flap. Inside were ten chairs circled around two more in the center. We took seats and waited for a meeting to start, but we were not quite sure what it would be about. An elderly man was escorted in by a Canadian Mountie, and they were seated in the front chairs, lit only by a bare bulb hung from an extension cord. The Mountie introduced himself and the local tribal leader who would give us some background on the local Inuit folklore.

“Sit here if you will and I will tell you a story that has been passed down for generations. Now before you pass me off as a crazy old man telling tall tales from the past, know that much of what I say has been reported as true. You will say that it is the timeline that is in question, but how can these stories exist for generations, long before your scientists say they cannot be true? Ah, that is a question we cannot answer here.”

Short in stature, he was dressed in a caribou and seal skin coat lined with arctic fox fur, his hair was long and matted gray, but well kept. There were beads and amulets on his coat, and gut string necklaces around his neck. I was sure there was a story of hardship or celebration behind every one of them. His eyes had the wisdom and depth of many years. Even with our advanced academic achievements, I felt I was in the presence of a man far more knowledgeable than any of us. He exuded wisdom, spiritual faith, and love of the land which cannot be reached from academic studies. I had often felt reaching this sort of life’s wisdom was the true goal of academic studies, yet it was unachievable with the modern structure and validation it required. I wished Kevin were here to experience it.

“This story is of man named Tek Tee Yah, a tribal leader many, many years ago. Tek Tee Yah was first a family man, and he loved his tribe as much as his family. He loved his time with his wife and children, but he was often called to go out on the hunt with his tribe. One time he left with five other men, but he was the only one to return. He was very upset and told an amazing story of survival. The hunting was very poor, and they felt they must have not honored the previous years’ hunt properly, for the gods had not provided elk and caribou for the hunt this year. Now it happened that they followed a river that came to a great waterfall, and that from below the waterfall they felt warm breezes, and they saw trees and grasses that they had never seen before. They followed the ridge of the valley down and explored into the valley below. They found the forest thick and very difficult to hike. After a lot of struggles, they made it to the valley floor.”

“There, in front of them they found a world very different from theirs. There were trees three and four feet thick, rising up forty and fifty feet. There were grasses and ponds filled with life. It was a land of dreams. But Tek Tee Yah knew it could not be so wonderful. The other hunters wanted to go forward and hunt the elk and caribou that roamed the fields. Tek Tee Yah was concerned. As they approached a herd of elk, the elk suddenly were spooked and ran away. Tek Tee Yah turned and saw huge animals with savage fangs chasing after the elk. After a short chase, they felled the elk and started feeding. The hunting team took cover in the woods and watched as other beasts passed by, he described what we now call mastodons, giant elephants with huge tusks and thick furry coats.”

“Now we all are told the Sabre Tooth Tigers, and the giant Mastodons are gone. But there was one more beast Tek Tee Yah mentioned, and that was the giant birds that flew above them. Tek Tee Yah saw them, but the others would pay them no attention. They were just birds,

so how could they be dangerous? Well, the third day they were there, they dared to go out hunting for elk again, and it was then that the giant birds attacked them all. They swooped down and scooped up the hunters like they were fish in a pond. Tek Tee Yah narrowly escaped by hiding behind a log and staying still, while the others ran for their lives. It was not until after darkness that he dared to scramble to the heavy woods to escape. The next day he scrambled up the side of the valley walls and he was able to find his way home in another three days.”

“He made it home, but he was not the same at first. He felt he was spared by the gods, but they would punish him for the rest of his life for not saving the others. This necklace here, this one with five fangs on it, is what the tribal leader gave to him to remember his friends that died. The tribal leader told him he must remember his friends, but not live in their shadow. Every year the tribe lead paid tribute to his friends and the gods of the hunt. Tek Tee Yah listened to his leader, and became a good father, husband, and leader. When the time came for a new tribal leader, it was Tek Tee Yah who stood up to protect them all. He always honored his friends, but he never tried to find the hidden valley, and he rarely spoke of it, because he did not want any of the young males looking for it and being caught in its trap.”

