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### Author's note

Apathy among the electorate is marked by an ever decreasing percentage of voters turning out at the polls. No matter the reason for this indifference, it has spawned an inane cliché: “If you don’t vote, you can’t bitch.” Rather, “If you don’t pay taxes, don’t complain.”

# Watershed

*C. C. Phillips*

*For Auburn and Nick*

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For more information on the author and his other books, visit <http://www.ccphillips.net/>

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## Chapter 1

The dry heat of late August left tiny beads of perspiration upon the brow of thirty year old Karl Larkin as he entered the air-conditioned coolness of Chesterton Motors. A slight hint of frustration flashed in the cool gray eyes as he vainly searched the contingent of blue coveralled employees for the customer service foreman. Karl had dropped off his dilapidated runabout for brake servicing earlier in the day. The shop manager had assured Larkin his, "Limo," would be, "ready for the track," by three o'clock.

Emory Stanton, president and owner of Chesterton Motors, appeared from one of the cubicles that served as offices for his sales personnel. From the flushed complexion of the affluent business man, Larkin surmised that all had not progressed favorably during consultation with one of the salesmen. The white-haired proprietor possessed a dual personality, the darker side of which the general populace of Chesterton --the small prairie town from which the garage acquired its

## Watershed

name-- had not witnessed.

As he studied the older man, a faint smile crossed Karl's handsome visage. He mused that the salesman had seen the other side of Stanton.

Upon seeing Larkin, the car dealer quickly masked his anger, flashing a toothy smile of feigned friendliness. The gesture was wasted on the younger man for Karl had suffered the consequence of Emory Stanton's wrath on other occasions. Reword as: Karl Larkin's employment as a civil servant positioned the young man on the same level as a doormat, in Stanton's esteem. This condescending attitude rubbed raw the pride of Karl and his co-workers. Silent resignation, like eating crow, left a bitter taste in one's mouth. Emory Stanton was a man of influence in Chesterton, albeit a sardine in a slough. He made no secret of his political "connections," a whip he often used.

Ignoring his pretense of amity, Larkin asked, "Have you seen Bjorn around this afternoon?"

Irritation flashed like a subliminal advertisement across the ruddy countenance and Emory said, "I'll page him for you."

The car dealer turned abruptly and strode toward the front desk, grunting an order to the receptionist as he passed.

Seconds later a voice hailed Karl from the shop entrance. Bjorn Johansson, the tall, middle-aged shop foreman, stood in the doorway leaning against the frame as if to support the structure. Johansson did support the business, for his ability as a top notch mechanic had earned Chesterton Motors a great deal of respect and clientèle. Recently though, the Viking descendant had become a manager, leaving the majority of the actual repair work in the

hands of the less professional.

"She *should* be in top form now," Bjorn said, adding, "I'm afraid to present you with this though," as he recovered the work order from a folder he had tucked under his arm.

Karl's gray eyes scanned the bill swiftly. The parts were expensive; however, the labor charge bordered on criminal.

"Wow! Thirty-five bucks an hour! I know you're a good mechanic, Bjorn, but this is outrageous."

Johannson shrugged apologetically. "I agree, Karl. People can't afford it, but Stanton, and Busse over at the Ford garage, have both upped their shop rates. They have you by the short ones.

"Oh, Karl. There is one more thing you should know," the shop foreman said as Larkin turned to leave. "I didn't personally do the job on your vehicle."

Something in Johannson's tone held a hint of warning. Karl nodded and proceeded to the front desk.

The pretty blond receptionist smiled warmly as Larkin handed her the invoice. Most of the single ladies in Chesterton would have liked to set their cap for this handsome and eligible bachelor. Karl returned her smile with a preoccupied nod of greeting. He paid his bill and strolled out into the sunshine.

Larkin paused briefly on the steps and surveyed the second of Chesterton's two business routes. Several boisterous young men burst from the doorway of the establishment across the street. The ubiquitous Licensed Beverage Room sign above the door explained the vociferous nature of the group.

## Watershed

Few vehicles were parked along the avenue, as harvest had been in full swing for a few days. The grain producers were in the fields, making the most of the hot, dry spell. Karl hoped the weather would hold as he glanced up at the incredibly blue western sky.

Larkin's eyes returned to the celebrating trio and followed their unsteady progress until he espied his old car resting almost exactly where it had been parked earlier in the day. Feeling bitter about the injustice of the staggering repair charge, he decided to follow up Bjorn Johansson's suggestion that both of the town's dealerships had conspired to soak the community. Chesterton lay seventy miles from the nearest bigger centre which made the concept of local patronization a necessity. Larkin preferred to shop in Chesterton, believing that the smaller communities were having a tough time in the grip of a prolonged recession. Farmers faced financial hardship and consequently the businesses in the agriculturally based areas suffered directly. Karl did not, however, accept blatant capitalization on the fact that the town remained isolated.

As Karl drove away from Chesterton Motors, he detected a faint shudder of the vehicle when applying the brakes as he approached the main street. He pumped the pedal and, finding nothing irregular, proceeded to Busse's garage. Parallel parking behind the shop truck, Larkin again felt a slight tremor from the car.

Busse sold Ford vehicles while Stanton sold General Motors products. The two garages were in competition in the sales arena; according to Bjorn Johansson, however, they were partners in the repair field. Larkin decided to quiz Hank Busse.



The Ford dealer appeared from his office as Larkin opened the heavy glass entrance door.

“Well, hello, Karl! I haven’t seen you since you left that fat cheque here for your new Bronco. It didn’t quit on you, did it?”

Larkin grinned, “I haven’t scraped up enough money to fill the fuel tank since I drove it home.”

He liked Hank, a fair business man who seemed to ride the economic downturn successfully. Karl wondered at the possibility of this bright and likable gentleman sharing the business bedroom with an arrogant shyster of Emory Stanton’s ilk.

Karl Larkin had many personal attributes that won him favor with people. He was... well... tall, dark and handsome. His six foot frame and muscular build complemented the tanned features of a man accustomed to the outdoors. The firm jaw and steady gray eyes suggested an inner strength and when he smiled his whole face participated, from the upturned mouth flashing perfect white teeth, to the tiny crows’ feet at the edges of his eyes. There was nothing insincere about Karl Larkin. The outstanding quality that brought him to the fore was his compelling, commanding, and sometimes hypnotic voice. He now used this voice to shift the conversation from the customary prairie platitudes, to the more pertinent topic. Imperceptible to the conscious mind, the tone changed.

“Hank, I want to ask a private question related to your business. That is *your business*, not any of mine and I do not wish to upset you.”

Busse met Larkin’s gaze and said. “Sure, Karl, shoot.”

It was not in Karl’s character to leave grain in with the chaff and he did not mince words now.

## Watershed

“Did you and Stanton agree to set the shop rates in town?”

Hank could not avoid the direct question, even if he wanted to. “Yes.”

Larkin waited a moment before saying, “How were you able to justify such an outrageous increase?”

Busse shifted his weight and looking down at his shoes like a scolded child, apologized, “Emory figured we had the repair shop business sewed up.” His voice held a bitter edge as he added, “Emory said, and he is correct, nobody is going to drive seventy miles out of their way to avoid a slight increase in labor charges. Not at today’s gas prices.”

“Seven dollars per hour is not a slight increase!” Karl said, “You have a good head on your shoulders, Hank, why would you listen to anything Emory Stanton suggested?”

Busse shrugged, “He made it sound pretty easy...” Quickly scanning the showroom he added gravely, “there’s a bit more to it than you realize too, Karl.”

Karl met and held Hank’s eyes. The bigger man could feel his soul being laid bare. Larkin murmured, “I think I see the picture now, Hank.”

Hank Busse led a respectable life in Chesterton: Pillar of the community, chairman of the Chamber Of Commerce, successful businessman, husband and father. Few people knew about an affair Hank had had with his pretty little secretary, Andrea. Larkin knew because Andrea herself unwittingly intimated to Karl that something was amiss. People, even those of short acquaintance, often trusted Karl though he did not encourage or pry. More often he wished they would save their

problems for the confessional.

Apparently Emory Stanton had discovered the situation and Larkin guessed correctly now.

"You knew about me and Andrea?" Hank exploded in a whisper.

"I study people, Hank, I had my suspicions. But that is your business and has nothing to do with me."

"Come into my office." Busse put a big hand on Larkin's shoulder and hastily ushered him to the seclusion of the sound proof alcove.

A different Hank Busse from the one who accepted the cheque for a new Bronco a few weeks ago faced Karl Larkin across the big oak desk now. The distraught giant pressed his hands against his face as if trying to push the torment out of his mind. "I'll spare you the details of my little fling," he began. "You know the old saying, forty going on twenty, middle age syndrome and all that horse shit. I pulled through without a hitch. Nobody seemed any the wiser. It started. It stopped. Finished. All of a sudden Stanton showed up wearing that wolf's grin of his and before I could think straight he had me agreeing to this twenty percent increase in shop rates."

"Does it stop there?" Larkin asked without meaning to add to the big fellow's obvious distress.

"Well, I hope so."

Larkin did not wish to play down the serious nature of the demeanor. Hank's standing in the community would suffer but his home life could be ruined.

"I see where you could be behind the eight ball for a while, Hank," Karl said.

"I'll be lucky to come out of this with any balls

## Watershed

at all!" The garage owner grinned through his grief.

The two men escaped the heavy atmosphere of Busse's office and strolled down the hall. Larkin observed that the people who created blue coveralls had distributed quite a few pairs to the Ford dealership as well. Stepping out into the waning afternoon sunshine Karl noted that the heat had diminished as the sun followed its curve to the west.

Hank said, "My hands are tied as far as lowering those shop rates are concerned. Stanton, in not so many words, threatened to spill the beans if I didn't go along with him."

Karl said, "Secrets don't last very long in a town where everyone knows the other person's business. There are plenty of gossips only too willing to spread the news to your wife. Maybe it would be best to tell Phyllis. She will handle it better coming from you."

Larkin walked over to his Chevy and slid in behind the steering column. For a moment, before starting the engine, he considered the unmitigated gall of Emory Stanton: the man seeped evil from every pore; Hell would have to partition off a special area for him when he arrived.

Karl realized he had a choke hold on the steering wheel and released his grip, chastising himself for allowing the dealer to 'push his buttons'. The car thrummed to life and Larkin waited for two pickup trucks to pass before easing out on to the street. As the sedan approached a pedestrian crosswalk, he let off the gas and coasted to allow a lady and her youngster to cross. The child broke from the mother's grasp and dashed in front of the oncoming vehicle. Larkin stepped on the brake. The pedal

went to the floor. His foot slammed hard down on the emergency brake.

Nothing.

Horror spread across the lady's features as, momentarily paralyzed, she stared at the imminent disaster. Mindless of her own safety, she dove for the child.

Freeze-frame slow, Larkin watched the pair disappear from sight below the hood of the car. He wrenched the steering wheel and slammed the gearshift into Park. The locking pin held and the vehicle juddered to a swerving halt.

Leaping from the car, Karl rushed round to the front. The lady, whom he recognized as a Mrs. Arnold, was holding tightly to her son with one hand while trying to push herself up with the other. Karl gently swept up the sobbing youngster and helped Mrs. Arnold to her feet.

"Are you all right?" he gasped.

"I...I think so... You didn't hit us... but... wha...what happened?" the dazed woman stammered.

"I just had my brakes repaired...or *thought* they were repaired. They let go! I couldn't stop!" The voice softened. "I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Arnold."

She gathered the subdued child into her arms. "I'm sure it wasn't your fault, Karl."

Larkin assisted the shaken pair to the sidewalk. Returning to the hastily parked vehicle, shock shifted to rage. Emory Stanton continued to 'push his buttons'.

Karl cautiously maneuvered the car back to Chesterton Motors. Coasting into the parking lot, he rolled up to the big overhead door leading into the

## Watershed

service bay. “Ahh, *Hell* no!” he growled and fed the engine more gas. Gravel squirted from the rear tires and the car lurched into the heavy segmented door. The front end of the car buckled and so did the garage door. A resounding combination of screech and crunch rent the quiet afternoon as splinters and parts became projectiles. Door and frame collapsed under the onslaught. Blue coveralls scattered. A mechanic laden creeper shot out from under a nearby vehicle, hurtling its human cargo to more secure surroundings.

Emory Stanton, positioned just beyond the wreckage, stared wild eyed, his bottom jaw quivering on a second chin.

Karl Larkin, gray eyes ablaze, leaped from his demolished vehicle.

Stanton’s mouth closed, then opened again. Strained but coherent words came out in gasps. “What... the Hell... are you *doing*? ...Have you lost your... your bloody *mind*?”

The uncivil servant stopped mid stride. Like tiny ripples on a pond, his anger vanished, to be replaced with a calm serenity. The voice took command.

“Brakes failed,” he said.

## Chapter 2

Emory Stanton's political allies worked swiftly.

A brief memo from Larkin's head office helped to diffuse surprise and disappointment when a manager delivered the proverbial 'Pink Slip'. The memo stated quite clearly that Karl's behavior, deemed unacceptable in the public eye, must not go unpunished. Larkin did not contest the issue but colleagues were incensed. Arguably, the brakes had indeed failed (Bjorn Johansson attested to that); the incident occurred far removed from the workplace; Karl's employment was not involved in any way; it happened outside the civil servant's normal hours of work.

The R.C.M.P. officer investigating the accident refused Stanton's plea for charges against Larkin. Upon testing the brake mechanism for his own satisfaction, the constable addressed the insensate dealer, "I should charge *you* with criminal negligence."

Encouraged by the officer's example,

## Watershed

coworkers of the oppressed man appealed to their union. The union, in Larkin's experience, existed for its hierarchy, usurping employee wages so as to pamper the hedonistic executive. There seemed little hope of backing from that quarter.

His skepticism was rewarded. When the road grew muddy the elder 'brothers and sisters' decided to wash their hands of the incident. Karl read the decision with slight change of expression:

**Having investigated thoroughly the grievance of Brother Larkin's dismissal, we find the fault to lie entirely in the hands of the individual. We do not condone the actions of this member and will not provide protection for those actions....**

Several colleagues had gathered anxiously to hear the verdict of their appeal. Now they apologized in embarrassment. The suggestion arose that Stanton had the union in his pocket along with the politicians.

"You've been shafted, Karl," Ted Hopkins said. "I could understand if you were driving a company vehicle, or maybe if it had occurred during working hours... but this is ludicrous."

"Stanton must have really crawled down in the muck to find the slime who engineered this railroad job," said another colleague.

The victim shrugged, "Emory could have set this up with a single telephone call. You boys best cover your backsides in his presence, too... Stanton's government doesn't want any *un-civil* servants."



Unlike his co-workers, the soft voiced young man did not presume that the term 'job security' necessarily existed anywhere other than on paper or at Rah! Rah! union rallies. He believed in a job well done and appreciation for individual effort. Removing personal effects from his desk, the dismissed employee reflected upon the time spent in this office; how long had it been? Six, or was it seven, years? He'd hired on after a stint in University in the spring of 1975. Now it was approaching fall 1982. Over seven years.

And, now he had no job, no direction. But, surprisingly, the dismissal had taken a burden off his shoulders like the last day of school.

Unwillingly, Karl harbored a growing resentment toward the bullying of the affluent car dealer, more so on behalf of Hank Busse than himself. Larkin knew his dismissal would be a feather in Stanton's cap. Men of his character would feed their egos on such a coup. How far would Stanton's gluttoned ego take him? What would the conscienceless shit-disturber try next? Who will be the victim?

Though Karl maintained an outward calm, his thoughts were a seething turmoil.

And it bothered him.

He disliked having anyone preying on his mind; 'pushing those buttons'. Stanton would pay for this injustice. Honesty was the highest among Larkin's virtues and he *would not* abide a liar, cheat or thief; he wasn't fond of manipulators or extortionists either.

Larkin decided to even the score; maybe go ahead a goal or two.

## Watershed

The banished employee initially reasoned that Emory's pocketbook would be the most effective target for retaliation against the predatory cad, but Karl could think of no way to do this without turning himself into a criminal. However, further consideration favoured a notion to publicly shame the car dealer. Many customers and all political confederates would soon disassociate themselves from a disreputable businessman. Stanton should be ruined just as he had planned for Larkin and threatened Hank Busse....

...How?

...How does a dishonourably dismissed civil servant expose a veteran exploiter? Post an ad in the local rag? Run up and down the streets shouting "Stanton screwed me?" The battery of absurd ideas that shelled Larkin's mind were laughable; at times he embarrassed himself. But Karl possessed a bulldog's grip and a pit bull's determination. He doggedly pursued the conviction that Stanton must be stopped.

Larkin did not allow himself to be preoccupied with vengeance, however, as he pondered in his idle moments. On the third night, just after Karl slipped into bed, the seed of an idea sprouted. By morning it had pushed up a tiny shoot that, in the light of day, looked too weak to survive but Karl did not give it over. He nourished the young plant for several days, watched it grow branches, leaf out, bud and blossom until the notion had fully matured.

What Karl foresaw was more than a personal vendetta. Like turning up the power of a zoom lens

or the magnification on a microscope, the distant and vague vision came into focus, revealing an opportunity to correct several injustices: a way to ensure that his friends and neighbours —the consumers of Chesterton and area— were not taken advantage of by the unscrupulous; then, tweaking and fine tuning the image still further, like a snowslide, the concept burst the borders of locality and bounded unleashed beyond horizons. Possibilities were endless.

From the recesses of his mind Karl recalled bits and nibbles of information he had stored over the years. Ideas, long forgotten, reappeared as pieces of a subconsciously pre-constructed puzzle.

After high school, Karl had endured two terms of university before concluding that he had had quite enough schooling for one lifetime. Teachers were condescending; professors were oblivious; and neither group could be *taught* anything. However, Economics 102 had been an interesting subject for Karl. As the professor expounded upon the intricacies of the science, the youth devoured the information. *Supply and demand*, the fundamental law of global economics....

Karl the student had trouble with that one.

If stated *demand and supply*, would the rudiments of the rule be altered?

Seven years later that question cropped up again. If you switched the wording from “*supply and demand*” to “*demand and supply*” would the sky fall in? Would the world economy go into overload? Karl did not think so, but the implications required further study.

Gradually, a concrete strategy materialized. Larkin grinned as he fantasized presenting his

## Watershed

hypothesis to Professor Goodwin, the university's economics patriarch. What would his reaction have been? Larkin could not defy the basic law of economics; his *modus operandi*: reverse the application.

Karl knew the time was ripe to present his vision: Anxiety gripped a world held in prolonged recession; unemployment figures were the highest since the Great Depression; global economies plunged; futile governmental attempts to reverse or slow the drift exacerbated the chaos.

Stanton's rebuff would become a mere consequence.

*Stéphane Giroux studied people. Neither habit nor hobby, he considered paying attention to detail of everyone he saw a fundamental part of his employment. At the moment, riding the Toronto subway bound downtown to Union Station, Giroux focused on a small bodied person, probably late teens, short blond hair tucked under a reversed ball cap, Stéphane leaned ahead: Toronto Blue Jays logo; faded light denim jacket with snaps fastened up to the second last; blue jeans: left knee ripped; well-worn sneakers: Adidas with right shoelace untied; the clean white collar of an out-of-style turtleneck was rolled up to the pale chin (one small zit) which rested upon a worn, navy coloured violin case: second latch along the neck broken; a gray woolen glove covered one rather small hand (the other was concealed behind the case) curled up on the bench seat. Asleep.*

*Giroux shifted his gaze briefly, tried to focus*

*on other passengers but for reasons unknown to him, he kept returning to the innocuous figure on the bench opposite. The train brushed into Union Station and the detective rose to make his exit. He cast one last glance at the little person on the seat and gave an involuntary start; Giroux was looking into the spookiest pair of eyes he had ever seen: the irises were a smoldering yellowish orange with dilated pupils like a wild cat; the whites were orbs of pale blue; they stared with intense burning hatred. Giroux's keen observation had missed the fact that he was under veiled study as well. Stepping onto the platform, Stéphane shivered; his hand involuntarily sought the reassuring bulge under his left arm.*

*Stéphane Giroux was a plain clothes detective for Greater Toronto Area Police (G-TAP).*

Chesterton boasted a fine district newspaper. The *Chesterton Herald* managed to hold on when struggling weeklies in the area were going under; now it thrived. The quote, "Serving the community for over seventy years" endorsed the front page of every issue and the Herald now reached out to more than three thousand subscribers. In a letter to the Chesterton Herald's editor, Karl Larkin wrote:

***They do not exist.***

**When someone (everyone) says,  
"They should do something about that,"  
who are we referring to? Who are they?  
Complaints outnumber solutions a  
thousand times and invariably the  
complainer/blame-shifter leaves the**

## Watershed

problem in the hands of the non-existent *they*. Coffee row, barber shops and hair salons, the beer parlor, anywhere at least two people meet, complaints abound and we part knowing that *they* will have to deal with it.

Have *they* ever done anything?

Not recently. Not in my lifetime.

