

For five weeks, they watched.

There were four of them. They watched in two-day, two-man shifts, hidden atop the bluff towards the back of the property, beneath wild undergrowth and camouflage nets purchased from a hunting store on Circle Lane. They would come in from the lake and lie in sleeping bags among the acres of green space bordering the north and east. The October breeze, mild for the season but rendered numbingly cold as it skimmed across Albatross Lake, tortured them nightly, but surveillance continued. With military-grade binoculars bought from an army surplus store, they observed and studied. When those weeks were done, when night swallowed the resort-caliber pool and the marble fountain and the granite lions that abutted the patio steps, they meet at the Paradise Inn on Horizon and First and pooled their data. It was good. Very good.

The owner – an elderly Chinese man who lived alone and collected antiques – left every Friday night and returned Sunday morning. Where he went, why he went, it didn't matter and they didn't care. There was no security. No cameras, no internal alarms, no guards, no dogs. Nothing. Only the wrought-iron fence that encircled the property, but they could bypass that in their sleep. There wasn't another house for miles.

Two more days and they'd be safe. Maybe. Hopefully.

For Coen, the waiting was hardest. At least when the night-chilled wind whipped at him, he was doing something productive. But now, there was only waiting. Every hour crawled by. The cops know their faces and Rikers was waiting with open arms. Better to be cautious and endure the wait than to be an idiot and risk everything. Not that prison would be any safer. Out here, if they needed to hide, they could do it fast and go deep.

The plan was simple: break in, pillage and purloin and plunder, get the hell out, sell their loot on the black market, and bribe the Merchant into taking the price of their heads. Simple,

dangerous, reckless, but necessary. No one could evade the Merchant's wrath forever, especially four traitors who'd skimmed cash and disappeared; the man had dozens of contacts and insiders and corrupt cops and politicians and enough dirty cash to pretty much do whatever the hell he wanted. If they didn't do something fast, they would be dead men sooner than later. Neil preferred later and if that meant watching the cheap-ass fan spin and staring at a screen full of static because the thirty-year old TV antenna was snapped and smelling the acrid scent of mildew and garbage for the next seven days, then so be it.

The days passed, the sun rose and set, and then it was Friday. Neil awoke and got dressed.