We stood and softly applauded as the Canadian Mountie thanked the gentleman and led him out of the tent. Rick was almost speechless as he considered the wisdom and the prescient warning of the folklore that was given to us. I felt a wave of gratitude sweep over me. Gratitude that this man had provided us with so much local wisdom, and gratitude that despite the situation, I was privy to such a great story told almost firsthand.

We walked outside and found a gathering starting in an open field between the tents. Major Hamilton of the Ontario provincial police took the megaphone and addressed the crowd.

After greetings and thanks given to all the different governments and politicians, he moved on with the topic at hand.

“Here to update us on our recovery plans is captain McClain from the Canadian Mounties.

“Thank you, Major Hamilton. We have a lot of updated information for you. We have found a murder of the birds just three kilometers, or just over a mile for you Americans, to our north. It is just down the hill. The situation is a little difficult there. Oh, by the way, we are calling a group of these animals a ‘murder’ in the same sense we call a group of crows a murder. It’s like calling a group of sheep a flock of sheep, or a group of fish a school of fish.”

“We’ll keep the briefing short, but I think we have some relevant information to share on the birds. I’d like to bring up our expert ornithologist from our Montreal University, Mr. Gerald Thomas.”

“Thank you, major Hamilton. These birds are obviously from an until now unknown species. We have gathered samples and sent them off for DNA sequencing, but we don’t expect to have any meaningful results for at least a few more days. We don’t have time for that. What we do know is that these birds appear to be most like the common predator named the Osprey. This bird is common across the northern tier of North America. What we find most similar are the wing shapes, the coloring, and the predatory behaviors. The Osprey, in its environment feeds almost exclusively on fish. For that reason, it is sometimes referred to as a fish hawk. Ospreys are big birds. Their wingspan can get up to two meters wide.”

“So how did this new version of the Osprey come to be? With a wingspan of up to ten meters? (thirty feet). Our best guess is that the competition in evolution, combined with the scarcity of food and resources in the Canadian forests forced the genetic changes. Ospreys are

highly intelligent; we think that intelligence brought the competition. And that competition brought the need for strength in numbers, and the need for size to survive. The subspecies became more tribal and less nomadic, and the competition among males made each successful generation a little bit bigger, over hundreds and thousands of years. The tribal behavior kept the group together, so there were no “lone wolves” for lack of a better term, straying outside the flock. The behavior we have seen shows that there is an alpha male among the flocks, maybe several of them, who guide and control the safety of the flock. When the wildfires destroyed most of the flock’s habitat, some of these alpha males were forced to fly elsewhere to supply food and security for the team. We have seen the alpha male behavior in the flocks on our shores. The flocks will obey the alpha males, so long as they are supplying food. It is these alpha males who are bringing food and “trinkets” back to the rest of the flock. If we take out the alpha males, we take out most of their guidance. Any questions so far?”

Ricks eyes were wider than a hoot owl. He was witnessing the introduction of a new species of bird, a species so unique and so huge he could hardly believe it. “I have a question. If you are saying that the rest of the flock takes their lead from the alpha males, then what makes you think taking out the alpha male will solve a problem? Typical group behavior would have a contest among the other males to establish a new alpha male, and the group would become whole again. Would we be any better off?”

“We would have to take out any alpha male, and their potential successors, we call them beta males.”

“That doesn’t sound like the best solution. We would just have to keep killing all the males until they are gone.” Rick replied.

“Fair point, but I don’t think it would get that far.”

Rick slowed down to get to his thought. “Maybe, if we get to the original alpha males, and get them to return to their forests, the others will follow them. If they led them to our neighborhoods, couldn’t they lead them back?”

“That’s an interesting idea, but we can’t just invite them to the local Marriott to have a conference with them, can we?” Professor Thomas replied.

“Maybe we don’t have to.” Rick said. “Maybe we can have them help us without them knowing. Do you want to hear more?”