I believe that every complaint, gripe or grievance should be accompanied with a plausible solution. If you don't have an answer, spend your time finding one rather than passing it on to *they*.

We, not *they*, are in a financial mess here in Canada.

Prices escalate, wages rise, taxes increase; is this a sustainable scenario? Farmers face ever higher production costs while grain prices slip to the lowest in our nation's history. We have bowed our backs, tightened our belts and made overwhelming sacrifices in an effort to withstand this prolonged cycle. Consumers have taken each price and tax increase in stride, hoping (in a few instances: praying) for a glimpse of light in a long and dark tunnel. Governmental initiated policies have proven to be painfully inept. No bureaucratic initiative, no financial wizardry, not even Divine Intervention will miraculously solve our problems for us.

And, of course, *they* have done nothing.

We mustn't wait for or blame

**anyone else. Responsibility lies squarely upon our shoulders. The road to recovery and prosperity begins now, right here, in Chesterton.**

**The solution: affordability.**

Damp ink found its way to eager hands as word of Karl's submission preceded the printing. Chesterton fairly buzzed with comment. What can be done? How could one man figure to straighten out the financial degradation suffered by an entire nation's plunging economy? Did Larkin intend to attack the governments, provincially and nationally? Perhaps the lad had "slipped a cog" after losing his job. The article launched a hundred-fold more questions than the written words had asked. *Everyone*, quintessential cynic through eternal optimist, wished to hear more.

Larkin's only remark flatly stated that, given an audience, he would outline his strategy.

Long time friend, Mark Conlee, conferred with his former colleague when Karl stopped in to sign final papers. Waving a copy of the Chesterton Herald, Conlee asked, "Karl, have you lost your mind along with your job?"

"I'm hoping that isn't the case. How does a fellow know when he's lost his faculties?"

"I'm not sure... You look the same..."

"Well, thanks for that show of confidence."

Mark unfolded the newspaper. "But what are you driving at?" Scanning the article, he added, "What exactly is this *affordability*?"

Larkin answered, "The amount a person's

## Watershed

income will support... I believe that the goods and services consumers *need* should be made more affordable. If that were so, income could be less or buying power could be more. You tell me: if you receive a five percent raise and, at the same time, inflation goes up five percent, have you gained? Or, if that same inflation was six percent, how do you make up the lost penny-on-the-dollar? No one wishes to lose that almighty buck, *but* if seventy-five cents went further, which is better?"

Mark refolded the rag. "In my experience, we've lost more pennies than gained. They haven't coughed up anything to cover the difference so I guess we just do without."

Pointing a finger at the column, Karl said. "*They* haven't coughed up anything to cover the difference! *They* never will either....

"To delve a bit deeper, the problem, as I perceive it, Mark, is that we seldom try to resolve anything on our own. Since confederation Canadians have depended upon the governing body. That dependence grew exponentially during the Great Depression when thousands of people were wholly dependent upon government handouts. "Relief" is a most hated word among our fathers, yet we continue to think of the provincial and federal governments as our life support, a 'Big Brother'. Politicians feed that notion, making us all the more dependent and everyone is at the trough for his or her handout. The circle widens; in the long run, the costs outstrip the benefits."

Conlee nodded. "Any time government is involved, administration gobbles up the lion's share."

"Mark, we are immersed in an economic Dust



Bowl again and I believe we can address, minimize, many of the problems on our own. We have to eliminate the very idea of dependency and to do that, each dollar has to stretch farther.”

“How do you intend to stretch the dollar?”

“I would begin right here, in Chesterton. I would challenge the over-inflated prices we pay in this town.”

Mark tossed the paper on the table, lifted his ball cap and scratched his head. “Well, we do pay more for everything... but it costs more to bring stuff here than in the city. We can’t drive to Riverside for a loaf of bread just because it’s ten cents cheaper.”

“No, and I wouldn’t suggest such a thing, but there are other points where we are caught in the middle. As the ripples of advancement spread, so do the repercussions. One feeds on another, always growing larger. Meantime, we’re going in circles like a dog chasing its tail, oblivious in our blind pursuit of higher income.”

Mark drew up a chair and pushed another toward Karl. “But what are you planning to do? How will *you* stop everybody from chasing their tail?”

“It’s simple. We unite as consumers.”

“Unite! Who’s going to unite? No one likes unions in this country, Karl. You should realize that better than anybody. Unionists and unions are blamed by Joe Public for the mess the country is in today. You won’t even have your own shadow behind you with that approach.”

Karl said, “People don’t like unions, Mark, that is true. Perhaps another appellation would prove more endearing to the masses.”

## Watershed

“A union is a union!” Mark argued. “What the hell else is it?”

“Have you heard terms like Bar Association, Institute of Chartered Accountants, Fraternity of Medical Doctors? Or perhaps North Atlantic Treaty Organization, The League of Nations? The name Soviet Union tends to put bile in the throats of people who are perfectly happy with the cognomen United States. It’s all in the way you say it.”

Conlee’s eyebrows rose. “Perhaps you have a point there....” He reached for the *Herald* and opened it again. “How do you expect to talk to all these consumers?” A grin spread across his face and he added, “Are you going door to door?”

“It would be best to reach out to the people in large numbers so they don’t confuse the message. Perhaps by speaking to the public, I could rally support.”

Mark Conlee was well aware of Karl’s ability to bring people around to his way of thinking. A spark of realization lit in Mark’s eyes. He said, “If you talk to them, they will listen.”

Flipping the paper back on the table, he continued, “The trick is to have everybody under the power of that silver tongue of yours. How could we arrange to have a mob of people in the same place, at the same time, where you can reach them?”

“That is a problem,” Larkin nodded, a worried expression furrowing his brow.

Conlee fully realized he was under the charm, and he knew that Larkin knew he knew; still his enthusiasm blossomed. “Maybe I could arrange to have a few of the boys from work pitch in; we are all behind you anyway. We could rent a hall and announce Karl Larkin as guest speaker. We’ll

advertise. Hell, everybody is interested now. They'll come out in droves!"

"Thanks, Mark. I hate myself for being a manipulator... using a friend. I'm no better than Stanton."

Conlee grinned, "I had to come up with your plan. It wouldn't have worked if you had come right out and asked me."

Larkin's friends became willing and invaluable tools. The stage would be set and Karl Larkin would have his chance to speak.

*The violin case appeared almost too heavy for the small figure lugging it down the cement steps into the cavernous underground chamber. The handles were no longer dependable, so the battered case had to be carried, bundle-like, in the arms. Jamie Langston didn't mind though, the 'violin' was a treasure, a companion.*

*In the foyer, Jamie briefly exchanged pleasantries with the commissionaire while signing the membership registry, then donned ear protection and walked through the doorway leading to the soundproof gallery. Jamie preferred mid afternoon practice because there were fewer patrons. Today, only one other individual was seated at the benches. He fired a steady volley from a large calibre handgun. The newcomer went to the opposite side of the shooting range.*

*Langston fiddled with the latches and opened up the case. A pleasant scent of gun oil assailed sensitive nostrils as Jamie extracted the nine pound "Stradivarius" and lovingly caressed the highly polished English walnut stock. The insignia Strum Ruger & Co; Number 1, Special Varminter; Cal 22-*

## Watershed

*250 was stamped into the blued steel barrel. The heavy-barreled rifle, having a special adaptation for take-down conversion, was in two pieces; a third part, a 3-9 Variable Power, Leupold, fifty millimeter target rifle scope with special mounts, completed the ensemble. Two boxes of twenty cartridges, in the calibre specified on the rifle barrel, were also tucked into the modified violin case.*

*The shooter delayed assembling the weapon, carefully inspecting each component in turn. Satisfied, nimble fingers put the single-shot rifle together in a practiced, rapid fashion.*

*Ten rounds of .224 calibre, 55 grain jacketed hollow-point bullets hit the bulls-eye of the target posted at fifty yards (the maximum length available in the gallery); a dime would have covered the adjoining holes. Jamie Langston was satisfied; the gun never missed....*

Chesterton Community Hall had been selected as the location for Karl Larkin's first Consumer Group meeting. As the fledgling orator anxiously surveyed the growing number of people attending, a fleeting panic seized him. He had very little experience in the field of public speaking. Would his voice fail him now?

An air of levity filtered among the gathering crowd. Curiosity was the biggest draw. A few faces reflected anxious hope. Skepticism reigned supreme. Karl had expected and prepared himself for the latter.

On the positive side, even the most optimistic person would not have predicted the overwhelming number in attendance. People from fifty miles away had driven to Chesterton to listen to the man who

claimed he could lower the high cost of living. Mark Conlee had said there may even be a reporter from the city of Riverside. The topic touched on a sore spot, and everyone desired a healing solution. A general rainfall had halted the harvest for a few days and many farmers had come to town for a respite and to buy supplies. Curiosity stimulated, they had coincided their trip with the meeting.

Following the usual scraping of chairs, exchanges of greeting and general confusion, the audience found a seat or stood toward the back of the hall when no more chairs were available. A low murmur continued until Larkin, unannounced, casually walked to center stage and stepped up to the microphone.

As though talking to someone in particular he said, "I tried out this mike a while ago... is it still working? Can you hear me at the back?"

An affirmative indication allowed Karl to proceed. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to see such a fine turn out. I hope to entertain you with a few ideas that should have been voiced long ago."

"Many of you already know me. For those I haven't had the pleasure of meeting, my name is Karl Larkin."

"He's running for vice-president of the world," shouted one of the contingent who had had time to brace themselves at the beverage room.

Laughter rippled through the hall.

"That's *President* of the world, Mel," Larkin retorted.

On the inside, Karl felt as though he was drowning. *Karl Larkin* was a nobody and only through the effort of his volunteer campaign crew and the inherent curiosity of the public had he

## Watershed

reached this point. Swim or sink? There were no more life jackets available and the water was rising to his chin.

But he could still open his mouth.

He did so and the voice flowed out.

Everyone, straining to hear, maintained complete silence while the figure before them captivated and hypnotized. Opening minds, touching hearts, arousing tempers while demonstrating the plausibility of his theory, Karl appealed to everyone individually. Whether vocal articulation or subdued whisper, the voice arrived inside the mind as though free from the logistics of normal sound.

“Canadians are very fortunate. Footage of starving third world countries fill our TV screens reminding us of just how blessed we are to live in this land of milk and honey. Most certainly, our living standards far exceed those witnessed on television. However, the misfortunes of others have a tendency to lure us into a false sense of our own security.

“We are not secure; we are complacent.

“The ever increasing expense of withholding our current standard is strangling the nation’s coffers. We are spending money that we do not have to maintain a system which is no longer affordable.

“As a parallel, consider an ecosystem: An ecosystem defined is the interaction of a community of plants and animals within an environment. Each organism is an integral part of a chain that must have all links in order to survive. If the fundamental link suddenly begins to disappear, the consecutive groups within that food chain must adapt, relocate or perish.

“Ladies and gentlemen, our food chain is losing its fundamental link. The signs of a failing economy are similar to the demise of an ecosystem. Our tax base is the link which keeps a nation strong. We are pricing ourselves out of our own country. We demand that our politicians and public officials maintain this luxurious standard; in order to be re-elected they comply and I *do not* blame them for failing to address the crux of the problem. It is easier to ride the wave than to commit political suicide. Consequently, we slide backward; with a tax increase here and there, a company moving out of Canada now and then, farm foreclosures and unemployment figures rising daily. We have to realize that ‘waiting it out’ will not solve, but surely compound, the issue.”

Gray eyes searched the audience. “Are *you* prepared to adapt? relocate? perish?

“We can rejuvenate our dying economic ecosystem. We will benefit from our efforts. Not everyone will be pleased. Many will be affronted. However, given the wisdom and the foresight to see our future in the ‘big picture’, all Canadians will gain.

“Everyone in this room is a consumer. Farmers prefer to be called producers, but they are consumers as well— on a grand scale. No matter what walk of life we follow, there are basic needs that we Canadians require to remain healthy and alive. We have essential requirements necessary to continue in our chosen profession. Consider the millions of consumers across our nation; don’t you think we should have incredible purchasing power? Why can’t we set the prices?”

The crowd showed obvious agreement as a

## Watershed

hushed whisper circulated around the room. Many heads nodded approval. Interested faces encouraged the speaker to proceed.

“The circle of price hikes never ceases its upward spiral. Every nickel increase in wages, goods, services or taxes tends to ripple outward until the actual cost to the consumer is effectively tripled or quadrupled. If you were an employee receiving the nickel increase, by the time you spent your next paycheque, the five cents would have been gobbled up in the ripple effect. Meanwhile, along the line, a business has folded, people have been laid off, and unemployment insurance premiums have risen. Members of the ecosystem have moved, adapted or... perished.

“Dramatic? Possibly. The implications however, are obvious.

“Conversely, if we were to turn the table one hundred and eighty degrees, if we installed a price reduction, lower tax or a decrease in the wage scale, there should be a rippling effect resulting in benefit throughout the circle. Avarice prevents the advancement of this more favorable scenario. We must have honest and complete participation in all links from producer to consumer in order for everyone to gain. The millions of consumers in Canada will ensure that this participation is observed.

“‘*A dollar ain’t a dollar anymore*’... Well, it could be. The time is upon us when we must take a stand on the cost runaway. All the complaining on coffee row won’t change things for us. No amount of political lobbying will help. And, apparently God has also left us alone in this problem. We are facing a monster that we *can* control. Not as individuals,



but together, as a group. That's the key! Consumers must have a voice. And believe me, if we all shouted at once... we would be heard."

Following a brief pause, Karl again spoke. "Undoubtedly you have questions. Where do we start? What can be done? I'll attempt to field your queries. Before we go into that, allow me to ask a few of you....

"We've all heard about the gas wars in major cities; ever wonder why that doesn't occur in *all* cities? Forgive me, I'm off the topic. On a more local basis, let us use the price of fuel at the service stations in Chesterton. I can appreciate the fact that our area, as it is a considerable distance from the refineries, must cover the added cost of fuel delivery; we don't need a gas war."

"I see many faces here from neighboring towns. Perhaps some of you could help me out here. Delaine Harlen, could you tell the audience the price, per litre, at the service stations in Fleury?"

All eyes turned to the addressed man. After conferring with the fellows to his immediate left and right, he rose and stated, "47.4 cents per litre for regular and 59.9 for unleaded."

"Thank-you, Delaine," Larkin responded, then he asked a lady from another nearby village. Her reply stated similar prices.

"Now," Larkin continued, "I'll tell you that the price of fuel in Chesterton is exactly two cents per litre higher. Why is that? Fleury is farther from the refinery than our town."

A murmur of surprise drifted throughout the audience. Steel gray eyes sought and found their target. "Harvey," Larkin called softly, "perhaps you could correct me if I'm wrong, or, if not, could you

## Watershed

explain why this price difference exists.”

A tall gaunt figure with a hawk nose and graying hair stood up nervously. Obviously embarrassed, he realized the futility of refusal.

“That’s right, Karl. We have a ‘Gasoline Retailer’s Association’ here in Chesterton. 49.4 is the price we agreed to hold.”

“If we had a ‘Consumer’s Purchasing Association’ who refused to pay more than 47.4 cents per litre, would you lower your price?” Karl asked.

“I...I guess we’d have to...”

“Ladies and gentlemen, to ensure that this price reduction occurs, tomorrow, buy your gasoline from the service station selling for 47.4 cents,” Karl said. “Hopefully, you need not drive to Fleury!”

The crowd applauded their enthusiasm. Karl realized he had stepped on Harvey’s and his colleagues’ toes. This must be expected if the theory were to prove viable.

“Fuel pricing is an integral part of this nation’s economy; Canada is huge and transport costs are a major factor in every purchase we make; any petroleum increase sends a ripple from shore to shore and consequently throttles the overall economy. The most negative impact are the ‘hidden’ taxes imposed by federal and provincial governments on every litre we buy. When governments back off their fuel taxes we will realize lower production cost on our every purchase. Until then, we are all driving around with our carburettors set on half choke.”

Larkin continued, “Fellow consumers, there is another item that stands out in the field of unfair pricing: In our grocery stores, the price of eggs is

exorbitant; almost fifty percent higher than Riverside. Now, you may go to any store in or near Chesterton and note the source of our egg supplies. All of our Grade A's come via one market. I don't have to tell you. It's printed on every carton. My concern here is not with the local merchants. This is a case of monopoly on the part of the producer. I have inquired and the supplier has told me that his production costs have escalated. That may be true... but note today's price of wheat. The hens aren't eating twice as much and feed grain prices are cut in half. Someone is growing fat and it isn't the chickens. We can easily curb our egg consumption for a time. Let us omit our 'two poached' for six weeks. By that time, existing stock will have to be moved and you can bet that our retailers will have negotiated a more acceptable price for us."

Once again the audience shouted approval.

"Now, I'd like to hear you opinion... any comments? Suggestions?"

"I got a question!" an older farmer called out as he rose to his feet. "How about that seven dollar an hour shop rate increase the two garages decided to lay on us?"

Perfect! Larkin smiled inwardly. The ultimate plan had been to nail Stanton and now the opportunity fell into Karl's lap. When the news reaches him, Emory Stanton would be fuming.

A barrage of verbal shots directed at the car dealerships ricocheted around the town hall.

"Yes," Larkin agreed, "that is a 25% rate increase. It seems unrealistic when I am trying to manage on a 100% decrease."

Laughter rocked the hall following this interjection. Most of the attendance had heard of

## Watershed

Larkin's recent dismissal. Many blamed Stanton.

A sudden quiet descended as Hank Busse rose to his full height. Karl noted the pale drawn face and presumed the owner of Busse Ford had suffered sleepless nights recently. Hank's tiny wife exhibited signs of stress too. She clung to her husband's big hand, looking up to flash him a fleeting smile of reassurance.

"Fellow... er... consumers," Hank began, "I fully agree with the plan Mr. Larkin has revealed tonight. His words contain more thought and wisdom than we realize at present. This presentation of Karl's is, or can be, far bigger than Chesterton and area. The implications are staggering. The scale can definitely be tipped in our favor and a stronger future hangs in the balance. Let's support Karl one hundred percent and see where it leads. Our community should be proud to have such an individual.

"Ah, yes," he added, as if in after-thought, "bring your mechanical difficulties to our garage. We have, as of this moment, reinstated our former shop rate."

Pandemonium broke loose and the meeting continued with added vigor. Larkin had assumed a seat beside the microphone and anyone wishing to talk could do so. A few spoke against his strategy suggesting that the people were incapable of the responsibility. However, the majority were not in a mood to listen to negative comment. Farmers expressed concern for escalating chemical and fertilizer costs. A heated and extended discussion suggesting a united tax rebellion had the entire audience astir. Though nothing concrete was resolved, Karl was extremely pleased with the

participation.

Returning to centre stage Larkin again thanked everyone for coming out. Appreciation shone in his eyes as he noted the passing of the hat. The crowd considered this a very informative and entertaining evening.

"I simply ask that we give this theory a try," Larkin said. "If these few targets can be met, we can move on on a grander scale. Tomorrow, in Chesterton, the consumer will have a say!"

Mingling with his audience, Karl received many handshakes and well wishes. Meeting the lean, tired gaze of Harvey Schmidt, pain touched the younger man's heart. "I'm sorry to have put you on the spot, Harvey. Really, it's nothing personal and I knew I could count on you to tell the truth."

"Damn it, Larkin, you know I make my living at that cursed service station. How the Hell can I make ends meet with a price reduction? We pay higher municipal taxes in Chesterton than they do in Fleury; my overhead is higher."

"Harvey, believe me," Karl said, "we have to start somewhere. You'll be rewarded in the long run."

"I don't eat no damn eggs. And, I sure as hell don't get my truck fixed at Stanton's garage."

"Well, you better go home and polish your Snap-ons, Harvey, because a lot of other people aren't going to Stanton's garage anymore either."

The lugubrious face lightened from dark of anger to dark of misery. "Maybe the shop business will pick up. That's better money than pumping gas anyway."

Hank Busse stepped up to clamp a firm grip on Karl's shoulder. "You're one hell of a speaker old-

## Watershed

timer. Where did you learn to hustle like that?"

Karl grinned at the big man, "I talked myself hoarse and you had more profound effect with only a few words... thank-you, Hank."

"I should be thanking you, Karl," Busse replied meaningfully.

Karl met Hank's eyes then shifted his understanding gaze to encompass Mrs. Busse as well. "I'm certainly happy to see *both* of you here tonight."

As Hank and Phyllis Busse turned to leave, Larkin's glance fell on a very attractive brunette whom he vaguely recognized. The glance turned into a prolonged stare; Karl could not tear his gaze from her. Thick, dark hair shone against the perfect whiteness of her skin. She wore an ivory coloured suit that accentuated intriguing curves. When she turned her head, Karl noted full red lips and large dark eyes. A carmine blouse, opened low at the throat, accented sparingly applied make-up. A stunningly beautiful woman.

And she appeared to be approaching him.

Pen and notebook in hand, the lady moved gracefully through the crowd and slipped to Karl's side. "Mr. Larkin," she said, offering her hand, "I'm Sheena Davies of the City Times, in Riverside."

