

Prologue

A light autumn wind blew dry leaves across the vacant parking lot as a pickup truck rolled quietly into the lot and, with its lights off, coasted beside a six-foot tall wooden fence on the far side. A man wearing night vision goggles standing in the pickup's bed was able to look over the fence and rapped once on the roof when the truck came alongside what looked like several stacks of large packing crates. The truck stopped and the Spotter hopped out of the pickup's bed carrying a portable drill. He quickly removed screws from both ends of a section of the fence and was joined by the Driver who was also wearing night vision goggles. With the screws removed, the Spotter put the drill into the bed of the truck. Then he and the Driver moved the fence section from its spot and carried it down the fence until the opening was clear and they leaned the section against the fence. Both men were big and could easily have been mistaken for NFL defensive linemen but neither of them was or had been.

Moving through the opening, the men surveyed the stacks. What seemed to be large packing crates were boxes of slats about eight feet long by three feet by three feet. They were stacked in four rows, each three boxes high and each row four deep. The last was actually five wide with the last row only two high making a total of fifty boxes. The men moved purposely to the next-to-last row and, grabbing the top box at each end, they moved it and set it out of the way. They did the same with the preceding row and then reached over the first row of crates, all of which had open tops. Securing the second crate in next to the last row, they pulled it out to the edge. Then they picked up the second crate they had removed and put it back. From the ground you couldn't tell there

was a missing crate. They picked up the first crate they had taken out and carried it outside the fenced area and set it behind the pickup. The Spotter lowered the tailgate of the pickup and the two of them picked up the crate and slid it into the extended bed of the truck. Then the men moved the fence section back into place and the Driver held it while the Spotter got the drill from bed of the truck and proceeded to put the screws back in. The two men climbed into the bed of the truck and covered the crate with a tarp and secured it with bungee cords. They got out of the bed, closed the lift gate and got into the truck's cab. Both men removed their night vision goggles and the driver started the truck and drove quietly out of the parking lot.

Twenty minutes later the truck turned off West Hibbard Pond Path onto a private paved road and passed under an entry sign that read Timber Point. They turned off the main road onto a dirt road and drove until it ended at the lake where a pontoon boat was sitting nudged into the shore. The two men got out of the truck, lowered the lift gate and the Spotter got into the pickup's bed, removed the tarp and then slid the crate out onto the lift gate where the Driver could grab it and help pull. Joining him on the ground the Spotter helped pull the crate out of the pickup's bed and set it on the ground. Each grabbing the crate in the middle of a side, they carried the crate to the pontoon, lifted it up and over the rail and, guided by the pontoon's Helmsman, slid it into the pontoon on an inclined ramp made of two by fours.

The Helmsman, who was virtually indistinguishable from the other two sizewise, started the pontoon's engines while the Driver and the Spotter lifted the front end of the pontoon and slid it off the shore before hopping aboard with an agility that their sizes belied. The Helmsman turned the pontoon around and headed out into the lake while the

two men removed wooden slats from inside the crate. Then they removed a tarp covering a naked body lying on one of the pontoon's bench seats, picked the body up and unceremoniously dumped it into the crate. Picking up a six-foot fir that was lying on the deck, the two shoved it into the crate on top of the body. Then they added eight concrete blocks weighing sixty pounds that had been sitting along the sides of the pontoon, four to a side, handling them as though they were papier-mâché. Each grabbed a handful of nails from a coffee can and put them in a pocket of their jackets. The slats that had been removed from the crate earlier were set on the crate's top. Picking up hammers and getting a few nails from their pockets, each moved to a side of the crate where the Spotter positioned one of the slats and they each fastened it into position with two nails. They worked quickly and effortlessly and soon the top of the crate was covered with slats about two inches apart. Extra nails from their pockets went back into the coffee can and the hammers were put out of the way. The two took positions on either side of the crate and stood silently looking ahead of the boat as though on lookout but seeing only the blackness of the dark fall night.

About ten minutes later the Helmsman, who had been watching his depth finder, took the engines out of gear and the pontoon started gliding on a virtually glasslike surface. He walked to the inboard end of the crate and started pushing it up the ramp with the aid of the Driver and the Spotter until about a third of it stuck over the bow. Waiting until the pontoon had virtually stopped the Helmsman grunted and the three pushed the crate up the ramp with relative ease until gravity took over and the crate tilted, wavered, and then with a final shove slid over the side into Hibbard Pond. That final push changed the manner in which the crate went down. It was hard enough that the

crate tilted forward and when it hit the bottom, it kept moving and settled on what had been the top before it was pushed off the pontoon boat. That was the second and most consequential mistake the Helmsman had made. The Helmsman went back to the con, slid the throttle from neutral to forward and turned the pontoon back the way it had come, not moving fast so as to minimize noise but this late in the season the lake was empty.

The Driver and the Spotter sat on the bench seat where the body had been and after a few minutes the Spotter broke the silence that had ensued from the time the truck entered the parking lot, “What did he do to deserve this?”

The Driver shrugged and said, “It doesn’t pay to take the Boss’s money or product.”