“Excuse me,” Major Hamilton interrupted. “This is just a briefing session, and there is a lot of other briefing to be done, so that we can get on with our search and rescue. I’d like you and Professor Hamilton to get together with whomever else you choose to go over your ideas and give us another update.” The room buzzed with conversations for a minute while Rick walked to the front of the room and shook hands with the professor.

Major Hamilton continued the briefing. “If you will now pay attention to the screens we have around the room, we have some drone footage of the murder’s collection of food and trinkets. For the most part, the food is brought dead. There are small sheep, pigs, lots of chickens and turkeys. But there are also what we call trinkets. These are things that the birds are bringing back for the entertainment of others. We see a lot of shiny objects like mylar balloons, sneakers, old chrome hub caps, etc. We think the alpha males use these trinkets to please the rest of the flocks. We see the females and the males playing with them once they are brought to the pile. The birds are treating the humans they take as trinkets. You will find that almost without exception the humans they take are dressed in bright or shiny clothing that make them interesting play objects. Halloween costumes with shiny silvery fabric or bright colored clothing are too good for them to resist. They picked them up and dropped them off for the flock to find

interesting. The fact that there were humans inside the clothing just made them more interesting if they started moving around in the pile. It's tragic, but that is our best way of explaining this behavior so far."

I thought about this. Little Bobby with his bright yellow costume on, Kevin with his bright blue jacket and pants, trying to rescue Bobby. The birds wanted something to play with, they were not trying to catch these people for food.

"To summarize, they don't want to eat humans, they want to play with them. We're going to put our theory to the test. We're going use a bunch of space blankets, you know, the shiny metallic ones they give to hikers for emergency cover when they are lost, and we will fill them with playground balls and bounce them near the food pile, to distract the birds. We'll pull them away, and then go in to see if there are any humans alive in the pile."

"That's crazy." I said. "It's crazy, but so crazy it might just work."

Major Hamilton took the stage. "We have an update. The National Weather Service has detected birds moving north to our area. They should be here in forty-five minutes. We need to be ready to move. We believe the birds are resting in a valley just beyond the ridges to our north. There's a river that comes out of the boreal forest. Our drones have spotted some brightly colored clothing floating down the river, it's possible someone has dropped it in the river, hoping a search team would find it. We'll set up a station at the closest point we can and send in some drones for reconnaissance. Once we get feedback, we'll go in."

CHAPTER 5

Kevin was being stabbed in his side, a direct shot to his kidney. Something was poking him. He curled in pain and grabbed at the stick causing the pain. Shaking into consciousness, his first vision was a blue and orange striped costume with large polka dots.

“This one’s not dead!” a woman’s voice carped, “He’s still alive.”

Kevin grabbed the probing stick and fiercely shook it at the woman. “Poke me again and I’ll ram this through you,” he threatened. His eyes focused on his nemesis, a paunchy short woman wearing a clown outfit; a brightly striped top with an oversized neon yellow pant to match on the bottom. The fake wig, nose and makeup were gone, only the traces of white cover ran down the sides of the jowls on her face. Her hair was a rat’s nest of dirt, twigs, and confusion.

“Most of us are dead.” She started, as if continuing a conversation that had started long ago. “We have about six of us left. I’m glad you’re not dead. We can use your help.”

“Where am I?” Kevin asked as he raised himself onto his side. “What’s going on?”

“He brought you here. We call him old Grump. We’re in some sort of freak bird commune. It’s in the middle of nowhere. It’s damn cold, so we think we’re north, like Canada or something.”

“Wait, who brought me here?”

“Grump! I told you. He’s the biggest of all the birds, and he’s in charge. No one goes against him. He brought a lot of us here, and soon other birds started bringing other people. We’re in some sort of nest in a forest. We can’t get out. Every day they bring more of us here, like we’re toys to them. Every afternoon they surround us in a circle and peck or claw at us until we dance and perform for them. It’s some form of game or entertainment for them. The six of us are the only ones alive only because we do a little show for them every day.”