The man with the voice had none.

Taking the proffered hand, he bowed slightly, "I... I'm Karl Larkin."

The eyes, close to, were a liquid deep blue, they gazed up into the steel-grays. At length the reporter spoke, "You are an inspiring speaker, Mr. Larkin. I commend you on your conduct this evening."

"Thank-you."

"I would like to ask you a few questions and take down some notes, if you don't mind."

"Certainly. Of course, Miss... Davies."

She smiled, "I'll need both hands."

Karl released her hand. A blush crept up his tanned features. "Oh, excuse me." Larkin wondered if anyone else had noticed but there did not seem to be anyone looking his way at the moment.

The majority of the audience had filed through the exits; a few lingered in small groups, talking animatedly. The orator began to realize the extreme stress of his campaign. Adrenalin that had brought him to this point ceased to flow and the effect of the anti-climax seeped in. The evening had been successful beyond his own biased prediction, now he wished to be out of the limelight, away from everyone. Studying the lovely reporter, he reconsidered; perhaps not away from *everyone*.

"It's awfully hot in here."

Sensing the young man's tension, Sheena suggested, "Perhaps I could treat you to a drink. Your throat must be dry after that intriguing speech you delivered."

"I think that would be great, Miss Davies."

The pair exited the hall and strolled casually along the temporarily busy avenue. Dozens of vehicles motored past as the hall parking lot emptied. After they had walked a couple of blocks, the din of rush minute traffic receded and the night grew quiet. Larkin looked up at the sky. An immense harvest moon shone down, bathing the streets in its silvery luminescence. Gradually the pent up strain of anxiety drained from his tired body.

"Nice night," he said.

Sheena said, "The city lights don't outshine the

## Watershed

moon in Chesterton.”

A little bell over the door tinkled as the couple entered a coffee shop. The waitress, recognizing Karl, smiled and ushered them to a table. Four other patrons, seated at a booth, congratulated Karl on his presentation at the town hall. Other members of his audience trooped in and called their congratulations as well.

Sheena began a battery of questions and Karl, feeling more at ease, managed answers.

“Do you believe this theory will actually be proved, Mr. Larkin?”

“...Please, Miss Davies, call me Karl. I’m not used to ‘Mr. Larkin’.”

She smiled, and Karl felt the warmth. “Not many people call me Miss Davies either. I’ve lived with “Sheena”, all my life... Karl.”

“Okay, *Sheena* —that’s a pretty name— I am convinced that if consumers pull together, we can achieve a more affordable and, in the long run, higher standard of living for all Canadians. Chesterton is experimental; this town will be the proving ground. I have hopes that the challenges taken tonight will be decided in our favor.”

“You have a very persuasive manner, Karl; I believe you could make anyone do anything for you.”

Larkin raised his brows; he hoped the beautiful reporter could not read his thoughts. He said, “thank-you, Sheena, I hope you are right.”

“There will be people in Chesterton who will not be pleased by your action tonight. How do you propose to deal with them?”

Karl recalled the weary look on Harvey Schmidt’s face. “I’m sorry for them. I honestly



think everyone will benefit when the dust settles. It will take longer for some....

"Would you mind, Sheena, if I shifted the topic for a little while? I am not entirely comfortable with your recording my every word."

"Of course, Karl," the brunette apologized. Then, stowing the note pad in her purse, she added, "I am a reporter, it's my job to find the facts."

"Your face looks familiar, Sheena. Could we have met somewhere?"

"You have probably seen me on CBJT television. I anchor the evening news occasionally... in addition to my City Times duties."

"That's it!" Karl snapped his fingers. "I must admit though, I seldom watch TV, and rarer still CBJT. I'll make a point of catching your newscast."

Sheena's huge deep blue eyes met and held the frank gray eyes of her companion.

"Are you a family man, Karl?"

"No, I'm nearing thirty and still single... I guess the right lady never came along....

"Excuse my boldness, but it really is a wonder that a pretty girl hasn't captured you. You are a handsome, intelligent man and your voice could charm serpents."

Her candor left Karl squirming on the inside like a seventh grade school boy. He concentrated on the coffee cup for a moment, then asked, "Are you... er... attached, Sheena?"

"Attached?" She laughed. "I haven't heard that expression for a long time. No, mister, I ain't 'tached to nobody."

"Now that," Larkin said, "is truly a wonder."

As they walked back to the hall and Sheena's car, Sheena shivered and slipped her arm inside

## Watershed

Karl's. "It's cool tonight," she murmured.

"Yes, there will be a heavy dew after that rain. I suppose the farmers won't be able to thrash for a few days yet. Fall will soon be upon us."

"Do you always think of others?" she asked.

"How so?" Karl looked at her, puzzled.

"You don't farm. Still you worry about farmers completing their harvest."

Karl shrugged. "My father is a farmer, I grew up on the farm. I suppose it stays with you."

Sheena smiled, "I prefer to believe that you are concerned about everyone."

The gray eyes hardened for a nano-second. "Not quite everyone," Larkin replied, thinking of Emory Stanton.

"I've heard about the injustice of your firing, Karl," Sheena said. "You have worked for that department for seven years. Everyone said you had done a fine job."

"You've really done your homework on me, haven't you? However, you couldn't have talked to everyone. There always exists two sides to any story."

"My opinion tends to side with the majority."

Karl said, "Reporters are supposed to be unbiased."

Upon reaching Sheena's little sports car, Karl took the keys and unlocked the door for her. "Folks don't often lock their vehicles in Chesterton."

They stood silently for a moment in the glow of the harvest moon.

She touched his face lightly with her hand. "I know you will do well with your Consumer's Association, Karl. A man like you could move the nation if he chose to."

“You know, Sheena, I had forgotten about the earlier part of the evening. My day really didn’t start until I met you.”

“Smoooooth!” she laughed as she settled into the car.

Through the opened window the couple chatted a moment longer.

“Will I see you again, Sheena? It’s only seventy miles to Riverside. Maybe we could see a show or take in a concert....”

“Hey, it happens that I have two complimentary tickets to the Gypsy concert. Would you like to take that in?” Sheena asked.

“That sounds great!”

“Here’s my address and phone number,” she said, scribbling in her note pad. “The show is at eight on the thirteenth. Drop around and we’ll do up the town.”

“Super! I’ll see you on the thirteenth, Sheena.”

She smiled and touched his hand. “Bye for now, Mr. Larkin. It really has been a pleasure meeting you.”

Karl stood transfixed as he watched Sheena drive away. The right turn signal flashed a few seconds then the sports car eased onto the thoroughfare; soon the vehicle disappeared from view.

“What a lady! ...What a day!”

Sheena left Chesterton, northbound on Highway 84. What little traffic she saw was in the form of taillights going in her direction: probably remnants of Larkin’s out of town audience heading home.

Setting the cruise control on her BMW, the

## Watershed

journalist reflected upon the evening. The handsome orator, though not polished, had a raw talent for speaking to the public. He faced a tough and cynical audience on his first trial and had manipulated the entire community as though they had been coached or responding to script. Sheena believed the town would carry through on Karl's suggestions; the man had a lasting effect.

She slowed for a set of eyes shining in her headlights, then braked as a trio of deer dashed across the pavement. Resuming speed at a lower cruise setting Sheena returned to her contemplation. What was it in the man's voice that was so alluring, captivating? In the packed hall she thrilled to Larkin's delivery. His words were spoken in a normal manner, amplified by an ordinary microphone, but they did not arrive in her head via the eardrums; rather, the voice insinuated itself inside her mind....

At the junction where Highway 84 ended, Sheena obediently stopped at the sign but the four lane was deserted. On the last leg to Riverside, transport trucks were the only vehicular activity the reporter encountered. The prairies were in bed by midnight.

Arriving at her apartment a few minutes past one in the morning, Sheena readied herself for bed. As she snuggled under the covers Karl Larkin continued to fill her mind; she was looking forward to seeing him again. A smile crossed her face in the darkness, had the man been mute she would not have been any less drawn to him.

## Chapter 3

*The kids at school had bullied Jamie Langston, partly because of the student's high intellect, but mostly because of the strange eye colour. In public school the Langston kid was labelled a freak and therefore, in small minds, an outcast. In higher grades, bullying grew rougher, the words more hurtful. Doting parents could not fill the void and, in time, sadness and frustration turned to anger. The worst of the tormentors realized, too late, just how deep that anger ran...*

*The Langston kid, "The Freak," or "Lion Eyes," had preferred not to go on the school trip, fearing that close quarters during the bus ride would provide an inescapable arena for the harassers. But Jamie's parents insisted the outing would be educational and an opportunity to make new friends.*

*Eddie "Hulk" Marley ensured that the drive to Niagara was nothing short of hell. An oblivious bus driver and feckless chaperones, who really didn't*

## Watershed

*care for Langston anyway, offered no reprieve. The falls weren't beautiful; they were a horror. With no provocation Marley grabbed Jamie by the arms and made as if to throw the orange-eyed kid over the fence. Nearby students encouraged the Hulk but, to everyone's disappointment, Lion Eyes did not cry out or struggle and eventually Eddie lost interest. Jamie lagged behind and tried to keep a safe distance from the other pupils.*

*When the students returned to the bus, a head count, then two more recounts, indicated that one student had been left behind. A chorus went up; "Hey, Eddie isn't here!"*

*Three days later Eddie was found in an eddy near the base of the falls.*

*Jamie Langston decided the school trip had been a success after all.*

Sleep eluded the weary orator when at last he slipped between the sheets. The monumental events of the day danced like phantom ballerinas through his mind. A barrage of 'ifs' and 'maybes' battered his exhausted brain. At last a vision of a beautiful brunette clasping a pen and notebook appeared and, smiling warmly, granted peaceful slumber....

The raucous cawing of a crow jolted Karl from his dreams. Seeing the golden sunlight streaming through the bedroom window, he threw back the blankets and leaped from bed.

"Eight thirty! I'm late for work!"

Recollection slowed him down. "I'll have to find a job to be late for."

Larkin gazed out across the fields. The little house and acreage had been a source of pride and

joy. Living five miles from town had suited the young bachelor perfectly. How he had cherished the moments of solitude following a busy day of patronizing the public. He wondered if those days of dealing with the masses were completely behind him now, or had he only gotten himself in deeper?

The crow who had provided alarm clock duty perched on a gate post. A hundred more of the black scavengers littered the nearby field pecking at the plague of grasshoppers. Larkin noted that dewdrops glistened like tiny diamond decorations on the needles of the evergreen trees. Although leaves on the deciduous trees were turning to yellow and orange, the recent rainfall had brought a tinge of green back into the dry yellow grass.

Karl scanned the blue horizon. He saw no clouds in the Lord's field of azure. In the distance, an irregular black line appeared in a ragged 'V' formation. The specks grew more defined as a flock of Canada geese approached. Still in his night attire, Larkin rushed outdoors in order to capture the music of the age-old song. The melodious honking stirred and warmed the heart of the solo audience. The birds passed directly over Karl's yard and he followed them with his eyes until their throaty chorus diminished and they disappeared from sight.

The incident of the geese placed Karl in a more philosophical frame of mind. He shrugged and said to the quietude, "life goes on after employment."

For the first time since his dismissal two weeks previous, Karl faced the quandary of an uncertain future. As yet he had no financial worries. His severance pay and superannuation would keep economic concerns under control for the time being. His expertise gained in the bureaucratic system

## Watershed

ought to complement a resume, however, the necessity of relocating struck a sour chord. Karl harbored a great reluctance to leave this home.

The consumer campaign had completely occupied the young orator's time until the adjournment of last night's meeting. Now he had to nurture the fledgling strategy until the system took wing. How could he continue the fight for consumer benefit without the necessary funding? Where could one man find support for a struggle whose cause depended entirely upon promotion? He must find a medium with which to reach the populace and, when he did, Larkin felt certain the movement would snowball. Meanwhile, idleness seemed unhealthy to the young man. Relaxation for him simply meant a redirection of energy.

After a light breakfast, Karl drove his new Bronco to town. Chesterton bustled in the mid-morning sunshine. Noting the row of pickups parked along the street, Larkin assumed that harvesting remained at a standstill. He angled his truck into an empty stall and strode into the *Miles Café* hoping to find temporary employ with one of the farmers.

"Hey, Karl!" someone called across the eatery, "The coffee is too expensive here! They want 75 cents a cup and two bits for a refill."

Recognizing Jerry Holt, a farmer friend, Larkin grinned and took a seat beside him. "Well then, drink tea!"

Smiling faces up and down both sides of coffee row were looking at Karl.

"That's some speech you handed us last night, sonny," said an older fellow in bib overalls.

"Didn't help me much," another crowed. "I



buy m' gas in bulk an' I got m' own chickens!"

A chorus of guffaws followed. Karl warmed to the jesting as each farmer offered his own chaff. He matched the badinage. "If you fellows weren't already so wealthy and didn't need the tax deductions, perhaps a reasonable benefit could be wangled for you as well."

Jerry's smile faded. "We got some hellish bills to pay occasionally and a steady cash flow just ain't always there. These days a guy can't farm without most of his income goin' directly back to expenses. Costs go up and profits go down."

Karl nodded, "I know that returns for agricultural commodities, particularly grain, have plunged the last few years. Not much you can do to change that. World prices are set by need and, recently, several countries that used to be importers have become exporters of *your* livelihood. You lose a market, or someone else acquires a piece of that market, and demand for your product goes down. Consequently, there's a lower price."

"We need a guaranteed price," said one of the farmers. "We can't sell wheat for two dollars a bushel when it's costing us three dollars to grow it."

Another grain producer agreed, saying, "The government has to give us a decent price or we'll all go down the tubes."

Knowing that grants, subsidies, artificially inflated prices and tax breaks were often a source of heated conflict between labour and agrarian sectors, Larkin chose his words carefully. "Boys, you are aware that for every dollar paid out, someone is putting another dollar in. That money *has to* come from somewhere and the government doesn't print extra change to grease the squeaky wheel. *You*

## Watershed

figure where it comes from. That particular argument has been hacked to pieces a thousand times over and so far only bitter feelings have emerged.”

While the group found interest in the bottoms of their coffee cups, Larkin continued, “On the other hand, have you considered the more accessible side of the problem: expenses?”

“Fuel, chemicals, fertilizer, machinery costs and land payments are your main expenses. How can you control these? What could be done so you didn’t have so much overhead?”

“Nothin’ can be done,” Jerry said. “We can’t farm without any of that stuff.”

Another farmer said, “Except land payments, we could get along without them.”

“Technology is on the upswing. For you guys to stay in the field, you have to be up-to-date,” Karl said. “Is it possible, though, to *reduce* your use of chemical and fertilizer? Has anyone considered just how long the land will withstand this constant chemical assault? Or what if everyone refused to buy that new piece of equipment? How about jerry-rigging to make that combine or tractor last one more season?”

“Parts is more expensive than a new outfit.”

Larkin studied the fellow who made that announcement. “Are they?”

Jerry Holt said, “I can see where you’re goin’ with this, Karl. You’re sayin’ we got to convince the manufacturers we ain’t goin’ to pay their prices. And I can sorta see... where would they be if we quit kowtowin’ to their demands? They’d be sweatin’ about an inventory that’s costin’ millions to stock pile somewheres. We seen what happens

when there ain't no market for our grain...."

The farmer beside Jerry broke in, "By the Lord Harry, Jerry! That's right! We've had a couple years when the bins was full, grain piled on the ground rotting and we had no damn market for it... couldn't sell a goddamn bushel! If those buggers making the chemicals was stuck like we was they'd drop their prices considerable!"

Karl said, "The odd thing about that situation is that, often, their production costs are minuscule compared to returns. Especially for chemical companies."

"Oh, yeah!" Jerry agreed. "They'll tell you that the high price is to cover their research programs and stuff like that."

"And a huge pile of promotional bullshit, too!" said another farmer.

Karl said, "A general refusal by Canadian farmers, on a large scale, to purchase particular products certainly would cause major concern for the manufacturers. However, farmers are independent by nature, and this independence will negate the thrust of a collective cause. The key here is that special products are unique to certain areas. For instance, grasshoppers are a problem for the dry land: our area. If you calculate how much you have spent on hopper spray, trying to salvage a crop that already over expended its return, you wouldn't be out a terrific amount if the grasshoppers had eaten everything. Today you could be buying insecticide for next year, for a price less than what you have paid this season."

"But we would have grasshoppers up to our knees," argued a middle aged farmer sitting opposite Karl.

## Watershed

"Depends where you go," Karl said. "They are belt high around my place right now!"

"We didn't make a dint in 'em. I sprayed five thousand dollars worth of chemicals in the last three years and I think there are more hoppers now than ever," said Jerry Holt.

Other farmers stated similar figures. Each had invested a terrific amount in pesticide.

"I suggested grasshopper spray as an example. You could substitute wild oat herbicide, or any other chemical, into the equation. If all farmers refused to buy a particular spray, the price would drop.

"Another angle you might consider is direct buying. Suppose fifty local farmers decided how much fertilizer they would use. If they took an order of this magnitude to the supplier, he certainly would be interested in altering his price."

"Like you say, Karl, farmers are independent," Jerry said. "We never could have all of us agreeing at the same time."

Karl's face darkened and his voice subtly altered. "Well, then, Jerry, farmers may well 'go-down-the-tube' independently, too. You suggest that you are independent. But where will you turn when there are no more subsidies? No more rail freight concessions? When the government turns off the tap? Or, when the bank forecloses?"

Larkin turned to Bob Fullerton, who occupied the seat at the head of the coffee ring. "You hit the nail on the head when you said you can't sell wheat for two dollars per bushel when it costs three dollars to grow it. Well, how are you staying in business?" He shifted his gaze back to Jerry. "It isn't independence that is keeping you treading water, is it, Jerry?"

“There are eight farmers at this table. Just out of curiosity, why don’t you go to your bulk dealers and request a single lower price for your fertilizer? Tell them what quantity you want and just see if one of them doesn’t cut a better deal than you are likely to receive as individuals. Do you think these farming co-operatives around here pay the same price as you? Not likely! Buy in bulk and cut your expenses. Reducing input is the way to lessen the blow of low returns.

“Probably the bulk agent stands to gain here also. You know how much fertilizer, herbicide, or other chemical you need. Costs may prevent your purchasing the required amount. A lower price enables you to buy more, therefore, the dealer recoups his loss in volume increase. Another benefit for both you and the agent is reduced expense in handling. The product can be delivered direct to your farm, effectively eliminating at least two handling operations.”

The farmers were quiet. Each had found something interesting floating in his coffee cup. Larkin wasn’t sure if anyone had been listening.

The older farmer wearing the bib overalls said, “I like to apply granular herbicide in the fall. Maybe we could ask Howard about a better price. I know his margin is small, but if he had a big order he could bring it in cheaper.”

Several others agreed. Conversation brightened as enthusiasm increased.

Karl rose to leave. “If any of you need a trucker during harvest, give me a call. I’m not overworked these days!”

Jerry said, “I’ll call you *and* we’ll pay for your coffee, Karl.”

## Watershed

The orator left the coffee shop and decided to see if his speech from last evening excited any effect upon the town's business sector. To his felicity, several service stations had lowered their prices to 47.4 cents per litre. Strolling toward Chesterton Motors, Larkin grinned as he noticed that a new overhead door had been installed. His delight amplified as he saw that no vehicles, other than the dealership's tow truck, occupied the service bay. Through the showroom window Karl espied Emory Stanton, arms folded across his middle, a storm cloud of hate on his face. Apparently, the dealer had recognized Karl too.

As he entered a grocery store, Karl was hailed by the owner-manager. "Want some eggs, Larkin? If somebody doesn't buy these, I will throw them at you when they turn rotten."

"Sell them cheaper, Mitch. I know you have to make a buck but you could make the same dollar by paying less and selling for less."

The balding, spreading, middle aged proprietor sauntered over to Karl. "By God, Karl, people are listening to you. I have sold three cartons of eggs this morning, normally I would have sold ten or fifteen dozen. I have already called our supplier and told them to either adjust their price or keep their eggs."

After a brief chat Larkin bought his groceries and left the store. A delusional fool would not have predicted the success of the campaign. Last evening's assemblage had complied as if by script. The confidence instilled by the illustrious oration encouraged Chesterton's population to test the plausibility of consumer influence; Karl's direction provided the vehicle to carry it through..

As Larkin drove out of town along Chesterton's Railway Avenue, he noted that several of the vehicles belonging to farmers with whom he had coffee this morning were parked at Howard's Farm Centre. Were they hammering out a lower price?

Karl spent the afternoon puttering around the acreage. He repaired a bent tine on the garden tiller, changed oil in the lawn mower and tightened a strand of barbed wire. As he worked, his thoughts centered around the lovely Sheena Davies. The thirteenth and their date seemed light years away.

At six o'clock Karl tuned to CBJT News. He was disappointed that Sheena did not deliver the evening report. However, there was brief mention of the Chesterton Consumer Meeting.

The shrill ring of the telephone jolted Karl awake later in the evening.

"Karl, this is Sheena Davies; we talked last night."

"Oh," Karl said, "I'd almost forgotten." He hastened to add, "Sheena, I watched for you on the six o'clock news. Your stand-in didn't complete my day for me."

"Chet isn't my stand-in; quite the contrary, *I* am the part time person around the station."

Sheena continued, "I have great news for you, Karl! The station manager read my article about your meeting. He wants me to do a televised interview with you!"

"An interview!" Larkin blurted. "You mean on TV? Me? That's a big step for this country boy."

"There's nothing to it. It will be just you and I in a small studio with a few equipment hands. There

## Watershed

will be no studio audience.”

“When?” Karl asked his assent.

“As soon as possible. Apparently my story in the City Times has caused quite a stir in and around Riverside. People have been phoning our office for more information. The editor has asked me to write a second column.”

“My lord, you work fast. The Chesterton weekly won’t be out for three days.”

“So, will you consider an interview, Karl?”

“How could I turn down an offer involving you and I in a small room?”

A throaty laugh preceded a staged southern drawl. “I do declare, Mr. Larkin, you do have a way of puttin’ thangs!” Then, in a normal tone, she said, “I have a booking for tomorrow at 10:15 A.M. It will be a fifteen minute interview. I will ask several direct questions and you won’t have to supply a lengthy speech; more or less paraphrase your presentation from last night.”

“Scoundrel! You have already arranged everything. You must have been fairly certain you could persuade me.”

Another laugh, “I had a backup in the event of your refusal: a veterinarian promised to talk about tapeworms in sheep.”

“And you preferred my story?” Larkin said, “I appreciate that.”

“Oh! There’s one other thing, Karl. I’m free after our interview. Maybe we could,...’do lunch’, as we say in the city.”

“I will put my job hunting job on hold for tomorrow,” Karl promised.

“See you at the station around 9:30?”

“I’ll be there.” he said.



Once again, sleep eluded Karl Larkin. Anxious thoughts and reservations concerning the television interview conflicted with pleasant anticipation of spending an afternoon in the company of the pretty reporter. At last the Goddess of Slumber appeared, this time holding a microphone; her reassuring smile diffused anxiety and Karl drifted off.

*Iris Wrigley, honour student and the prettiest girl at Toronto's York University, came from Baltimore.*

*That was seven years ago.*

*Now she was Iris Giroux, homemaker, mother of two (boy, four; girl, three), residing in Toronto, wife of Detective Stéphane Giroux and she was wondering what had been troubling her husband recently. Office grief or a tough case at work had left Stéphane restive, but Iris knew it would be useless to pry. Occasionally, Mrs. Giroux helped the detective sift through extraneous data searching for an obscure link, but she always waited to be asked.*

*Giroux was the force's bloodhound of the cold case. He researched shelved, unsolved crimes, re-opened old files and sorted through the chaff for grains of truth, searching for the lost end of the thread that would lead to the whodunit. It was tedious, seldom rewarding and certainly not front page work. But he was good at it. He had to be, for any other bloodhound would lose the scent on a years old trail.*

*Of late, he had been delving into the dead-end investigation of a high profile entrepreneur who had parked her successful business enterprises to pursue*

## Watershed

*a career in federal politics. The campaign trail had been a spectacular run for Elizabeth Van der Weist; polls had ranked her so far ahead, she could afford to have given half her ratings to opponents. Van der Weist was smart, young, single, gorgeous, charismatic, independently wealthy and had cornered the market on public support.*

*Then she was murdered.*

*That was three years ago. G-TAP detectives were baffled; they had nothing. With no leads, no suspects and no motive, the case had concluded with a question mark.*

*So Giroux resurrected the investigation. The scant file stated that Elizabeth Van der Weist had been killed instantly by a shot through the head at 07:35 hours, August 29, 1979. Van der Weist had emerged from her condo in Markham and was shot dead in her doorway....*

*The additional information lacked substance for the casual investigator, however, the detective had not expected to find a suspect in the file; he just wanted a crack in which to start prying and Giroux had a knack for turning the mundane into the extraordinary.*

*There had been two eye witnesses, no ear witnesses: the sniper had used a silencer.*

*The morning had been extremely foggy (according to Witness Number One, the taxi driver who had come to pick up Van der Weist, visibility was no more than the width of the street); the shot came from nearby and probably at, or near, ground level.*

*There had been no speeding vehicles heard nor seen departing the area, none of the parked automobiles moved before the arrival of police*

*(Witness Number 2, a neighbour, had maintained a vigilant watch); the assailant escaped on foot, took refuge in a nearby building, or simply remained near the scene becoming part of the gathering crowd.*

*Ballistics, medical examiner's records, and every written word was sifted through. Giroux found the two witnesses: the neighbour, still living next door; the taxi driver, moved to Vancouver, and grilled them again to see if a three year departure had brought any flashback that may have been missed initially. All the data gathered was screened, resifted, screened again and again (nothing went in the trash), then put into a series of possibilities. Possibilities were filtered until a host of logic questions percolated to the top. The 'and-or-nand-nor' sequence separated Stéphane Giroux's investigative talent from the run-of-the-mill.*

*The tree was still there when Giroux visited the crime scene three years after the fact. It was a giant blue spruce and, when the detective emerged from underneath the conifer, he was covered in dead needles, his face and arms were scratched, and smeared globules of sticky sap clung to his shoes, hands and clothing.*

*But he was smiling.*

*The detective had discovered gray stubs of not-so-recently pruned branches along the main trunk of the tree: someone besides the noxious nesting crows had used the tree for a perch. For Stéphane, topiary craftsmanship on the inner side of a tree was more than remarkable, it was evidence. It opened a whole new avenue for the logic machine.*

*Giroux now had personal information regarding Van der Weist's killer:*

## Watershed

- 1) *He was a small bodied person*
- 2) *He was agile and reasonably physically fit*
- 3) *He was probably younger and less experienced than most assassins*
- 4) *He was infinitely patient*
- 5) *He was not hired*
- 6) *He was insane*

*These deductions, logical to the detective, were arrived at through this simple reasoning: Only a small, agile and physically fit person could have shinnied up that tree, rifle in tow, to the height which would allow a clear shot (through heavy fog) without actually exposing the shooter. The person would have been young because an older person would have chosen a more opportune location and time (after all, the victim, a political candidate, had not been living in seclusion); for the same reasons, a hired killer would have selected a less conspicuous hiding spot. The fellow had spent many hours in the tree; arriving in cover of darkness before the shooting and waiting until the cover of darkness to escape—a minimum of fourteen hours—that requires patience... and guts, which is a part of the reason for the last conjecture: the fortitude required to stay in that spruce tree for fourteen hours while police, thick as ants on a stick-poked anthill, crawled around within fifty yards, must have been borne of insanity. “And,” Giroux said to himself, “only a complete lunatic would climb that filthy, sticky, scratching spruce tree!”*

*Iris would murder him for the mess his clothes were in.*

## Chapter 4

Old Riverside lay sprawled haphazardly along the banks of a lazily meandering stream. Latter day commercial and urban subdivisions sprang up farther back, the demarcation obvious as a black line on a white paper. The water way, sluggish or stalled at this time of year, claimed the dubious name of High Water. Approximately sixty thousand people lived and worked in the mini-metropolis. Peculiar to sister prairie cities, the grip of the prolonged recession had squeezed the economy in Riverside beyond the point of hardship. Contrary as the weather, the hardy individuals held on; population statistics remained fairly stable.

When she was two years old, Sheena Davies's parents moved from Ontario to Riverside. Except for her absence while studying for a degree in journalism at a college back east, she had made this western town her home. Opportunity knocked for Sheena upon her graduation. The editor of City Times, Riverside's daily, hired the honor grad immediately. Energetic and conscientious, Sheena

## Watershed

soon became a valued employee. Within weeks she had her own column in the local paper with frequent free lance articles published throughout western Canada. Her brilliance had not gone unnoticed in other media sectors. David Colburn, Station Manager of CBJT Television in Riverside, recognized the potential of a rising star. He quickly persuaded the young reporter to join his staff as a part-time newscaster. Sheena Davies demonstrated the same proficiency in front of a news camera as she did with her typewriter.

Today, Sheena appeared even more enthusiastic than usual. She fairly glowed as she bustled around the news room. Camera operator for the morning crew, Billy Dion, detected the subtle change. When Billy was on the job he assumed a no-nonsense attitude, however, when the camera sat idle, the young fellow kept everyone on their toes with jibes and harmless practical jokes.

“What’s up?” Billy asked as Sheena hurried past his desk.

Sheena stopped. “Could you be more specific?”

“You look a little flushed today. I thought maybe you weren’t feeling well.”

Sheena felt the heat of a blush spreading over her face.

Billy seized the moment, not allowing the pretty reporter a chance to respond. “Oh!” He apologized, “Perhaps I’ve misjudged here. Could that radiant glow that’s over-exposing my cameras be caused by a touch of love sickness? Has our pride and joy found the man of her dreams?”

The colour deepened, “Give it a rest, Billy!” Sheena retorted, and escaped to the outer room.

The camera man leaped to his feet and followed Sheena, badgering her like the paparazzi.

Billy's barrage of questions slowed momentarily with the appearance of CBJT'S receptionist. "There is a Mr. Larkin here to see you, Sheena," she said.

"*Mr. Larkin!*" Billy echoed. "Can I come and see him too?"

"Sure!" Sheena challenged. "It would be healthy for you to meet a *real* gentleman."

Sheena found Karl in the television station's lounge where he stood admiring the works of a local artist.

"Hello, Karl, you're right on time."

"Hi, Sheena, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"I'll take you to the studio and we can perform a mock interview so as to familiarize you with the program. It's nothing really; I feel a bit silly rehearsing. A person of your composure needs no briefing."

"I wish I felt the confidence you appear to have in me."

A comfortable lounge area had been prepared for the setting of the interview. Karl sat in the stuffed leather chair offered and Sheena occupied a second chair opposite him.

"How are people responding to your speech?" she asked, initiating the lesson.

Karl told her of the fantastic support he had received in Chesterton, also mentioning his conversation with the farmers at the local coffee shop.

"People are willing to co-operate when there is a financial gain involved," he said. "The problem arises in convincing everyone to pull together for a

## Watershed

common cause. I believe that, with a little guidance, consumers will have the strongest voice. We can, with mass participation, achieve any goal desired.”

“What goals do you have in mind, Karl?”

The preliminary briefing continued. Soon the camera and sound crew appeared; Billy Dion had shifted to his stolid technician persona. After informal introductions, everyone took their places.

Karl’s tension mounted as the ten second alert sounded. Sheena, noting his anxiety, reached across and laid her warm, soft hand in his cool, almost clammy palm.

“This will be a snap, Karl, we’ll be out of here in fifteen minutes.”

The ‘On Air’ light flashed and Sheena made a short introduction.

“...and today we’re talking with Mr. Karl Larkin, the man who single-handedly delivered a lower cost of living to Chesterton.

“Mr. Larkin, please explain how your theory of price control actually functions?”

Karl quickly regained composure; an instant veteran before the camera crew.

“I must correct you, Sheena, I didn’t single-handedly reduce prices in Chesterton. I merely suggested that, if everyone complied, we could attain a more attractive, less expensive, cost of living. Whether or not this goal is achieved depends upon the people of Chesterton.”

He continued, feeling the warmth expressed behind the professional smile of his interviewer.

“You see, Miss Davies, consumers have paid the listed price since the retail system began. We’ve been brainwashed into believing that the marked value is the price we must adhere to.”



“Are you suggesting a barter system? Something like tourists encounter in Mexico?”

“No, I’m not saying that we haggle for our goods. In that event, the average price would remain as is, while many would pay for the benefit of the few. Rather, this system involves group bargaining. A consumer war on prices that we feel are unnecessarily high. I would like to establish a realistic mark up.

“Whether the inflated price is initiated by our local retailer, the distributor or the producer, we must seek to eliminate the artificial, unjustifiable cost.

“Remember the sugar shortage? the coffee and cocoa famines? the infamous energy crisis of the seventies? Were these scarcities real? or was it a load of... well... of *propaganda* backing a deliberate falsification? Consider: are we out of oil today?

“Whether or not the shortages did actually occur, consumers paid the price. We took the mark-up as gospel and had no recourse. Did the inflated price go back to the producer? Has there been a sudden increase in millionaires among the Columbian coffee growers who were able to grow a crop? I think not.

“On a more local basis, when the price of beef drops at the auction ring, the producer feels the pinch immediately. Does the consumer ever see a proportionate reduction over the counter? No. Someone is taking food off our tables and cheating the stock grower at the same time.”

“How do you propose to attack the marketing system, Mr. Larkin?”

“The situation involves cooperation by all

## Watershed

consumers, essentially, everyone. *Individual effort* has negligible effect. *Combined effort* has colossal consequence.

“Just for an example, let us focus on a particular subject... oh... something ordinary... let’s use... engine coolant: Now, with winter approaching, we’ll be paying six to eight dollars for a four litre jug of antifreeze. This price is absurd. By no stretch of the imagination does it reflect the production cost. We must refuse to pay the inflated price.

“Reducing consumption is the key in this instance. Many drivers periodically drain and refill their vehicle cooling systems on an annual basis; an unnecessary practice. Instead of replacing the old coolant, test, or have it tested; strengthen it if it is weak. Use less! Share a container with your neighbor!

“Refuse to buy whenever possible. There are uncounted methods of reducing consumption no matter what the subject. Eventually, the supplier will realize a drop in sales. At this point, he must lower his price to avoid the burden of a huge inventory. When the price is suitably realistic, consumers will buy. *And*, reduced consumption is a boon for our environment: waste and extravagance, forfeit today, continue to be so for the future.”

“Do you believe consumers are prepared to support such an approach?”

Karl said, “Markets are governed by supply and demand. The point I wish to stress is: *consumers are powerless over supply, they are the ultimate controller of demand.*”

“Thank-you Mr. Larkin, and good luck in your endeavour,” Sheena said. Then, facing the camera,

“That’s our time for today. I am sure we shall be hearing much more from Karl Larkin and his one-man war against inflation.”

The ‘On Air’ light winked out. Karl exhaled a sigh of relief. “How did I do, Miss Davies?”

“You were excellent, Karl! I wish all my interviewees had your enthusiasm.”

The recording room door whooshed open and a burst of colour filled the available space as a wide smile filled with gleaming white teeth preceded a stout middle aged man into the studio. A stranger to Karl, he wore a black or deep navy coloured blazer unbuttoned to reveal an expanding mid-section. His startling bright blue shirt of a silken material strained against the projecting paunch. A broad white tie complemented a pair of white slacks. Even the graying at the temples matched the soft gray suede of his shoes.

Larkin gasped audibly as the flamboyant figure strode toward him. Sheena hurriedly made an introduction, “Karl, this is Mr. David Colburn. Our station manager.

The smooth-shaven face revealed a slightly flushed complexion. Karl met the extended hand noting the firm grip. He also noticed two expensive rings glittering on manicured fingers.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Karl,” the older man boomed as he pumped Karl’s hand. “I must commend you, young fellow. *You’ve got guts.* There will be a lot of toes stepped on around the country if you continue this effort.”

Karl said, “Actually, I’m just the medium. The result will depend entirely upon support.”

“Not to worry, lad! People will be falling over themselves to listen to you. And once they’ve heard

## Watershed

you, they'll follow your advice. Believe me, the time is ripe!"

"I thank-you for your confidence, Mr. Colburn. You don't strike me as a man worried about inflation."

"Inflation? High prices? Why, that's everyone's problem."

Larkin soon recovered from the initial shock and warmed toward the manager. A brief chat ensued, then David Colburn abruptly turned on his heel and departed, saying over his shoulder, "Let's do lunch sometime!"

"There's a character!" Karl said.

Sheena laughed, "I'm glad he didn't ask you for lunch today. I have dibs on that honour."

Karl's shining gray eyes focused on the lovely face. "The honor and pleasure are all mine, Sheena."

"Where would you like to go? What kind of food suits your palate? This isn't New York, but we do have a few promising dining establishments."

"I'm afraid that my familiarity with your city is vague at best. I couldn't name one restaurant here. As for taste preferences, my cooking serves my stomach with two food types: raw or burnt. You pick the place. Guaranteed, I will enjoy it."

Sheena laughed at Karl's admitted lack in culinary skill. "Aside from either raw or burnt, Karl, would you like Mexican, Greek, Chinese, Italian, Japanese or...?"

"How about Canadian?"

"Now that," she said, "could be difficult."

Karl retrieved his jacket from the lounge while Sheena picked up her coat and handbag from the partitioned cubicle that was her office.

When they met in the parking lot, she said, "Hop in with me. We'll pick up your vehicle after lunch."

Larkin admired the shiny B.M.W. His evaluation was greatly enhanced by the beautiful brunette behind the wheel. "Nice car."

"Thanks. I wish I owned it!"

Karl frowned, reluctant to ask. "It's not yours?"

"I own part of it. The bank owns the rest!" She smiled.

Relief must have shown on Karl's face for Sheena reached across the console to touch his hand.

"Beautiful day!" he changed the subject.

"Yes, although Studer—he's our weatherman—said we could expect cooler temperatures and maybe rain later this afternoon."

"There is a dark cloud bank in the west," Karl agreed. "Someone said: it's a good thing we live in an ever changing climate or nine out of ten people couldn't start a conversation."

The brunette laughed. Then, in a more serious tone, she asked, "Is something bothering you, Karl? You seem a little tense. The interview is over now... relax."

"Sheena, I'm fine. Honestly, I have never felt better. It's just that... I can't believe this is happening to *me*."

The girl geared the BMW down and darted through an opening left by a passing car. Deftly she pulled onto an off-ramp, circled and assumed the slower pace of the downtown traffic. A puzzled expression appeared briefly on her face. "Everything will turn out for the best," she assured him. "You've taken a controversial stand but you will have the vast

## Watershed

majority of the people behind you.”

Now it became Karl’s turn to look puzzled. He cast a blank look at her but said nothing.

“This is the place,” she said, braking the car to a halt in front of an unassuming board building whose only claim against vacancy were two signs: one simply said ‘*The Bin*’, the other, hanging in the doorway, ‘*Open*’.

Karl, lacking optimism, followed Sheena into the modest establishment.

“Wheweee!” Larkin whistled. “They must have blown their budget on interior decorating!”

‘*The Bin*’ had been decorated after the fashion of pioneering times. Miniature wheat sheaves, ears of corn and antique farm tools adorned the walls. Grain sacks, jars of preserves, and a multitude of articles resurrecting a by-gone farming era occupied corner shelves and dividers.

“I thought you might like this place,” Sheena smiled. “It has a country charm.”

The hostess, attired in nineteenth century rural fashion, including long dress, white apron and bonnet, ushered the couple to a quiet table.

After a brief run through of the menu, a similarly clad waitress took their order.

“Well, Karl,” Sheena began, “what would you like to do this afternoon? We have the whole day to kick around. Is there anything in particular you wish to see? A show? The museum? The art gallery?”

Karl thought a moment. “What I’d like to do, and don’t be offended please, is to take a drive in the country. There are a range of coulees along the river west of town, I’d like to see what the creatures are up to this time of year.”

Sheena gasped, “See what the creatures are up

to! What, pray tell, do you mean by that?"

Larkin felt his face growing warm. "The animals, Sheena. The deer, the coyotes, the birds! I like to watch them. Maybe capture a few on film. Wildlife is sort of a hobby for me."

"Oh, Karl! I should have known. You care about people, it's only natural that you are concerned with '*creatures*', too!

"That's a wonderful idea," she added. "I'd love to escape urbanity to stroll about the countryside for awhile."

The waitress returned with their orders. Karl delighted in the excellent cuisine cooked to order, neither raw nor burnt.

"I'd like to see what the creatures are up to," Sheena reiterated. "Karl, you astound me every time you speak."

Larkin laughed with her this time. "This may be the last chance to observe some species before spring. The migratory birds will be moving on soon. With winter coming, the roads into the back country will be inaccessible and many animals will go into hibernation. I would love to visit the museum, the theatre and all the cultural amenities of your city, especially with you as a tour guide, Sheena. Today though, let me take you away from the familiar."

After leaving the restaurant, the couple retrieved Karl's Bronco. With Sheena leading the way, they motored to her apartment, where she parked her car and the pair changed into casual clothing. Karl felt more at ease, having swapped his suit and tie for Levis and a sweat shirt. When Sheena returned from her bedroom, Larkin failed to control a quick intake of breath.

The brunette smiled, noting the approving

## Watershed

glance bestowed upon her. "It feels good to be a tomboy again. I don't have many opportunities for casual dress."

"I wonder if Mr. Strauss had you in mind when he made his first pair of blue jeans!" Karl said.

Leaving the four-lane a few miles west of the city, Larkin wheeled the 4X4 down a rutted, dirt road. As they edged closer to the blue line that marked the beginning of the river hills the trail grew steadily more treacherous. Karl stopped the Bronco before a huge puddle left by the recent rain.