“You’re crazy, lady.” Kevin said. “That can’t be happening. I’m a dean of a university, not a puppet in a clown show.”

“You may think so right now, but that’s not what he thinks. And what he thinks is what matters. Get busy dancing or get busy dying.”

Kevin stood up. His full six-foot two frame towered over Maggie. “I’m not going to buy that. There has to be a way out of here. There has to be a way to defeat him.”

Maggie snickered. “Well, champ you’ll find out pretty soon. It’s usually late afternoon when they come for us. And those who don’t dance are invited for dinner. Their dinner.”

“What’s your name, champ?” she asked.

“My name is Kevin. “You say there are others alive? I want to talk with them. I’m sure we can get a plan together to get out of this. There has to be a way.”

“Okay champ. Or Kevin if that’s your name. My name is Maggie. If there is a way out, let’s wait until after today’s show. If we’re still alive, we can talk some more. Come with me. I’ll introduce you to the others.”

As Kevin slowly moved, his body ached in places he never knew could ache. His ribs hurt with every breath. The bird’s talons must have grabbed him most tightly across his chest. He had never felt pain this severe in his ribs. He wondered if some were broken, or just badly bruised. The pain made it difficult to take in his new surroundings. The most immediate features of the landscape were cliffs rising up two to three hundred feet, and a river flowing between the sides of the cliffs. He imagined a waterfall must exist upriver, which carved the small valley they were in. The land surrounding them was clear of trees with a grassy area open to the sky. Kevin considered this a perfect spot for the huge birds to land.

Three others who had been searching for other people joined them as they walked across the open floodplain. Kevin met Jonathan, a plumber from Jonesville, Brian, an exterminator from Kristol, and Patricia, a physical therapist from Altan.

“Is this area where the birds make people perform for them?” Kevin asked.

“Yes, it is here and further downriver.” Jonathan responded.

“What is further down river?” Kevin asked.

“We’re not sure. The river flows into a thick forest. If you look past the flood plains that we’re standing on, you will see a thick forest on all sides, right up to the cliffs. We’re talking about forests so thick you cannot walk through them. A few people tried escaping through the forest, only to turn back. The growth is just too old and too thick to get through.”

“What is at the top of the cliffs?” Kevin asked.

“Honestly, we don’t know. When it is windy, there is a lot of ash that floats down from the cliffs. We think the wildfires must have wiped out the forests at the top of the cliffs, so we only see the ashes as they fall. We can’t be sure because we can’t get up there.” Patricia offered.

“There’s not much to work with here.” Kevin admitted. “You’re blocked on three sides by cliffs and forest, and there is just more river and forest heading downstream.”

“Exactly,” Maggie confirmed.

“Art and Leslie like to go just beyond the bushes ahead because it takes the birds a while to find them there. Anything to slow them down is welcome.” Maggie said.

“Speaking of birds!” Jonathan said. “I think they’re coming.”

Kevin followed Jonathan’s gaze southward, toward the flow of the river out of the valley. He couldn’t see anything. “I don’t see anything. How do you know?”

“See those clouds to the south? See how they are not the same colors as the other clouds? That’s because those aren’t clouds. They’re birds. They’ll be here in a few minutes. When they return, they will need to drop off everything they have carried with them; food, supplies, possibly more people, or other trinkets they have found. Then they will come for us. We need to hide in the bramble on the edge of the forest as long as we can. When they come looking for us, they will find us. But we don’t have to rush them.” Jonathan said grimly.

“Let’s go!” Maggie said. Let’s find some shelter.”

Kevin took shelter behind some driftwood that pushed up against the edge of the thick forest behind him. Maggie recommended it to him. “They will come looking for us, hopping and pecking and chirping. If one of the birds finds you, it’s best you come out right away. If you

don't, they will know where you are by your scent, and the bird will peck at you. If you don't come out, others will join in. You are better off coming out and joining the rest of us."