"Is this the end of the road, Karl?" Sheena asked glancing anxiously at the foreboding obstruction.

"Nope! This is where it begins."

Stepping out of the vehicle, Karl quickly locked in the front hubs. Hopping back in, he reached down for the transfer shifter and gently eased the lever back into the low range position. An indicator lamp displaying "4x4" flashed on. The driver grinned with excited anticipation as he selected a gear and slowly engaged the clutch. The truck lurched forward, chewing its way through the mud hole. Sheena shrieked as water thrown up from the churning tires splashed over the vehicle obliterating the view of the world outside.

Wipers slapping, engine roaring, mud flying, the 4x4 ground its way across the mire. Larkin eased off the accelerator as he felt the front end of the unit start to rise up on to firm ground. The Bronco crawled out of the bog.

"Piece of cake." Karl smiled.

Sheena, knuckles white from squeezing the dash, asked, "That's what they call four-wheeling is it?"



“Just trying to impress you...I can’t afford repairs so I don’t usually attempt such stunts unnecessarily.”

They encountered several more water filled depressions before Karl reached his planned destination. He approached those with more caution and less zeal.

“This should be close enough,” Karl said as he pulled the vehicle off the trail and turned off the engine.

Sheena looked her question.

“We’ll walk from here.” Karl explained. “The river is just beyond that line of rocky hills. Maybe we will see a goose or two.”

The wind had picked up and the gray bank of clouds witnessed earlier were nearer and blacker. Karl found a heavy Siwash sweater for the lady and slipped into a down filled bomber jacket himself.

“You came prepared,” Sheena approved.

Karl laughed, “Sometimes I don’t make it through those puddles!”

He rummaged about and soon produced field glasses and a camera. Thus arrayed, they began a hike which led down through a deep ravine and then up the far side of the coulee to the ridge of hills he had pointed out earlier. A sleek gray coyote appeared on a ridge farther up the slope. The wind tugged at his fur as he studied the intruders for an instant then silently slunk away. As Karl and Sheena entered the rose and saskatoon bushes lining the bottom of the gorge, the hushed sound of snapping twigs reached them. Karl grabbed the girl’s hand and, scrambling up the incline, retraced their steps to a vantage point above the brush.

“Watch!” Karl said in a low voice.

## Watershed

On a dim trail across the gorge five mule deer appeared, trotting nervously as they entered the exposed ground.

“Mules,”

Sheena looked at the man skeptically. “They’re deer!”

He nodded, “Mule deer.”

The antlered group pranced uneasily, stopping often to gaze back toward the thicket.

“Watch now,” Karl repeated.

Soon another buck, sporting a much larger set of antlers, emerged, following in the wake of his brothers.

“Wow... it’s beautiful.”

The camera’s “click” sounded loud in the sheltered silence at the bottom of the draw. Huge ears twitched and, as one, the herd bounded up the steep slope to disappear into a neighboring coulee.

Incredulity showed in the girl’s eyes, “How did you know he was there?”

“This time of year the bucks sometimes run together. Often the wisest of the group will hold back while the younger ones test the air. I guessed and happened to be right this time.”

Karl and Sheena made their way through the tangled thorns and up the opposite side. As they topped the ridge, the wind tore at them gale force, and the grey-blue ribbon of the river came into view. Directly below and some three hundred yards across, a huge bend had formed a large bay.

“I thought there may be a goose here,” Karl stated his satisfaction.

“Lordy! There must be a million of them,” Sheena gasped.

The couple took a seat on the ground in the lee

of a huge boulder near the top of the river hill. With the aid of his binoculars, Karl pointed out several species of geese bobbing like feathered buoys on the choppy water.

Sheena snuggled closer to Karl as an unusually cold blast bearing a trace of sleet swirled into their shelter.

"Perhaps we should start back," Karl said. "It is turning colder by the minute."

As they prepared to depart, their eyes met and held. The wind tossed a thick lock of her dark hair across the lovely face. Perhaps the icy sleet and rain could have caused the mist in Larkin's gray eyes but that would not explain the lump that rose in his throat. "Sheena..." he cried hoarsely above the gale, "you are so beautiful!"

She fell into his arms. The kiss defied the chill of the wind, the sting of the sleet, the passage of time. High on a desolate ridge, far above the icy river, heaven, for a moment, revealed a glimpse of all eternal.

The path had become slippery from the increasing rain. Karl held Sheena's hand tightly as they descended the steep hill. Arriving at the vehicle he helped the bedraggled, shivering girl into the truck. "I'll have this rig warmed up in a jiffy!" he promised. "By the way, you are even prettier with wet hair!"

"The geese will spend a cold wet night on the river," Sheena said through chattering teeth.

"They are dressed for the occasion; we may have a damp night ahead of us too, if this rain continues. "The girl looked at him anxiously. "Do you think we can make it back to the highway?"

"Betsy will pull us through," Karl said as he

## Watershed

patted the dash affectionately.

Larkin's prediction held true and the couple heaved a sigh of relief as they slogged through the last pothole and reached the safety of the paved four-lane.

"Good work, Betsy!" the girl mimicked, patting the dash board as Larkin had done.

After sharing a pizza and several mugs of hot chocolate at a pizza parlor, Karl drove Sheena to her apartment.

"I have had a wonderful time, despite the hideous weather conditions," she said as Karl walked her to the building.

In answer, he drew her close, placing a long and lingering kiss on warm and welcoming lips. Bidding Sheena good night, Karl turned and strolled to his vehicle. Had he looked back he would have noticed that he left no tracks on the wet pavement.

*Eddie Marley, the eternal grandstander, had climbed the fence and stood precariously balanced above the falls, but to his chagrin the audience had moved along. There was no one to witness his bodacious stunt. He felt a tug on his pant leg and looked down into the expressionless yellow-orange eyes of "The Freak."*

*It had been an impulsive move for Jamie. The look of horror on the Hulk's face as he teetered then fell over the wall soothed Langston for years after. The scream, too quickly drowned out by the roar of the falls, also endured. A cog had slipped on the driving gear of Jamie's brain.*

*When the nightmare of school ended, to Mr. and Mrs. Langston's dismay, Jamie decided against*

*further education, fearing that university would be an extension of the “Freak” and “Lion Eyes” torment. The graduate moved away from home, rented a small apartment and found work as a janitor in a medium sized office complex. The work suited Langston well for the building was deserted during cleaning hours. No human contact. A place to hide those lion eyes.*

*The rifle came into the janitor’s possession through a series of unlikely events. The short version of the story is that one of the businessmen at the office building gave it to Jamie, saying his wife insisted the gun be removed from their house. It is inconsequential how the Ruger arrived but it changed Langston’s life forever.*

*It changed the lives of other people, too.*

*Jamie signed up as a member of a shooting club and frequented the indoor range regularly. Other weapons enthusiasts were eager to assist the novice and the new member soon grew familiar with the jargon, learned how to care for the weapon and, with diligent practice, became a worthy marksman.*

*Punching holes in paper from fifty yards away was a good pastime, but Langston had another hobby: following the careers of celebrities and people of public prominence. The diminutive, lion-eyed janitor was intrigued by the rich and famous; the glamorous ladies and handsome gentlemen on the television screen, the publicly prominent, those name-on-everyone’s-tongue types. However, in every scrap of information collected there was nothing that told Jamie exactly what was so special about Them. How did They become so idolized? Really, They were just ordinary people... Centre stage is where the world should have put Jamie*

## Watershed

*Langston! Why didn't it?*

*They were lucky and Jamie wasn't.*

*Elizabeth Van der Weist's rise to fame had baffled Langston. Elizabeth used to live on the same block as Jamie's parents! There wasn't anything special about her then, but somehow, Van der Weist became an overnight success. The office seeker even had a poster of herself on the subway trains! The "why" of that development preyed on the janitor's mind and Jamie began to pay special attention to the emergent politician's exploits. Newspaper clippings, articles and a poster swiped from the train station went into Jamie's collection. The orange-eyed groupie began capturing photographs of Elizabeth, but the lady never paid any attention to Jamie. Maybe she didn't remember the Langstons.*

*A good politician never forgets anyone, especially a neighbour. Elizabeth Van der Weist should not have forgotten Jamie Langston.*

*Another cog in the brain gear slipped.*

## Chapter 5

In the days that followed, Larkin began to realize the popularity his consumer control theory generated. The appearance on CBJT television positioned the orator as somewhat of a celebrity in and around Chesterton. The achievement marked a beginning for a campaign of greater magnitude.

Late returning home after a day of harvesting with his friend Jerry Holt, Larkin received a telephone call from the Mayor of Brant. The caller apologized for the lateness of the hour saying his office had had been trying to reach the orator for several days. He further apologized for the short notice when stating the reason for his telephone call: Brant's citizens had been pressuring town council to invite Karl to speak at a social function; that function was scheduled for tomorrow evening. The Mayor left the vague impression that more lay behind the invitation but he did not elaborate.

Larkin accepted.

The town provided for a population of just over four hundred residents plus a large agricultural

## Watershed

community. It lay approximately one hundred miles to the north of Chesterton. Karl departed early enough to enjoy a leisurely drive. He studied the gently rolling landscape en route. Harvest season progressed well. In the last twenty miles, most of the area he passed through had more pasture than grain land, but it was the peaks of grain elevators catching the last rays of sunlight in the distance that announced the end of the journey. Brant itself typified the small prairie town, no surprises. Along the highway, on the outskirts of town, were the elementary and high schools. Just across the thoroughfare a large quonset building labeled *Centennial Arena* housed the skating and curling rinks. The numbered highway terminated at the railway crossing and the paved road yielded to a dusty graveled avenue: Main Street. A collection of false-fronted one and two story buildings, separated from the street by wide concrete sidewalks, boasted their particular merchandise and service; a few were boarded up. A gas station with its single pump stood on the corner across from the structure whose weathered sign read simply *Brant Hotel*. Eying the street, Larkin again saw the ubiquitous row of grain elevators which marked the far edge of town as well as the end of the line for the Brant railway spur. He had no trouble locating the town hall, which buzzed with activity although he arrived prior to the designated time.

After introduction to several of the town fathers, the guest tried to ascertain what the people specifically had in mind. He didn't believe that they requested his presence simply to recite the speech delivered in his own home town.

Martin Caldwell, the mayor, shook hands with



Larkin. The thin hand possessed a grip of unexpected strength. The bespectacled white-haired gentleman stood an erect six feet two inches. Though slight of frame Karl perceived the inner strength which established the leadership quality; the man should have been destined for a higher office.

“Our town welcomes you, Mr. Larkin. Many of us saw your television appearance last week. Everyone has read Miss Davies’ coverage in The City Times. We thought it would be beneficial to meet you personally.”

“Thank-you, Mr. Caldwell, I’m honoured to be your guest... I am, however, somewhat confused. You realize that mine is a very controversial presentation. Hard feelings are bound to be generated initially. I don’t want to stir up trouble for you and your town.”

The elder man nodded. “Actually, Mr. Larkin, we haven’t asked you here to speak out against the high cost of living. We in Brant are well aware of the unjust prices. However, you may have noted as you drove down main street, we have one of everything. One butcher shop, one service station, one hardware store and one grocery store. We couldn’t boycott these facilities. Quite the contrary, we willingly support our businesses. Our patronage ensures survival... for all of us; without strong local support Brant would be extinct.”

Mayor Caldwell continued, “We are situated forty miles from *any* other centre. Most do not wish to travel that distance for their goods. Some of us can’t. We are deeply concerned about our town’s future, the businesses, the schools, every aspect that makes up our community.

“The railway has plans of abandoning the

## Watershed

Brant spur. Without the rail support and the grain elevators we will lose our town. It is the same story we have witnessed many times all over the west: The elevator system folds, we lose three or four families; businesses go under; student numbers decline; first, the high school closes, then the elementary shuts its doors; soon the community is too small to support even a post office. People are forced to go to bigger centres. In time the entire village is gone.”

Larkin listened intently. He had pondered Brant’s future upon entering the little town. Now, hearing Mr. Caldwell speak, he realized how perilously near the end it may be.

The mayor said, “Two of our people were visiting in Chesterton and stayed to hear your public address. You have a very persuasive voice and charismatic manner. We want you to give us direction. The people will listen to you. We have tried to reach common ground amongst ourselves, but a certain amount of division exists. Too many ideas without a hundred percent support has devastating consequences.

“You make the suggestions and we will follow your example.”

Blatant astonishment appeared in the gray eyes. Karl could not believe the gentleman’s request. “You want me to speak to your people on a subject that is far outside my realm and, frankly, one in which I am very poorly informed?” he asked.

“The subject is of concern to you,” the mayor corrected. “You have positive feelings toward your countrymen. You strive for a better future for all. Think about it... our goals do not differ greatly.

“As for your knowledge, I considered briefing

you before you came. I didn't. I have confidence in your abilities and perhaps an off-the-cuff presentation will sink home better than a rehearsed delivery."

Larkin perceived the despair felt by the older gentleman who so openly appealed to him. A man of Caldwell's calibre would not ask for help unless driven by desperation.

"I will do my best!" Karl said, once again surprised by the strength of the mayor's grip.

Brant's community hall began to bulge at the seams as the audience took seats in rows of chairs. Larkin estimated four hundred adults were in attendance. Apparently most of the agrarian neighbourhood had turned out as well.

Mayor Caldwell made the opening welcome and thanked everyone for their participation. "... Without further ado, I present the man you have all come to hear: Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Karl Larkin!"

The formal introduction and accompanying applause disconcerted and simultaneously thrilled the orator. No public address system had been provided and Larkin doubted his ability to entertain a huge crowd, especially if he had to compete for the floor.

Larkin thanked Mayor Caldwell then addressed the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to see so many of you here tonight. Your support for your town is truly commendable. As Mayor Caldwell has pointed out to me, the proposed rail line abandonment will ultimately spell disaster for Brant. Simply stated: *you must keep this spur in operation*. This is a collective struggle with a single goal and will demand the combined energies of

## Watershed

everyone in this community. You must stand together to exhaust every conceivable effort to retain your livelihood.

“Recognition is the key to your future. Appeal to the people who have the power to swing decision in your favour. I suggest that a letter be written and signed by the community. Everyone’s name should be on it, not only the adults but the children as well; remember, they are citizens too, and hopefully Brant will be their town. This petition should be presented to members of the provincial legislature, members of parliament, the premier, the prime minister. Make the governing officials aware of your plight. Keep after them, don’t let the bureaucratic process place you on the back burner.

“Public outcry influences government decisions. There are several informative television productions that will be interested in your story. Airing your grievances nationwide will place you in the driver’s seat of the bureaucratic vehicle.

“Railroads have a tendency to ignore the human element. Dollars and cents, not compassion, are the tools of corporate efficiency. To maintain this trunk perhaps you could enhance the usefulness of the rail. When the west was pioneered, trains were the lifeline to the many settlements. If it be economically feasible, have your goods delivered by rail, as they were thirty years ago....”

Larkin continued the delivery, his magnetic voice drawing upon the audience’s emotions. Emphasizing their need to pull together, he felt the assembly warming, becoming a more cohesive group.

“In conclusion I will stress again the necessity for unanimity. You have a legitimate concern and

with combined support, you will not fail.”

Larkin believed himself undeserving of the applause that followed. However, if he had instilled confidence in the minds of his listeners, the battle, for the moment, would be in Brant’s favour. Gratification shone on the face of Mayor Caldwell.

As the clamor tapered, Larkin took a seat beside the mayor on the temporary stage platform. In the second row, a middle aged man with dark hair and drooping mustache stood up. “Mr. Larkin hit the nail on the head when he mentioned that part about increasing the use of the rail. If we could make this a paying proposition for the corporation, maybe they would allow this branch line to stay open.”

Another man across the room contradicted, “We can bring everything we need out here in one box car! The railroad ain’t going to get rich carrying groceries to Brant.”

Larkin interjected, “Pessimism is a poor ally....

“We must investigate every opportunity, however, we have to be realistic. Maybe there isn’t a way to provide more business for the railroad but we will reach that conclusion, *after*, not before, looking into it.”

Several comments volleyed back and forth across the room. Soon a shouting match developed and the assembly fell into chaos with everyone trying to drown out his neighbour. Larkin saw why the mayor had asked him to come: Individuals had their own thoughts and, in voicing them, failed to listen to the opinions of others.

Larkin rose from his chair and a sharp glance over the audience quelled the tumult. “Since everyone is in this together, seeking a common goal,

## Watershed

we will go farther with an optimistic approach. A positive attitude preludes triumph. If we focus on *'reasons why'*, the *'reasons why not'* will disappear.

"I noticed on the drive up here that there is considerable pasture land in this area. Is there a possibility that you might set up a livestock sales ring here in Brant and ship the cattle out by rail? Surely you could muster several carloads of cattle every time an auction was held. You would have no trouble convincing buyers to come out here."

This supplement gave the crowd food for thought. If the proposed spur abandonment presented a marginal decision for the railroad, the added market of livestock shipping could sway the verdict in Brant's favour. In addition, it was an opportunity for the start-up of a new business.

Larkin joined the assemblage for coffee and doughnuts after the meeting. When quizzed about the developments in his consumer campaign, he chose his words carefully and maintained the market attack to general items. He did not wish to open a can of worms for this isolated little town.

Motoring back to Chesterton, Larkin considered his next move. He realized the importance of keeping his campaign rolling. A lull at this stage of infancy would be devastating. Dropping the price of gas, lowering egg prices and the blackball of the dealership had been easy enough. Chesterton proved the potential of consumer control. The time had come to lash out at the unjust mark-up on a larger scale. If this included a province wide, even a nation wide, promotion, Larkin felt capable. He realized his popularity at the moment remained too concentrated for national success. He must promote his theory and deliver his

speech to every Canadian willing to listen.

The avalanche that he had feared in the beginning had swept him up and now Larkin did not realize it had happened.

Karl's thoughts returned to Brant and the people he had recently spoken to. Their's was a struggle for survival. He debated his contribution to their cause. Perhaps he had given them direction. Pertinacity and government intervention might persuade the railroad to allow the track to remain open.

Larkin shrugged and muttered aloud, "I hope so."

He heard the ringing of the telephone as he entered his darkened premises. Two long strides swiftly carried him to the annoyance. "Hello," he said, hoping the calling party hadn't hung up.

A familiar feminine voice said, "Mr. Larkin, you do keep late hours. I have been trying to call you since eight."

"Sheena! It's two in the morning! I guess you can afford to miss your beauty sleep, though."

The girl laughed, "Still charming. However, it is important that I reach you. You remember Mr. Colburn, my boss at the station?"

"Yes, of course. He's a hard man to forget."

"He wants you to appear on an evening telecast. It is to be a special presentation - in 'prime time'. Mr. Colburn believes in you almost as much as I do. With the proper promotion you will go to the top. He intends to jump on the bandwagon while it is still on the ground floor."

Larkin grinned recalling the flamboyant station manager. "With that fellow as promoter, I suppose the sky would be the limit."

## Watershed

Sheena said, "He does know his business. He has made money and you could do well by him."

Karl hadn't considered a profit for himself. The station had mailed a cheque for two hundred dollars. Chesterton and Brant had 'passed the hat', netting a healthy sum simply because of the large crowds. However, speaking full time as an occupation had not occurred to him.

"What is the format, Sheena? Does Colburn want me to talk on the same subject? Does he have something specific in mind? I have to be careful that people do not grow weary of my platform. They need guidelines and they want to see results."

"Hold on!" Sheena said. "I believe Mr. Colburn has a plan of attack. He will brief you if you are interested. I am mystified by his vagueness and I've now told you as much as I know. The date and time haven't been set. Perhaps the broadcast will be pre-recorded. Anyway, he wants to see you as soon as possible."

"Yes, I am interested." Karl said. This trick of fate complemented his thoughts of continuing the venture. "I will come to Riverside tomorrow. Tell Colburn I will be there at 10 A.M."

"You were coming to the city tomorrow anyway, weren't you?"

Larkin frantically searched his memory. "The thirteenth! I had forgotten what day it was! Sheena, believe me, I hadn't forgotten our plans, I just didn't know the date."

"Well, I could go to the Gypsy concert alone if you are *too* busy."

Karl apologized again. "I will be there with you, Sheena."

Larkin explained why he had been out so late



this evening and went on to recount his most recent presentation. Sheena commended him for his effort in helping the people of Brant. "You have a tremendous gift, Karl, the gift of effectual speech. It is all the more magnetic because your heart is in your convictions. Mankind will benefit by hearing you."

"Sheena, you could be describing a cult leader or one of those slippery religious crusaders on television."

"I'm serious, Karl!" she scolded. "You have the ability; you are a leader. This platform you have chosen is controversial, but the people will follow you en masse. Think about it."

Karl changed the topic. "Will I see you at the station tomorrow?"

"No, I won't be in. I have to interview a lady, then write a column about a fashion show that is coming up. Work will have me tied up all day. Perhaps we can make the supper show though."