Looking at the heavy brush behind him, Kevin understood what Maggie was telling him. There was no opportunity to escape through the woods with the cliffs right behind them. He watched as the birds landed in the flood plain. There were more than fifty of them. Some of them carried something in their talons, some of them did not. Those that did brought whatever they brought to the edge of the plain where Kevin had regained his consciousness. After the birds were gone again, they would look for survivors in the same area where he was found. There was a lot of energy and confusion among the birds. The cackling, chirping and calling were constant and loud. The male birds were challenging each other, charging and threatening, wings outstretched to make them appear as large and threatening as possible. Then Alpha landed, (or Grumpy, as Maggie had called him). The other male birds calmed down and stopped their charades. Alpha let out a screech, which sent a chill down Kevin's back from being preyed upon by this animal less than a day ago. It was debilitating. Kevin cowered where he was, unable to process that the terror had returned. He saw Maggie across the way, taking a chance by waving to him, trying to communicate something.

He looked at Maggie, then looked where she was pointing. There was something floating in the air. Something suspended on its own, but too big to be a leaf and too still to be a bird. Kevin didn't process it right away.

Then the hunt for the trinkets began by the birds. Alpha called out and hopped over to the edge of the brush, looking for a human to come out. After hopping just fifteen feet he stopped and turned towards the woods. He started pecking at the brush. He turned over a log, and there was Jonathan laying there. Alpha hopped towards him aggressively. Jonathan jumped up,

waving and calling to Alpha. “I’m here! I’m here!” He did a somersault and then laid flat on his stomach. Alpha jumped up with a hop of joy. The other birds joined in, hopping and chirping along. Jonathan jumped to his feet and started clapping and singing a song. Soon the other birds joined alpha in searching the woods for their entertainment. One by one, a person would be found, and would come out dancing, rolling, jumping, or singing. He or she would join the others in the middle as the birds hopped around them.

Alpha came to where Kevin lay. Kevin could still remember the feeling of the shotgun in his hand as he aimed at the bird. He had missed by a split second. Alpha stopped and cocked his head towards Kevin. Kevin stayed still. Alpha let out a low noise, a growl combined with a gurgle. It was a warning. He hopped aggressively at the wood pile. Kevin stayed motionless. Alpha hopped over and turned his head, exposing Kevin within striking distance of his beak. A targeted peck could kill Kevin, and Kevin knew it.

The bird moved in closer. Kevin considered his options. Move, and be captive, or stay motionless. Alpha made the first move. He turned his head and moved to peck Kevin in the leg. Kevin moved his legs open, and the beak just missed him, pinning him in the driftwood. Alpha pulled back. Then Kevin’s mind flashed. IT WAS A DRONE! The thing he saw floating was a drone! That meant help was on the way. He could play the game the bird wanted now. There was help on the way. He rolled out from the driftwood and rolled sideways across the grass. Alpha jumped back at the unexpected action and started hopping and chirping with excitement. Kevin turned and spun on his back, his feet and arms in the air. Then he pulled back on his shoulders and launched his body upwards to land on his feet. His chest ribs sent shocks of pain to his body, but he held firm standing up. The birds all hopped and started calling each other loudly. Alpha hopped in a circle with happiness and then jumped into a stationary flight before

landing softly on the ground again. Kevin imitated his friends before him. He tried a cartwheel. He did jumping jacks, all the while heading towards the group of people in the center of the field.

The hunt for the others and the dancing in the middle went on for another thirty minutes. Kevin watched as the others became as exhausted as he was. He was thirsty, he was hungry. He had no idea how long it had been since any of them had had real food, or access to water other than the river. Art and Leslie were found last. Kevin understood why they took pains to try to be the last to be found.

There was a lull in the activity as the birds settled down and the people had no more dancing or songs to offer. Alpha approached the group. He wanted something else, but no one could tell what it would be. He made the murmuring sound again, as he had when he was finding Kevin. Kevin came towards him. Alpha hopped towards him, aggressively again. Kevin thought he would stall for time. He approached Alpha, coming closer yet. Alpha turned his head, showing some sort of expectation. Kevin stood his ground. Alpha hopped to him again. They were almost face to face as Alpha held his head down to him. Kevin looked up at him, hoping to achieve a standoff of sorts. Alpha let out a call from deep within his chest. It was a war cry, tearing into the air and alarming the rest of the birds. With a twist of his neck, Alpha swung his head low and hit Kevin broadside across his body, sweeping him into the air. He was flung upwards almost twenty feet, screaming and flipping around. One of the other birds reacted quickly, and jumped into the air and clenched him in the midst of his fall. He flipped him to his beak. From there, he used the strength of his neck and beak to flip him higher in the air, twisting and turning. Another bird saw the action and swept upwards to catch him mid-air. He was tossed again, flipped and turned until he struck the ground thirty feet from where he had stood.

The other birds followed Alpha's war cry. They closed in on the circle of survivors, chattering and becoming more and more aggressive by the minute. A beta male made the first move on the group and grabbed Brian. He shook his head once and snapped his neck. Maggie and the others watched in horror. Maggie started to entertain them again by dancing. Jonathan saw her attempt to distract them with entertainment and joined her by his doing his famous somersault. .

CHAPTER 6

We saw the danger from our helicopter as we breached the treetops. The pilot swept down into the field. Captain Brooks ordered the pilot to hover where the remaining crowd of people had gathered. A spotlight lit up the circle, with the survivors huddling in the middle. Another helicopter entered the area and hovered upstream of us. With the survivors in a circle, the captain ordered the team to open fire on the birds. Each chopper had two gun ports firing fifty-millimeter bullets, tearing them apart as they tried to take flight.

Alpha was outside the range of fire because he had been chasing Kevin as he was tossed around. With the birds killed or scared away, the captain ordered our helicopter land on the flood plain. Rick and I got out with two troopers, all of us dressed in Kevlar puncture resistant clothing.

“Let’s get Kevin!” Rick shouted.

We found Kevin laying on the ground, semi-conscious. He was unable to move, and I am no doctor, but I was sure he was near death.

“He’s here! He’s right here!” Rick called. We ran to the area Rick was pointing to, with the armed troopers right behind us. I reached Kevin and cradled him in my arms, checking for signs of life. “I think he’s alive, Rick.”

Rick came to our side and nodded towards Kevin. “Kev, hang on. You’ll make it.”

“Look out! One of the troopers shouted. “There are more birds incoming!”

We heard Alpha’s call as another group of birds approached.

“Get back to the chopper!” Rick called.

“Help me grab Kevin!” I yelled to Rick. Rick was already running for the chopper.

I grabbed Kevin by the shoulders and started dragging him towards the chopper. Rick reached the chopper and disappeared inside. I was confused. Why did he abandon us? I dragged Kevin behind a fallen tree and sheltered in the branches. The birds kept their calls going, searching, looking for us. All I could do was lay quietly, waiting for the birds to come.

A crackling, popping sound came from the helicopter, followed by a low hum. Then a new call came from Alpha. A call for calm, it was a call he used to settle all the birds down after some excitement. I looked around for the source, but Alpha was nowhere near the field. The call changed, and the birds turned to look for Alpha. He could not be seen, but they cocked their heads, perplexed. The call repeated, which convinced the beta males to act and take flight. Was this the call to flock? Were they called to fly around the fields?

I looked at the chopper, and saw Rick appear in the door. He was holding something in front of him, I could see it was a controller. A drone slowly rose from the ground, outfitted with audio equipment; speakers mounted on the side rails. The call to fly above came louder now, and I could see the speakers on the drone were the source of the calls, not Alpha. Rick had been recording the calls of the flock and now he was using it to fake them out. Years of evolution had

taught them to obey the calls of the Alpha male, and this was not going to be an exception. Rick programmed the drone to rise above the fields to a height of over one hundred feet. The flock of birds followed the sound and the drone, circling higher and higher. Rick sent the drone south, away from the fields, and away from the base of armed troopers, ready to kill them.