Disguising his disappointment, Karl said, "That sounds fine. I have a few odds and ends to tie up at the Government Building. Where, and at what time, shall I catch up with you?"

They agreed to meet at Sheena's apartment at five-thirty. Larkin bade her good night and hung up the phone.

Karl reflected on the eventful day: At six A.M. he met Jerry Holt for coffee at the farmer's house. By eight they were in the field and Karl hauled grain until past mid afternoon. The trip to Brant, the challenging meeting, a long drive home; he was exhausted.

But when he should have been falling asleep, his mind went into over-drive. Sheena had apprised

## Watershed

him of more exciting news. What would Colburn have in mind for a telecast? Where would this lead? Karl Larkin, leader of men? What about the concert? He enjoyed Gypsy's singing, what would she be like in person? Karl's thoughts, as slumber caught up, returned to the beautiful brunette who so openly believed in him.

## Chapter 6

After wiping up the crumbs of a light breakfast Karl was still blinking away the last remnants of a short sleep. He called his farmer friend Jerry Holt to inform him that the meeting in Riverside prevented him from helping with the harvest. He took a quick shower, fueled the Bronco and drove to the city.

A beaming David Colburn met the orator as Larkin passed through the heavy glass doors of the television station. "Karl, my boy!" the manager boomed, grasping Larkin's hand. "Glad you could make it! Say, I've a load of interesting news for you... here, step into my pigeon hole."

The younger man attempted to return the greeting as he was ushered into Colburn's opulent office. Seating himself in one of the luxurious leather chairs on the guest's side of the huge oak desk, Karl asked, "What is the interesting news, Mr. Colburn?"

"Dave! Dave! Karl, please call me Dave. The news is that more people are asking questions about you than you can imagine. Not just regular folks off

## Watershed

the street either. These dudes have influential connections. They all want to know whose side you're on. If you aren't supporting a particular party, everyone is eager to sign you up. What do you say about that, Karl?"

A bewildered expression with a trace of annoyance crossed Karl's face. "I'm not representing, and do not intend to represent, any political party. I speak what I believe and hopefully I speak on behalf of all consumers."

Taken aback, the executive recovered instantly. "Of course, Karl! That's the beauty of the situation. You don't conform to any political affiliation. But...with the proper guidance and the support of nearly every voting Canadian, you could control the country. You could even create your own political party."

Exasperation entertained eruption. If Larkin's platform was front page news, why did everyone seem to be missing the point? He saw no connection between lowering the price of gas in Chesterton and becoming prime minister. News media, in particular, were determined to inflate his purpose out of proportion.

He instinctively liked Dave Colburn and, although the fellow exuded a shady used-car-salesman persona, Karl perceived that the man did not possess a shallow character.

"Dave, listen. I am not interested in running the country. My purpose is simply to eliminate the artificial cost, the inexplicable mark-up wherever it is injected throughout the marketing system. Consumers should have greater buying power and this computes to a higher standard of living. We earn less, we pay less and, in the global supermarket,

Canadians will have advantage.”

The manager sobered. “Karl, if you intend to eliminate unfair prices you had best wake up and smell the coffee! The greatest shame in this country are the levies, tariffs and hidden taxes. It’s racketeering! And *that* is where your unfair pricing exists. Certainly everyone along the retail line has his cut, but if you want to talk unfair, look at the slice that goes where it is least deserved. Look at how our tax dollars are spent! Don’t you think there ought to be an accounting of the billions being blown out the window every year?”

Karl reclined in the soft chair. A silent whistle issued from his lips. “You think I should attack the governments? Maybe *you* should have a look around, Dave. We’re already in the throes of a prolonged recession; unemployment is at its highest since the 1930’s; a major tax revolt now would be detrimental to our country’s very existence.”

“Moderation, Karl,” the executive said. “I’m not talking revolution... more of an... accounting. You are capable of moderating masses; *I know it!* With you in the driver’s seat no one is going to rise up against the government. So all I am suggesting is that you and that silver tongue of yours reveal a few insights to the general populace. Just tease the bureaucrats a little; put them on their guard. Remember, in order for this to continue, you have to be controversial or the public won’t buy the gimmick.”

“Gimmick!” Larkin expostulated. “This is no gimmick. Damn it, Dave, I am not trying to buy favour or fool anyone. I simply want a realistic value on consumer necessities: *goods and services.*”

Colburn apologized, “I’m sorry, Karl, I didn’t

## Watershed

mean to say gimmick...”

“Well, that is what you said, Mr. Colburn. Why are we having this conversation anyway? What motivates you in all this?”

Colburn opened his hands in a display of honesty. “Karl, I aspire to be your manager; your promoter. I am behind you one hundred percent and with a certain flare, together we shall see your dream a reality. You and me, lad, we could go a long, long way.”

The younger man shook his head to clear his thinking. He could not believe what had been said. Colburn wanted him to prostitute his talent. “A certain flare?” What did that entail? He featured himself on stage, a carnival act, a circus. The station manager, in his hopes for personal gain, had forgotten the morals and principles men of Karl’s calibre live by.

Karl rose to leave. “I’m sorry, Mr. Colburn. You and I are on a different wavelength. I appreciate what you have said. And, believe me, I would derive great pleasure in exposing the political pocket liners. But not after the fashion you wish. There is no way that I will profit at the expense of the people I say I am fighting for.”

Desperation seized the elder man. “Larkin, please,” he said. “Hear me out. There is more to this than you understand. You want to help your fellow man, but not at his expense. Who will pay for your crusade? You can’t buy time on national television. You couldn’t even afford to advertise on my station. Without promotion you are dead in the water. I have the vehicle to take you where you want to go. Don’t think that I operate simply from the kindness in my heart though. *Money* is my

catalyst. If you agree, I will see that you have the chance. I know you can do it but, this is the *real* world, and in the real world, dollars are the driving force.”

The words carried weight.

Karl resumed his seat, issuing a sigh of resignation. Anyone with half an eye and one ear could realize the common sense in Colburn’s appeal. However, another vision flashed before him: this time he was glittering with rhinestones under a kaleidoscope of stage lights...spewing crap rather than voicing his genuine, heartfelt message.

Larkin grimaced and cleared his head. “Dave, I will go along with you... for awhile. This Hollywood fantasy of yours doesn’t suit me though. I am not sure how much glitter I can abide. My platform is realistic. I do not care to distort the thrust by facade.”

Colburn shifted in his chair and winced. “Old war wound,” he said. “I think you misinterpret my idea of promotion. There will be nothing sleazy nor false in any co-production venture. I’m talking about a class act. We will deliver the same routine you held in Chesterton, only it will be on a more... ‘affluent’ ...stage.”

Larkin absorbed this supplement. “Give me an outline of our first endeavor,” he said. “Sheena told me that you hoped to produce a one hour telecast. I couldn’t hold an audience for that long by simply speaking to a camera. They may sit and listen in an auditorium but in the comfort of their living rooms folks would change channels or turn off the set.”

Colburn snorted, “I think you could hold the attention of an audience for an hour if they were ass-deep in a pond of piranhas. However, I have

## Watershed

considered either a debate or perhaps a public participation format; a phone in program possibly. Perhaps you have ideas of your own, Karl?”

Larkin shrugged in answer. “You are more experienced than I in this field, Dave. I am sure you will develop something. By the way, when do you propose to broadcast this... show?”

“That depends on whether we have a live production or not. In any event, I require at least two weeks to advertise and alert the viewing public.”

For the second time Larkin stood to make his exit. “You can let me know, Dave. If you are unable to reach me, call Sheena. I will leave a number with her.”

The station manager offered his hand. “I will be in touch, Karl,”

After leaving the station Larkin contemplated the proposal but conflicting emotions distorted clear reasoning: He admitted Dave Colburn would be an unequivocal asset. Reaching the populace was paramount to success; the producer could provide the medium. However, fears for what lay on the road ahead, doubts of his personal capability, concerns of promotional tactics and public reception mockingly taunted.

With a shrug of resignation, he muttered aloud, “I’ve nothing to lose!”

*Detective Giroux reconsidered the patience of the trigger man. The fog on the morning of the shooting had been ideal for several reasons: it provided extra cover for approach; further deadened the already silenced muzzle blast; concealed the hunter’s movements during those crucial seconds just prior to the shot; gave the*



*police no reason to believe the shootist had not escaped unnoticed. But... was the fog a lucky coincidence or part of a well thought out plan? If it were part of the plan, how long had the killer waited for the right conditions? A man only had to look out at the nearest street light to know if there was a heavy fog, but how could he know the fog would hold? Unless he lived in the immediate area, how would he know it was foggy near Van der Weist's condo? How could he be sure the candidate would be home that particular morning? On the other hand, unless it was a fortuitous twist, how many times had the predator scouted out the neighbourhood and slithered up that spruce tree only to abandon the mission because conditions were not perfect? Stéphane concluded that there was no coincidence; the stalker possessed both above average intelligence and patience beyond imagination. The patience, and premeditation bolstered the hypothesis that the sniper had a serious mental disorder... to him, killing was a game. Urban hunting.*

*And that led to another disturbing thought: Folks who enjoy playing a game the first time generally play that game again.*

*Giroux decided to reopen the files, going back to August 29, 1979. He searched for a common thread, a link between the information he'd gathered on the Van der Weist murder and crimes of a similar nature, solved or unsolved. Giroux knew that the answers to many open ended cases were locked up in prisons or buried in graveyards.*

*The closest comparison he found was neither incarcerated nor interred. It was another dead end.*

## Watershed

The afternoon passed quickly: Larkin lunched alone before an appointment with a financial advisor. He purchased several items not available in his home town and visited the public library. A handful of seconds before five-thirty, he rapped on Sheena's door.

The most beautiful girl in Larkin's world responded to the knock. An extended and loving embrace superseded platitudes.

Sheena broke off breathlessly, "Tell me about the interview with Mr. Colburn Are you going to have the telecast? What will the show be like? When will it be aired?"

Larkin halted the salvo with a second lingering kiss on the inviting red lips. He said, "Good. Yes. We haven't decided yet. And, I don't know!"

Seated on an elegant sofa, his arm around Sheena, Larkin related the proceedings of the meeting. He could not mask the misgivings in his heart.

Disappointment could be heard in Sheena's voice as she said, "You don't sound particularly enthused, Karl. Please... have more faith. Believing in yourself is synonymous with believing in what you do. What you are doing is right and nothing should stand in your way!"

Gray eyes softened. "Sheena, you certainly make me want to believe."

She kissed him and whispered, "I believe it's time to make our appearance at the supper show."

Sheena looked stunning in silk blouse, long suede skirt and knee high boots. Her shiny BMW won the toss as transportation to the show. Parking spots were limited and a small queue waited in the foyer of the dinner theater but everyone was soon

seated. Karl and Sheena shared a bottle of wine and enjoyed the exquisite meal.

Gypsy's band members assembled on the stage, lights dimmed and the beautiful star promenaded to the platform under the guidance of a brilliant spotlight.

"Hi, everyone," she beamed. "Is Riverside ready to rock?"

The audience responded with cheers, shouts and whistles.

"We are going to do songs from our new album and a few of the oldies. Hope you enjoy!"

Sheena and Karl did enjoy. Gypsy endeared the audience with her youthful effervescence. "Clap your hands, sing along," the entertainer encouraged while singing past hits destined to be classics.

Karl leaned over to Sheena, "I would like to motivate an audience like that!"

Sheena smiled, "Maybe you should sing at your meetings."

The concert ended too quickly for the crowd. A prolonged and loud standing ovation encouraged an encore. The entertainer, prepared for such, reappeared and sang a beautiful cut from her new album.

"How about a relaxing drink somewhere?" Larkin said as the couple exited the parking lot in Sheena's sports car.

"I would like to wind down a little after that performance," the brunette agreed.

Sheena drove to a hotel in 'Old' Riverside and led Karl to a posh, dimly lit lounge just beyond the lobby. Two gentlemen in three piece suits and a waiter dressed in white shirt, black vest and black

## Watershed

pants were the only other occupants. The patrons took no notice of Karl but cast lingering glances at Sheena as the waiter took their order.

Reclined in a plush velvet chair, Larkin closed his eyes, momentarily succumbing to the luxurious comfort. "Lord, it seems like weeks since I have slept. Between harvesting for Jerry and promoting this program of mine, there hasn't been a lull. I thought the loss of my job would leave me plagued with boredom. Now, I would appreciate a little free time!"

The waiter arrived with a small tray containing Perrier for Sheena and a pear brandy for Karl.

"It's only the beginning, Karl," Sheena leaned forward placing her hand on his. "When Mr. Colburn activates his promotion, you will be covering a lot of ground. Once national interest is aroused, there will be no turning back. Requests for your presence will smother you. As Dave said, you will reach every consumer in Canada and they will want to hear more and more."

Karl sipped the brandy. He could not envision the magnitude of the campaign as predicted by his media friends. Colburn had a specific itinerary for the orator to follow. The attack on particular consumer products appealed to Larkin, but he had strong misgivings concerning an open assault directed at governmental mismanagement. Political blunders were fodder for the media. However, the promoter certainly planned to reach the public by heading down that road. Controversy seemed to be the heart of Colburn's promotion.

Larkin mused aloud, "I will have to keep my head up."

Sheena smiled. "Wish I could go with you."

This promises to be the biggest news story since this global recession hit!"

A certain sternness flashed in her companion's gray eyes. "Sheena, do you think of me as a 'hot news item'? Is Dave promoting this venture solely for "the story" and his own profit? I assure you," he added gravely, "there is no selfish monetary gain in my motivation. It is time something is done to curb this run away profiteering and if I can stop it, I will, but not simply for the benefit of the media!"

Sheena shrank slightly as she witnessed the inner steel of the man.

Her hand trembled as she grasped Larkin's. "Dave and I are in the media. It's what we do. But both of us believe in what you are doing. And I believe in you."

The gray eyes softened, "I'm sorry for the outburst. The strain is already taking a toll. Let's go before I say something else. I have a long drive ahead of me."

Sheena glanced at him shyly. "I... hoped you would stay with me tonight...."

The couple returned to Sheena's residence and Karl held her close. He lifted her chin and looked deeply into the shining pools of her eyes. Love gazed back.

His heart swelled to bursting as wondrous emotion, a hunger not born of lust, washed over him. He kissed her tenderly.

She whispered, "Take me to the bedroom."

Sheena switched on a small dim lamp beside the bed and turned to face Karl. He kissed her again and slowly began to undress her, letting the clothes fall to the floor around them. She shuddered under

## Watershed

his slow and gentle caress and smiled shyly when she heard the sharp intake of his breath as her naked body stood revealed.

Sheena helped unbutton his shirt and led him to the bed. Karl's pants came off but the socks stayed on as raw dammed up passion forced the gates and flooded over the lovers.

Since their first encounter, the enchantingly beautiful brunette had reigned over Larkin's reflections in those timeless moments between consciousness and slumber. Tonight the dream surrendered to reality. Karl remained a willing captive.

## Chapter 7

Autumn seized and held the bleak prairie landscape. Pasture land had all but lost its verdure: a faint green tinge lingered in the lowest reaches where sunshine and moisture met; sheltered chokecherry and saskatoon-filled draws, still resplendent in fall uniform, bore stark contrast to the stripped and naked limbs of the gnarled and twisted perennials 'up top' which stood defenseless, unable to escape hungry, howling pre-winter winds; prairie wool stood dead and shorn. Hereford, Black and Red Angus and Charolais cattle, tails hanging idle after a season of constant swatting, grazed placidly on the shortened grass or lay meditatively chewing cuds. The lush and vibrant promise of last June—invariably morphing into August's waving golden fields of grain, then falling prey to the reaper man—now cringed in stunted yellow bands of coarse and brittle stubble. Barren brown strips of desolate summerfallow alternately laced through the ghost crop creating an endless checker board of straw and loam: a farmer's patchwork quilt unfolding to the

## Watershed

horizon.

Karl Larkin relived the previous evening as the Bronco steadily clipped the miles between Riverside and Chesterton.

"I *must* be in love," he mused aloud.

Never had he felt this way about anyone. Ladies had shared interludes in his life; a few relationships had run hot and brief, others simmered for months. None of the women in the past had ever captured his heart, dominating his thoughts in every waking moment, filling his dreams at night.

'Someone *special* will come along and then you will know' his mother had counselled when a teenage Karl Larkin posed a question of being in love.

"Someone special," Karl echoed. Sheena Davies... *someone special*.

He noted that more stubble than crop was in evidence along the highway. The major portion of the harvest was now completed, at least in the southern farming areas of the province. Though grain prices had hit a sorry level, from the producer's standpoint, Karl knew farmers could enjoy temporary peace of mind having the crop in the bin.

The four wheeler found its way onto the main street in Chesterton. *Lowest Price in Town* Larkin read on a sign posted at the entrance of Harvey's service station. Blinking his eyes in disbelief, he reread, "40.9/litre."

"Good lord!" He winced. "There's a gas war *in Chesterton!*"

Larkin stiffened as he drove past Chesterton Motors. He saw no activity in front of the garage nor at the service entrance. To his dismay, the employee



parking area had no vehicles either. Had customers directed a full-scale boycott against the dealer? If the people turned on the dealership, as, apparently, they had, word must have reached the street about Stanton's blackmail attempt on Hank Busse. Though it was Emory Stanton's arrogance that had started Karl on his crusade, he did not believe for a moment that his own campaign had turned Chesterton against the shady businessman.

If politics and shallow people hadn't destroyed his career, none of the recent events would have transpired.

"A grudge is a frightful burden," thought Larkin, feeling somewhat uncomfortable with the realization that his targeted dealership suffered from loss of business. He had not thoroughly considered the repercussions.

Karl wheeled the Bronco into a vacant parking space near one of the grocery stores. Friendly faces greeted him as he moved along the aisles tossing groceries into a cart.

"Hey, Karl!" a familiar voice heralded the shopper. "I have a *special* sale on eggs for you today! You can buy the fresh ones real cheap or, if you'll stand still long enough, I have about a hundred dozen bad ones that I've saved to throw at you!"

The stout proprietor, a small clipboard in one hand, pen in the other, had a peculiar lop-sided gait as he approached Karl.

"The only bad egg in this store is you, Mitch. Why are you limping?"

The grocer grimaced. "Twisted my ankle jumping out of a freight truck. Just a sprain... too fat and lazy to climb down, too old to jump."

## Watershed

“Was the freight truck hauling fresh eggs or rotten ones?”

Mitch tapped Karl on the shoulder with his clip board, “Well, I did eventually sell my eggs after you told everyone to quit buying them. But, not before I lowered the price to ‘red ink’. The supplier dropped his price, so I guess folks are happy again.

“By the way Karl, I’m in the midst of changing franchises. You’ll see a new name on the store next time you’re in town. Lower prices pretty well across the board. My bottom line won’t change —passing the savings on sort of thing— but I may see an increase in customers. It’s a way of keeping the prices down.” Mitch touched his head with the clipboard, “Always thinking, you know... a fella has to stay on his toes with penny pinching police like you breathing down our backs.”

Changing the subject, Larkin asked, “Did Stanton lay-off his men? The place looks deserted.”

Mitch nodded. “Yes, Karl. People have pretty well abandoned Stanton. Don’t take it too personal though; Emory brought it on himself. Most of us had had a bellyful of that clown and his uppity ways, so we just needed an excuse to blow him out of town. His little strong-arm scam backfired too: most everybody frowned on his blackmailing Hank Busse.”

“So Hank’s little faux pas is common knowledge now?”

The grocery manager winced, “You couldn’t keep a scandal like that off the street in *any* small town. *Especially not in Chesterton.*”

Concern showed in the gray eyes, “What about his employees, Mich? What will happen to

them?"The grocer poked Karl in the chest with the clipboard, "This town needs two dealerships to keep each other honest, though that hasn't been the situation with Emory involved, but I'd bet Stanton will fold and someone new will move in to take over the garage. In time, everyone will be working again. Besides, I hear that Emory pays starvation wages anyway."

Karl purchased his groceries and left the store feeling ill at ease. He echoed the grocer's last words: "Starvation wages." Mitch's optimism wouldn't put food on the tables of Stanton's ex-employees.

As Larkin placed the groceries into the back of his vehicle, he noticed a haggard, stooped old man shuffling toward him. A pang of guilt struck the younger fellow as he recognized a very changed Emory Stanton.

"You son-of-a bitch!" the car dealer cursed. "You've ruined me! A lousy no-account sniveling civil servant who never was worth the powder to blow him to hell."

Compassion fled as the steel gray eyes hardened. Karl said evenly, "You didn't do much in the way of bolstering *my* career, Emory. Now we both have nothing. Remember it was you who fired the first shot."

"I'll fire the last shot too! Nobody crosses me and gets away with it. You better cover your tracks real good 'cause I'll be coming after you!"

Although he could smell no liquor, Larkin thought the outraged man had been drinking. On closer inspection he noted that Stanton's eyes bore a glazed feverish expression, like a crazed or rabid animal.

## Watershed

“You best seek medical assistance, Emory. You are eating yourself up inside. You’ve already thrown a screw into everyone else who has had to deal with you, don’t cheat yourself.”