With the birds gone from the field, I stood tall from behind the shelter I had taken.

“Rick! You did it! You moved them away!”

Rick was still intensely focused on the drone maneuvers. He looked over at me and nodded.

“We’ll be right there!” One of the troopers shouted to me, acknowledging the help I needed with Kevin.

We loaded Kevin on the chopper and found the rest of the survivors hiding in the woods. On by one we loaded Maggie, Kristol, Jonathan, Art, Leslie, and Patricia in to the chopper.

I stepped outside to talk with Rick, who had set a GPS path for the drone to follow. Once it was as far away as it could be, it would stop playing the sound loop the birds were following and the drone would return homebase on its own. Rick was anxiously scanning the horizon to see if the drone would return.

He turned to me and spoke. “It’s not that we just destroyed their world. It’s not that they tried to destroy ours. The world is out of balance, and we have to bring it back. We can’t destroy our way out of the challenges we have, Sam. We need to own it, all of us.”

“There’s no plan B.” I said. “We can’t wait to fix it until everyone of us feels the emergency the way we just did. When we get home, let’s get to work.”

Another chopper came. The drone never returned to home base. We prepped Kevin for the flight and strapped ourselves in. As we rose above the trees, I could see a waterfall upstream from the fields; its mist lit in the moonlight. It was a picture of eternal calm, framed by the ashen shores of burned-out forests.

The chopper dived downward and left. The pilot was wild in the front.

“There’s another one of them, coming at us.”

I looked out the window. It was Alpha, now coming at us from the side. “Here he comes!” I yelled. “Three O’clock!”

The pilot swerved to the left again, just as Alpha’s head was about to enter the open side of the chopper. Alpha went above the chopper, and the tip of one of the blades clipped him in the neck. Blood splattered on the windows and through the open doors, covering our clothes. The chopper spun around as Alpha collapsed into a downward spiral. The pilot held the chopper in a spin, round and round, as it plummeted to the thick forest below. As it was about to crash, he gained control of the chopper and stabilized. I looked at Rick in disbelief.

Rick had the original recordings of the bird’s calls on his iPhone, he told me he had made copies for use on the drone sound system. In the coming days he worked with the drone team to set up more sound systems for the other teams dealing with the birds. Team by team, they went to each of the communes and played alpha male calls for the birds to start a migration. Once the birds were in the air, he used the drones to keep the flocks of birds flying North to their homes, where they belonged. Once the birds returned to their habitat, they found that the workable fields were filled with available food like turkeys, chicken, and stocked fish in the lakes. It would take

years to reestablish their ecosystem, but Rick and his team could make sure they made the transition.

We made it back home in shattered pieces of our former selves. The brutal experience taught me the perspective of scale in human experience. I forgave myself completely for the incidents of my youth. Halloween, however, did not regain any credibility in my personal book. Rick joined me in assessing a fear of what might happen next Halloween.

Kevin survived his injuries, but he had broken vertebrae in three places, broken ribs, and some internal damage. His doctor would not clear him for full time work, so he agreed to work part time in another department of the university until he made a full recovery.

Rick and I used our notoriety from the birds to advocate for a more aggressive climate studies curriculum. The university agreed and fully funded a new department dedicated to climate action, complete with a new major and advanced degree program, along with an extensive free education program. It's just a small start, but as others come on board, we will build momentum. We invite everyone to join us and do what we can in direct and meaningful ways to restore the balance needed due to global climate change.

End

AUTHORS NOTES:

This story was a lot of fun to write, and it has a lot of layers to it, including political and character “easter eggs”. For a little humor and better understanding of all the thought processes that went into this story, I invite you to check out my blog at <https://Coppertreebooks.com>. I’ll also put links into some of my favorite climate action links, and I welcome questions and suggestions readers offer. Thanks for your support.