“Save your advice for those fools who will listen to your bullshit,” the older man spat. He turned abruptly and shuffled stiffly toward his defunct place of business.

Several by standers had gathered and they now stared in embarrassment as Larkin’s gaze fell upon them. Mark Conlee ambled over to his friend.

“It appears Ol’ Stanton has slipped a cog,” Karl’s former co-worker volunteered.

“He is not a well man,” Larkin said. “I best not underestimate him.”

“The old bastard is capable of causing plenty of grief,” Mark agreed.

Karl changed the subject, asking his colleague about the employment they had previously shared. Mark stated that the crew missed him and the work load had increased without his ambitious contribution. The job and the employees remained pretty much the same though; Karl’s replacement arrived last week.

As he drove down the street, the orator recalled a story for those who felt they were irreplaceable: *“Shove your arm into a pail of water; when you pull it out, the hole that is left behind will represent how much you will be missed.”*

This adage had been with him for a long while and Karl realized the truth in it. He had seen many employees —the ambitious, the lazy, managers— come and go but the hole they left behind filled in as quickly as the water in the pail. Curiously, the rule applied more to those who felt they were the

contradiction; Larkin possessed no illusions.

Surprise appeared on Karl's face as he opened his mail box at the post office. The pigeon hole overflowed with envelopes. Normally Larkin didn't receive an abundance of Christmas cards and besides, this would be too early.

"Where is all this mail from?" he pondered aloud.

"You are a popular guy, Karl," an urban acquaintance said. "Must be fan letters."

Larkin grinned at the speaker, then replied ruefully, "This is more mail than I have received in my entire life."

Returning to the Bronco, Larkin quickly scanned the post marks on the letters: a few bore the Chesterton seal; many were from familiar locations; several had arrived from places unknown to Karl; all were from Western Canada.

Bewildered as to the contents of the correspondence, Karl rushed home to his acreage, anxiously resisting the temptation to immediately begin reading the letters. After stocking his refrigerator and cupboards with the groceries, he settled down in his favorite chair and devoted the next hour and a half to the correspondence.

The first envelope he opened contained a letter from the town of Brant. Mayor Martin Caldwell had thanked Karl previously, but now expressed his gratitude in writing. The message exhibited optimism; though the people expected the struggle to be long, they possessed the heart required to persevere:

"...Our town would not have assumed the unanimity we now enjoy without your guidance. Win or lose, Brant will be forever in your debt..."

## Watershed

Larkin stared at the written statement. He had only suggested a few options which, in his opinion, appeared obvious. "Folks are more willing to accept words from a stranger than to agree with their own neighbour," he mused. Perhaps the population of Brant had been unified not by his speech but merely by the fact that he was an outsider.

Reading several more letters, Larkin's anxiety began to ease. Everyone congratulated him on his courage, wished him luck and usually wanted to know what they could do to help. Many suggestions and requests were included; they ranged from ridiculous and amusing to downright malicious.

Blushing inwardly from the unaccustomed rain of compliments, Larkin opened an envelope postmarked Chesterton.

"The home town fans are writing too!" he mused.

The red tinge drained from his cheeks and a solemn mask overcame the youthful visage.

*"...and we have been friends a long time, Karl. Didn't you stop and think of us when you bulldozed Stanton practically out of town? You were the only one hurt when he railroaded you, but your retaliation is bringing grief to a dozen families...."*

Larkin read the remainder of the note. Despair seized him. He had realized from the beginning that certain individuals would be hurt; that realization glared accusingly in bold print now.

## Chapter 8

*“Welfare and unemployment are not solutions. They are by-products of a growing problem....”*

Larkin presented his platform, christened by Dave Colburn, “The Consumers’ Advocate,” to an audience of business persons at a banquet in Banff, Alberta. The majority of the group based their interests in the oil industry; a handful were in manufacturing. An aura of ostentation permeated the exquisite Royal Hotel boding failure for Karl’s cause, and the orator doubted his ability to influence these magnates. Independence is a leg-up to success and they deserved every accolade awarded them. Karl’s increasing popularity had merely aroused their curiosity.

“It is the responsibility of all Canadians to keep Canadians working. Government intervention in the form of job programs, hiring incentives and other plastic, flash-in-the-pan gimmicks simply do not survive in the long term. We must create and maintain positions within the established working environment.

## Watershed

“As successful entrepreneurs, you scrutinize your financial statements carefully. In tough economic times such as we are facing today, we strive to reduce our expenses. To balance the ledger, all too often, it is labor costs which are addressed first....

“Lay-offs.”

Stern gray eyes probed as seven hundred individuals felt they were personally under scrutiny.

“Though certainly a quick-fix, layoffs are not a practical resolution, particularly in the long run. Reducing labor costs *without* cutting personnel may be the more favorable decision. A general reduction of wages for all, across the board, is more acceptable than terminating employment. Of course, not everyone is going to be happy with this arrangement either. But this action reflects your consideration toward your employees and the psychological effect is beneficial two-fold: workers become a more cohesive group; *and*, the threat of ‘Who’s next?’ is eliminated. An appreciated employee is a productive employee.”

Larkin paused momentarily. The audience remained silently attentive.

“My motivation is to improve the economic situation for all of us. *You* are capable of fulfilling that dream for many working Canadians. Right now, unemployment figures are staggering; consequently, our economy staggers proportionally. Industry drives employment: Your businesses, your plants, warehouses, every aspect of your corporate structure has the power to accommodate a greater portion of the labor force. You can ‘make it happen’....

“Why should you though? You have built your



empires. You know what it is to struggle and sweat and bleed. You know the bitter taste of failure. And, you know the sweet reward of success. So, why should you give a damn about anyone else? Let them make their own way. If they fail; if they quit; if they are down and can't get back up again, too bad....

Temperature dropped.

A soupçon of hostility with all the clout of half a wink rippled through the hall.

"I agree."

The chill lifted several degrees.

"I agree when we're referring to the perpetual quitter who refuses to work. When we talk of the permanent society leech. When we consider the losers and abusers... Yes! I agree. However, the majority of workers *are* willing. They have the desire, the *balls*, to earn their keep. For these people we must ensure a place in the work force. Employment must be made available because we can no longer sustain the burden of the unemployed.

"Remember, *you* are the individuals who pay for the bread lines. You pay for the unemployment, the social assistance. You pay an incredible amount for poverty and the abominations associated with impoverishment. A portion of every dollar you pay in wages goes to those who are not working. Is this fair to the labour force? Is it fair to you?

"Have you ever once considered that you are contributing to a concern that is growing more socially acceptable every year? It is no longer an embarrassment to rely on the government; to ask for a handout. What will motivate the next generation: the youth raised on assistance today?" The voice lowered, "Would you rather pay a dedicated

## Watershed

employee or a welfare bum?”

In conclusion Larkin subtly changed his tone to an entreating demand, “Ladies and gentlemen, please, *keep the work-force working!*”

An exuberant and sincere round of applause accompanied the speaker as he stepped back from the lectern.

Dave Colburn shook the orator’s hand vigorously when they met in the hall outside the spacious banquet room. “Good job, my boy! I never dreamed you could melt the ice around that crowd, but you delivered a genuine heat wave!”

Karl felt quite enlightened too. In his modest way, thoughts of heckling and rotten eggs suited his expectations more than the ovation received.

Three very busy months had passed since Larkin agreed to allow Colburn to promote his messianic venture. Numerous auditoriums, gymnasiums and banquet halls afforded venue for the crusade as the original promotional program sponsored by Colburn grew into a colossal success. The one hour prime time production reached thousands of households. Many video clips were rerun by larger television stations. The gifted speaker reached the populace with enchanting voice and supportive results as ‘Karl Larkin’ and ‘The Consumers’ Advocate’ became front page throughout western Canada.

Neither Larkin nor Colburn believed that mere words, no matter how inspiring or persuasively presented, could secure public attention indefinitely. This realization came to them early in the program when a belligerent member of the audience taunted

*“Talk is cheap; it takes money to buy whiskey.”* Colburn gave Sheena extra duties in ferreting out grist for Larkin’s mill. The capable brunette uncovered the facts, brought the news to the fore and monitored closely while Larkin went to work setting things right. Initially, CBJT and The City Times kept Riverside and district informed; soon coverage grew exponentially as news of the program washed across the west like early morning sunlight pouring from a bucket of dawn. An unsubstantiated increase in provincial telephone rates drew the attention of the campaign. Under the auspices of Karl Larkin, the ensuing public outcry forced the corporation to withdraw the proposal. Riverside consumers enjoyed a *decrease* in electrical charges after Larkin, through Sheena’s diligent sleuthing, exposed an embarrassing balance sheet belonging to the city’s light and power division. Farmers tuned in radio and television, eagerly anticipating developments in Larkin’s attack on agricultural chemical costs. Supermarkets guarded their prices closely lest they be singled out as perpetrators of inflation. Consumers enjoyed a respite from the traditional monthly price hikes. While the majority basked in the sunshine of a price freeze, the remainder steamed in cold frustration.

On the home front in Chesterton, Jerry Holt and his confrères at the Miles Café took initiative from Karl’s original letter to the Herald. Karl had written, *“I believe that every complaint, gripe or grievance should be accompanied with a plausible solution. If you don’t have an answer, spend your time finding one rather than passing it on to they.”* The coffee cup brigade took it upon themselves to test Larkin’s advice. Jerry reported to Karl how the

## Watershed

program began:

“I think it was the next morning after you chewed our ears about payin’ too much, that one of the lads, Jensen, I think it was, says: “They gotta keep the prices down...’ or somethin like that. Right away somebody jumps on him and says ‘There ain’t no *they*.’

“Well, we all had a good laugh, but when it happened two more times, we got to thinkin’, you know, maybe there is somethin’ to this. So I took a pen and a napkin and we started puttin’ ideas down on paper... not just bitchin and complainin’, we come up with solutions.”

Jerry laughed “Christ! I didn’t get home ’til near lunch time! It seemed like we was doin’ somethin’ worthwhile and havin’ a good time doin’ it. Anyway, we did the same thing again the next day. *I tell you*, it was good for business at the Miles ’cause every coffee drinker in town popped in to add his two cents worth! On the second day we christened our little meetin’ Coffee Row. The waitress, Sharilee, she brought us a regular notebook to use and we just put things in there. It wasn’t no big time stuff like you’re doin’ Karl, more local. Fr’instance, the big issue around town has been fundin’ for artificial ice. Well, *they* ain’t givin’ us no money for that these days, so we just started makin’ plans to raise cash on our own. Now Chesterton’s got a rink committee doin’ the fund raisin’ and we all contribute new ideas every mornin’ at Coffee Row.”

Karl had commended his friend for the effort. Jerry, appreciating the compliments, had continued:

“Oh, there was a lot of things we done that we could have done ages ago, but instead we sat around

and bitched, just thinkin' it was up to someone else."

"*They*," Karl had interjected.

Jerry nodded. "Yeah... There was a pile of junk on a vacant lot over on the east side. It was an unsightly heap an' a rat trap too. Everybody thought the town should do something about it but *they* didn't. Even though most of us was from outside o' town we just got together with half a dozen pickups that mornin' after coffee, drove over to that junk pile and hauled 'er all away. Done. No more bitchin' an' *they* never done nothin'. It was *us*!"

The farmer had gone on to say that the Miles Café group set an example for the town. Soon the beverage room, cocktail lounge and the hair dresser's shop had become protagonists in an extended coffee row. Of course, zany submissions outnumbered the practical ideas exponentially, but long neglected problems were now being addressed. "And," Jerry said, "It gives us somethin' to do instead of sittin' back and bitchin'."

Jerry's group had forwarded several solutions to concerns outside the Chesterton jurisdiction for the Consumers' Advocate to administer. These, added to a growing list of unsolicited tips and proposals from the general public, prompted Colburn to incorporate more staff. He hired six 'diggers' —energetic journalists having substantial insight into the thrust of Larkin's campaign— to furnish an unending flow of information and ammunition. The investigative team lightened the load for Sheena. An entire floor of office space in 'Old Riverside' was rented; Sheena screened applicants for three, eventually seven, clerical positions.

The Consumers' Advocate was no longer a

## Watershed

one-man crusade.

Alone in his room at the Royal Hotel, Karl reflected upon the snowballing gauntlet controlling his life. Had he become a prisoner of his own creation? Where would this headlong rush deliver him? Admittedly, the triumphs spoke for themselves but Karl hoped to retain a sense of individuality. More and more frequently he felt that people regarded Karl Larkin as a medium rather than a human being; a voice without embodiment.

As had become custom, he reached for the telephone when spirit waned.

The sweetest voice of all answered the call.

"Sheena!" Karl said. "I'm missing you."

"I miss you too, Karl. When are you coming home?"

"I will have to check with Dave but I'm sure that nothing is scheduled for this weekend. Let's go out to my acreage and relax for a few days."

Sheena groaned. "I've a meeting to attend Friday night, Karl... Perhaps you could stay here and we will drive out to Chesterton Saturday?"

"That will work," Karl said. "I feel like I'm on a run away train. Perhaps a quiet interlude will help to collect my thoughts. *And*, I desperately need time alone with you."

"We'll make up for lost time this weekend, darling," Sheena promised.

Larkin hung up the phone and reached for the switch on his bedside lamp. The bells rang again. He dropped his hand and grasped the receiver.

"Karl! Hal Reid here. I have uncovered an interesting tidbit on Agra-line Chemicals."

Hal Reid had proven to be an invaluable

member of the investigative team. Recently, the digger probed chemical companies, primarily of agricultural concern.

“What have you got, Hal?” Larkin asked.

“These boys have lots of bucks.” Reid said. “I’d say that farm chemicals are a mere sideline. They are into everything from pharmaceuticals and hotels to trans Atlantic freighters.”

“As long as it’s legitimate, more power to them. I am more interested in how much profit they are making at the farmers’ expense.” Larkin paused to clear his throat, “We need to know the cost of production. Categorize each chemical. Find out why, for example, it costs the grain producers a hundred dollars for a litre of grasshopper poison. Are they making this stuff out of liquid platinum or what? Surely the chemical can be produced more cheaply.”

“I have looked into that, Karl. These people have their labs sealed tighter than their employees’ mouths, which don’t flap very loosely either. A brief composition is listed on the containers though. I have talked with chemists at the University and I believe the listed prices of these chemicals are totally inflated according to ingredient cost. Ballpark figures are all that I can produce, however, because there are so many variables. I will state this though: a five hundred percent markup is entirely possible.”

“How on earth can they justify that?” Larkin exploded.

“From my inquiries, Karl, I’d say the processing cost is only a small factor. The companies argue that government regulations are so strict that their greatest expenditure is for testing and standards approval. Of course, research takes a huge

## Watershed

bite too.”

Karl said, “Sprays and fertilizers have become so much a part of the farming operation that the entire industry is chemical dependent. Crop junkies. Herbicide and pesticide manufactures have the farmers by the ‘short n’ curlies’ and they know it. Hal, draw up a list of products that Agra-line markets and we will review it together. I’m inclined to squeeze these fellows a bit. Even a ten percent cut would be substantial.”

Reid agreed by saying, “Agra-line can take a reduction. Last year they offered one of their chemicals at a twenty five percent lower rate ostensibly due to the unstable grain prices. There are two ways of looking at that: they were overpriced the previous year or they miscalculated their predicted sales. Either way, they are admitting to a mark up of at least twenty five percent before the product leaves the plant.”

“Perhaps they felt a twinge of benevolence. Have you studied any other companies, Hal? How do their sales and marketing compare with Agra-line?”

“Nothing in depth, Karl, but I have made a few calls. On the surface these chemical companies display a facade of furious competition but back stage they are holding hands and sucking each other’s ears.”

“While the farmer pays the shot,” Karl said.

“Keep digging, Hal, you are doing an excellent job. We want facts, though. Make certain that we can substantiate every piece of information we use.”

“One other thing, Karl,” Hal supplied, “they bodily threw me out of their plant in Ontario. ‘You’ve been warned!’ they said. We will have to



step lightly. These boys can and will play hard ball.”

“You be careful, Hal, we don’t want any casualties.”

A restlessness seized Larkin. Pacing the hotel room he reviewed the conversation with Hal Reid. ‘These boys can and will play hard ball!’ Karl echoed. He wondered if and how the corporation intended to support their warning. Court battles create a poor image. Maliciousness seemed unbecoming of a giant. Hal probably dealt with Agra-line at the lower management level; a decision to physically escort the investigator off the premises may have come from the desk of a wanna-be executive who acted entirely above his jurisdiction. Perhaps it was security personnel.

As he readied himself for bed, Larkin considered and then rejected the possibility that his campaign had become a thorn in the side of the behemoth. Agra-line would simply ignore any public statements made by the orator. ‘I’m pretty small potatoes in the eyes of that outfit.’ Then he grinned. “Small potatoes will grow into big potatoes if you kick enough dirt on them....”

*“Celebrities are just ordinary people,” Jamie had mused while cleaning the sniper rifle. “They live, they die.”*

*The hunt for Elizabeth Van der Weist had been a prolonged affair, but Langston had patience and all the time in the world. A perfect day arrived, the politician came out and the job was done. Lion Eyes had trouble controlling giggle fits while the cops were crawling all around. The sniper had a ring side seat in a big spruce tree. As calculated, no*

## Watershed

*one bothered to look there. One officer came close, wandered below Jamie's perch, stepped behind the bushy tree, relieved himself, then returned to the scene of the crime. Yellow-orange eyes followed him.*

*But Van der Weist wasn't the only person who troubled Jamie Langston. There were many. Sometimes it felt like everyone wanted to kick dirt on the yellow eyed freak. In time, the Van der Weist collection came off the wall and went into a scrap book. Jamie pasted a newspaper article showing a picture of the candidate lying dead on her doorstep in a pool of blood on the last page of the folder then wrote "The Bloody End". However, now the walls looked bare; the janitor decided to take up another project.*

*Adrian Quennell had struggled academically, but he was a tremendous athlete. Teachers, books and learning hurt his head so, to keep himself amused, he taunted the other students. The smart kid with yellowish orange eyes was one of his favorite targets. He loved to see the wild glare, the intense hatred, when Lion Eyes focused on him.*

*Of course, Quennell didn't see the yellow-orange eyes focused on him five years later....*

The aroma of fresh coffee and sizzling bacon stirred Larkin to consciousness. He glanced at the clock radio beside the bed. Eleven-thirty. He groaned.

Sheena appeared in the bedroom doorway. "Oh! I'm sorry. I've only made enough breakfast

for myself. I thought you were dead.”

“Well, I’m happy to hear that my demise didn’t spoil your appetite,” Karl retorted.

Larkin had returned from his tour Friday evening and, after picking up Sheena at her meeting, the couple enjoyed a quiet dinner. They opted for a midnight drive to Karl’s acreage and sleep was postponed until the wee hours of morning. Now he lacked energy to crawl out of bed.

“Come on sleepy head, I have the shower running for you.”

The massaging spray soothingly erased the last remnants of sleep and Karl began to feel alive again.

“Are you awake yet?” Sheena called above the pulse of the shower.

“Almost...Yeow!”

Sheena dashed a pan of ice-cold water over the curtain. Before she could escape, a hand grasped her wrist and pulled her into the rain-closet.

“Karl!” she shrieked. “My robe....”



## Chapter 9

Karl and Sheena treasured the precious time spent at the acreage. Only a light skiff of snow covered the ground and the temperature held at freezing during the day. Wind was elsewhere. The sky was azure. Sheena devoured the quietude as the couple toured Karl's premises. No intrusive vehicular noise passed within hearing. Occasionally a passenger jet droned high overhead leaving a wispy white wake of vapour in its passing. There were no visitors and only a few telephone calls.

Neither Sheena nor Karl cared to break the spell; they abstained from a trip to Chesterton for supplies. Larkin's refrigerator contained no fresh produce so the couple subsisted mainly on the meager cache in the bachelor's freezer; for the remainder, they lived on love.

Saturday night, Karl drew a small sofa close to the hearth of the handsome stone fireplace that took up an entire wall of the living room and the amative couple shared a perfect evening in front of a crackling fire.

## Watershed

Karl put his arm around Sheena and pulled her close. He could smell the fragrance of her hair and feel the warmth of her body." I could grow used to this," he whispered softly.

Sheena rested her head on Karl's chest. She could hear the steady rhythm of his heartbeat and felt the inner strength. She had never known anyone like Karl Larkin; sometimes he seemed invincible....

Sheena shuddered and said, "I'm worried, Karl. Some of that mail we read today had serious implications; one was a blatant threat."

Jerry Holt kept an eye on the acreage during the orator's absence. He checked the water and made sure that electrical appliances and furnace were running. The farmer also collected Karl's mail at the post office. A large sack of letters had awaited Karl's return and together the couple had filtered through the barrage of correspondence. The majority of the letters were thank-yous for previous appearances, invitations to speak or congratulations and suggestions. One missive, in a plain brown manila envelope with no return address and a Toronto post-mark, read in bold print:

**Keep your mouth shut or we'll shut  
it for you.**

"Don't worry about that," Karl tried to dismiss the subject. "Most likely it was sent by some attention starved nut case."

"But the letter said 'we!' That suggests more than one person behind it. And besides, who could you have singled out in Toronto? You haven't made any individual enemies that far away," Sheena

persisted.

Karl stood up and slowly paced the room. A frown creased his handsome face. "I suppose it could be Agra-line. Certain individuals within that organization are aware that Hal Reid has been investigating their chemical production. They would be premature in making threats though. We haven't singled them out publicly. My comments have been fairly general as far as the agricultural chemical manufacturers are concerned. I do intend to meet with Agra-line and a few of the other big names later on, but they aren't aware of that."

He waved a hand in couldn't-care-less fashion. "I'm not about to lose any sleep over an unsigned letter. There are hundreds of weirdos out there that crave this publicity I could well do without."

Sheena arose and came to Karl, "Please be careful. I worry about you."

The threatening letter did not cross Larkin's mind again until he received a call from Hal Reid three days later.

Seated in Dave Colburn's CJBT office, Karl responded to the secretary's "Karl Larkin, line two."

"Karl, this is Hal," the voice sounded breathless. "I've dug up a few fresh bones and uncovered another helping of scraps from Agra-line."

Sensing the urgency in the investigator's tone, Karl interjected, "Are you O.K., Hal?"

"Yeah... yeah, I'm all right... for now. It might a good time to back off though. These fellows have more to hide than over-priced chemicals. They've got a bee in their bonnet and they don't want us, or anyone else, snooping around... at all!"

## Watershed

“We aren’t particularly interested in their illicit activities, if that is what you are alluding to; crime investigation isn’t our platform.” Larkin paused, then chuckled, “I’ll admit, it would make life even more interesting —don’t throw out any tidbits— but, as I said before, we need to prove that there is an unnecessarily high markup on certain pesticides and herbicides. Then we’ll insist upon a price reduction. If we are refused, the farmers can decide the future of Agra-line’s chemical division.”

Reid said, “We definitely have sufficient information to approach them for that concern. I found an interesting bit of material that... er... somehow escaped the paper shredder.”

“Give me what you’ve got. Maybe we can reason with Agra-line without a public outcry.”

“You owe me a bonus for this detective action, Karl. I had to sacrifice my virtue to get access to the top floor.”

Hal Reid’s perseverance, digging in the ‘trash bins’ of Agra-line’s executive, unearthed a highly confidential sheaf of financial statements and documents. Following a close perusal, Reid drew two conclusions: Agriculturalists and pharmacies were not the only users of chemicals produced or distributed by Agra-line and Revenue Canada would raise their collective eyebrows if they were privy to the financial records. For confirmation of the latter, the investigator hired the resources of a trusted accountant.

Larkin firmly refused to become involved with the company’s alleged illicit dealings stating again that criminal investigation would not be a part of the consumer fight.

“Can you fly back tonight?” Karl asked his



digger. “We’ll break down those financial reports and extract only what we need for our campaign. I’d like to have a proposal for Agra-line before the new year. We may be too late to benefit those farmers who need a tax deduction before year end, but the majority will appreciate any positive movement.”

Hal Reid had a previous engagement—a further sacrifice of his virtue—but assured Karl that he would catch the red-eye and be in the office at CBJT late afternoon the next day. He added, “From a quick estimate, I’d say we can net the tractor-boys an easy 25% cut on Agra-line chemicals.

“Thanks, Hal.” Larkin replaced the receiver. The investigator’s words left him ill at ease: Maybe Agra-line really had sent that threat.

Hamilton Sturgess, manager of Agra-line Chemicals’ Toronto office, failed to conceal his irritation when Karl Larkin called.

“Yes, Larkin. I’ve heard of you,” he said.

Ignoring the lukewarm response, Larkin tried a softening approach. “I’d really appreciate a chance to meet and discuss product prices your company controls.”

“We’re on a tight budget here, Larkin. I would advise you, for your own good, to keep your nose out of our affairs.”

“Your *affairs*,” Larkin said, “are none of my concern. I *am* interested in the customers of your agricultural division. I’m trying to establish an acceptable pricing policy that, in the long term, will benefit you as well as the farmers. Surely you don’t desire a purchasing freeze on your product?”

“You can go to hell!” the belligerent

## Watershed

businessman exploded. "We don't care a cold damn about your puny charade. Besides, the farming industry is small potatoes for us. I'm warning you again. Keep your damn nose out of our business!"

Karl heard the receiver crash down and the hum of dial tone resume.

More amused than shocked Larkin replaced his own handset, then softly drummed his fingers on the desk as thoughts coursed through his keen mind.

He had an outline of prices charged by other chemical companies in Canada: no significant difference existed throughout a wide range of similar products. Given the opportunity to ad-lib and exercise 'gentle coercion' Karl believed he could negotiate a fairer deal through these sources. Also, because the remaining companies combined did not enjoy as large a slice of the pie as Agra-line, they may be receptive to an increase in sales. Larkin surmised that a certain envy must exist for those in the shadow of the huge conglomerate.

The orator doubted Hamilton Sturgess would reconsider his position and Karl thought it prudent to contact the smaller chemical manufacturers immediately, *before* Agra-line had an opportunity to strengthen any reputed alliance. If the companies all followed Agra-line's example, Larkin's campaign would have no foundation for negotiation.

Consulting his personal notes, he reached again for the telephone.

Larkin's opportunity to launch an offensive against Agra-line's farm chemical sales came sooner than he expected. The Canadian Cereal Grain Authority (CCGA) requested the orator's presence at their annual convention in Ottawa.

The symposium was an extravagant event traditionally attended by members of all major farm organizations: grain terminal and railhead executives, representatives of federal and provincial departments of agriculture, commodity experts, import/export wizards, farm implement manufacturers, and just about anyone associated with the agriculture industry except those who actually knew the difference between a combine and a cultivator. It offered Karl the ideal venue to plead his case against over-pricing of herbicide, pesticide and fertilizer.

David Colburn beamed more than usual as he slapped Karl on the back.

“Boy, this is *theeee* chance you have been waiting for! Once you wag that silver tongue of yours at this convention, all the farmers in Canada will be behind you. There will be enough coverage to put you in competition with the Pope!”

Larkin listened, an amused grin on his face. The sponsor’s exuberance no longer troubled the young orator. Both men had nurtured a healthy mutual respect which evolved into a genuine friendship and Karl realized, without Colburn’s help, he would be back in Chesterton counting eggs for Mitch the grocer.

“How much support would I gain if I were to start with a tirade against freight subsidies, government assistance, or, perhaps, CCGA itself?”

Colburn’s smile faded. “You wouldn’t open that can of worms for that particular audience... would you?”

Larkin soothed the older man. “Well, you know I don’t agree with robbing Peter to pay Paul; sort of goes against the *grain*. However, it would be

## Watershed

prudent to avoid that issue at this time with the hope of minimizing or eliminating the need in the future. If a farmer can save ten thousand dollars in costs, that may eventually translate into a break for the taxpayer.”

Colburn brightened. “Speaking of taxpayers, do you have anyone checking up on the feds? Maybe we should expose a few examples of the flagrant mismanagement of our tax dollars.”

Dave often pitched the idea of using federal government waste to gain popularity for the campaign. Larkin usually dodged. He said, “I had hoped to keep politics and bureaucrats out of the program. The way I see it, we can have no political affiliation or we lose support. Any negative comment directed to a particular party will certainly be misconstrued....”

“But taxes are the biggest rip off of all!” Colburn protested. “It will gain us tons of publicity.”

Larkin winced, recalling his ongoing struggle with Hamilton Sturgess and the entire Agra-line corporation, “Publicity isn’t always in my best interest!”

Karl’s argument was lost as Dave Colburn assumed his pigeon-chested strut and Karl could lip sync the words he knew were forthcoming. “Publicity, coverage, fame! It’s everything! So what if a few people are agitated? Conflict creates renown. We have gone from a shrunken subcolumn near the classifieds to front page headlines! National networks pay, ‘The Consumers’ Advocate *Inc.*’ a *ton* of money to broadcast your words, your voice.

“I’m telling you, Karl Larkin, my boy...*Now* is the time to poke a stick in the hornets’ nest. Those

jokers presume to represent the people. We'll expose a few instances of pocket lining, just to keep them on their toes!"

Cool gray eyes dammed the verbal flood. "I'll not be party to individual harassment of MP's and MLA's. Don't forget: people in glass houses...."

Dave Colburn said, "Yeah, yeah, and people in stone houses shouldn't throw glass...."

"But," he argued, "we have the vehicle—the *power*—to eradicate patronization and vote buying, to install democracy in it purest form."

Larkin gave up, "I will have our diggers check out a couple of select government funded programs. Maybe we should... *encourage*... our politicians to exercise caution in their spending. It seems to me that every tax payer could be given an accounting of how their dollars are spent."

The older man appeared satisfied with the compromise, "We'll dig up enough embarrassment in general terms without homing in on particular individuals... But just once, I would like to have the feds under my thumb and watch 'em squirm instead of them putting the screws to me, especially around tax time."

Karl laughed at his partner. "I'll just bet you squirm at tax time!"

Hours later, the orator reviewed the conversation he had had with Colburn. The promoter's tone had held the slightest trace of... of what? When he said '*power*'; was it eagerness? excitement? maybe a hidden hunger? Karl shook his head; he read too much into small details.

However, the ripple Larkin started had been gathering momentum. It was approaching avalanche

## Watershed

proportions but, Karl felt, under control. As the campaign swept along, gathering energy, would *power* skim to the top? Would Larkin let that power overwhelm him? What would Dave Colburn do if he were in Karl's shoes?

## Chapter 10

“Ottawa and farmers generally do not go hand in hand,” Larkin mused. Momentarily alone, Karl relaxed in his hotel room thirty floors above the convention centre where the Canadian Cereal Grain Authority held their annual assemblage. The orator had been reflecting upon his childhood and a warm smile now lightened his features. He wished he didn’t know now what he didn’t know then.

Days of youth are lifetime treasures for a farm boy. The world truly was as big as all outdoors; you could see as far as you cared to and fill in the beyond with imagination. Karl had been a teenager before he realized that Ottawa did not control rain clouds. As a youngster he thought that *’government’* was a *’four letter word’* reserved for the barnyard and not spoken in the house; just saying *’government’* would put a stroke against a lad to be brought up on his file when judgment day rolled around.

Demons of the *’government’* were heartless thieves and prevaricators not to be associated with.

They were involved in a beastly campaign to

## Watershed

eliminate farmers.

“Why should I sell your wheat?” a popular/unpopular prime minister had asked a throng of angry farmers.

Karl remembered the colossal effect that quote had around the kitchen table. Now, in retrospect, the orator had to ask himself the same question. Whether a government acted in the best interests of the populace or not, bureaucratic intervention, by its inherent nature, escalated cost; government administrative dollars, in Karl’s opinion, were monies badly spent. The Grain Authority, sponsors of the symposium Karl now attended, were the quintessence of government intervention. A tithe from every bushel of grain marketed went toward paying the administrative costs of the Authority.

Larkin sighed. Sadly, many farmers would be out of business if they were responsible for selling their grain on an open world market. He considered the thousands of ‘hopper cars’ hauling wheat to the east or west shipping ports. Huge “*Government Of Canada*” lettering was stenciled on those freight cars. Larkin doubted the railways had sponsored free ad campaigns for the feds: Government money paid for the hopper cars; how much did it burden the tax payer? What were the administrative costs?

Probably more than a farm boy’s investment laying pennies on the railway tracks.

The banquet of the previous evening had been embarrassingly lavish and now Karl Larkin flinched inwardly as he surveyed the mammoth convention centre. Obviously the agricultural contingent here were accustomed to living ‘higher off the hog’ than their counterparts out in the field. Hundreds of



people, maybe more than a thousand, were in attendance; none of them in overalls. The orator thought of his farmer friend Jerry Holt, back home in Chesterton. Jerry would be paying a portion of the bill for this dissipation.

“Such extravagance.” Larkin murmured.

“She’s big time, my boy.” Dave Colburn whispered. “The Consumers’ Advocate is moving up! Now, you go show ’em your stuff!”

The chairperson of the convention, Richard Ganley, was at the podium facing a battery of microphones, talking animatedly to the crowd. A ripple of laughter drifted to where Karl and Dave were waiting behind the speaker. A camera crew occupied the foreground.

“A young man from out west has been creating quite a stir across our nation recently. He has started a campaign to bring a fairer product price to consumers. Having been raised on the farm, he has particular interest in lobbying against unreasonable and unaccountable expenses that our farmers incur.

“I had the pleasure of meeting this fellow earlier today, and friends, I believe he just might turn the economy around! Please welcome, Mr. Karl Larkin!”

Karl, a congenial smile masking his misgivings, stepped forward as the audience applauded with required enthusiasm. Mentally, Karl noted that few faces reflected a farming background. The majority, he surmised, couldn’t distinguish barley from buckwheat.

“I had assumed this meeting would be held in the office of a grain elevator,” Larkin said as he casually glanced around the elaborate convention room. “Nice elevator!”

## Watershed

The crowd, warmed by the opening statement, soon became entranced under the power of the silver tongue and enchanting voice. Without effort, the veteran controlled his audience: his words were their words; he spoke exactly what they felt; drew crystal clear verbal pictures and the verbal portraits were identical to those in the listener's mind's eye.

"Everyone participating in this convention is concerned with agriculture. I am concerned with farmers.

"Canada should thrive with its vast food production resources and, from the seed to the table, all of us are affected by agriculture. Because the production of food for an ever-increasing world population will always be necessary, so will agriculture in Canada be necessary. However, I fear today that the people of production will change drastically. To demonstrate, with your permission, I shall use my home area as an example.

"The 'dirty thirties' had greatest consequence in the prairie region. At that time, nearly every quarter section provided a home and income for a farm family. As the drought continued, people were forced from the land in droves. Thousands left the area never to return and never to attempt an agrarian existence again. The result is obvious today where we have fewer families, larger farms and many communities —whistle-stops— that exist in name only. The land, every acre farmed prior to the drought, is still in production.

"Now, almost half a century later, the sons and daughters of those who persevered, those who hung on through the depression, are facing a similar crisis. The drought on the prairies today exists in the form of a financial desert. Thousands of our farmers are

facing bankruptcy. These people will be forced away, leaving, not years, but generations of work, blood, sweat and, most of all, dreams....

"It frightens me to think of reading a municipal map ten years from now. My neighbours' land will be listed as so-and-so. The people will be a gone concern."

Larkin paused for a sip of ice water, noting the appreciative nods of agreement from his audience.

"I believe that the tendency toward corporate farming institutions is an insult down to the very roots of our nation's existence. However, from the economic standpoint, this trend is virtually automatic. Farmers cannot continue to battle the ever increasing odds.

"But let us stop a moment to study the larger consequence of losing our farms: Small communities will evaporate along with the farming populace. Pride in ownership, pride in production will no longer exist. The interim between today and that time will be a most morally devastating period for our agrarian friends."

A deliberate pause allowed the words to sink in a little deeper and Karl sensed the unanimous thought: "If farmers cannot be economically viable, then let the corporations take them over!"

He smiled inwardly.

"I am here today seeking to slow, stop or reverse this seemingly inevitable course; *you* may wish to consider the impact upon the future of the Grain Authority. Typically, corporate magnates do not pay outsiders to market their product."

Ears perked.

Not everyone had considered that a decline in the number of farmers out west may impact soft-

## Watershed

hand jobs in the east.

“I do not agree with artificial funding. Drought bonuses, subsidies and grants and freight exemptions, are temporary measures. Prolonged use creates false security and, needless to say, it costs billions. As economist Hyman Minsky said, “Success breeds a disregard of the possibility of failure.” I must add that *artificial success* is even more obfuscating. False income often comes at the expense of ambition. A young farmer might hold on indefinitely with sufficient government funding, but, when the day comes that this is no longer economically feasible, the government will pull the plug.

“After ten or fifteen years of subsidization, the farmer has gained nothing but gray hair, unless, of course, he went bald. Hindsight will say it would have been easier for him to go back to school or begin a new line of work at twenty-five rather than at thirty-five or forty years of age. The bottom line is: government intervention did him no favours and it cost a ton of cash to do it.

“What can be done? Can we hold on to our farms or will this decade be remembered as “The Dirty Eighties”?

“As everyone in this room knows, when the price for a bushel of wheat is three dollars on the world market, that is exactly what that grain is worth. Regardless of subsidized payments made to farmers in other countries, the importing nations are still paying only three dollars per bushel.

“Must Canada keep-up-with-the-Joneses by accordingly subsidizing our own producers? If so, for how long? And, at what cost, to all Canadians? Our population is not large; we do not have a

sufficient tax base.

"In order to profit selling grain on the world market, we must be able to produce it below market price; a standard rule for any industry. In the instance of agriculture, unless we can magically create a commodity crisis without it actually taking place, cost of production has to be reduced while sustaining maximum yields."

The orator met individual pairs of eyes, "Have you ever noticed that a bull market in grain is immediately succeeded by higher farm production costs?"

Nods of agreement.

"Have you ever seen the reverse? When did a bear market in wheat devalue a new tractor or combine? Never?"

Heads bobbed.

"Why is that?"

"Today, farming methods are increasingly dependent on chemicals, fertilizers and state of the art technology. Modern machinery and farming practices require major investment. Have we simply accepted that expense is greater than return?"

Larkin paused for another sip of water, appreciating that the crowd remained totally attentive.

The voice resumed.

"People who know me realize that I do not promote, advertise or solicit for any group or company. My sole purpose is to create a more affordable standard of living for *all* Canadians. In this endeavour the program has encountered varying degrees of opposition. Feathers have been ruffled and I have left a small wake of disgruntled people who would rather Karl Larkin had stayed on the

## Watershed

farm.”

Against-the-wind laughter fleetingly stirred the room.

“My colleagues and I have made significant progress in our struggle. Consumers are participating and, with their support, we have the attention of the marketing machine. The rural community is no exception; farmers are consumers too and many of the organizations represented here at this convention can verify that individual producers are keen to see action in their interest.

“I have a list of corporations who are excessively impacting cost of production, particularly in the areas of pesticide, herbicide and fertilizer; a handful have expressed grudging support, others have paid lip service, one or two have been... less than cooperative. However, The Consumers’ Advocate has effectively solicited a marginally lower price for farm chemicals: Prices in general will be reduced up to five percent, we hope to strengthen that to fifteen percent. Of course, the success of our agriculture campaign depends upon the support of the farmers. I’m disappointed that it has become necessary to focus on any particular group or corporation.

“Our personnel have also been studying the trail of machinery manufacture. We have the figures from assembly line to the farm yard. Presently we are lobbying for cuts wherever possible. Surprisingly, our government has a hand in for a sizable portion too... robbing Peter to pay Peter back at a later date! Farm machinery dealerships are experiencing a difficult existence these days. Equipment *sales* are fiercely competitive; repair *parts* are exorbitant. The term ‘Genuine’ when

referring to replacement pieces has become a costly cliché. A touch of manufacturer's paint can be quite rich.

"Many opportunities have yet to be explored." Karl again made an exaggerated study of the convention centre. "The CCGA could reduce spending and give the difference back to the producers. A reprieve from fuel taxation would prove beneficial, not only to farmers, but to the entire nation; loosen the collar, leave the cash in circulation.

"In closing, I state that our farmers can remain extant. They are not powerless over their future, nor must they be financially dependent. As consumers, they too are a part of a movement rapidly gaining momentum across this nation: Speak up! Be heard!"

As the orator stepped back from the podium, the crowd reacted with dazed silence. The hypnotic voice and the essence of the oration momentarily stalled time.

The clock ticked once...twice....

Enthusiastic applause erupted. Larkin bowed a small exaggeration of a nod, devoid of vanity.

Karl Larkin spent the final two days of the convention talking and meeting with sales personnel who dealt with local area distributors like 'Howard's Farm Centre' back in Chesterton. He stressed the agreed pricing policy The Consumer Advocate had negotiated with manufacturers and the importance of passing the five percent saving on to the final purchasers. Without creating hostility he warned, "Farmers will be made aware of this reduction and any further development. It would be unfortunate to discover an instance of profit skimming by

## Watershed

distributors.”

Larkin also reminded grain companies’ executives that tightening their belts by cutting the middle-man profit would benefit in the long run.

“Remember,” the orator cautioned, “when the farmer is gone so will the grain companies go as they exist today. Corporate farms will buy direct and ship direct. The country elevator system will be a part of history.”

Sheena Davies had listened attentively to the broadcast, aired nationally. Karl Larkin’s speech to the Grain Authority received air time in its entirety. The keen journalist detected no flaws in Larkin’s delivery.

Although Agra-line remained obscure in the recital, Sheena knew where the finger of guilt pointed. She realized that Agra-line executives were certain to detect the innuendo as well, for that company had turned a deaf ear on The Consumer Advocate.

Fear gripped her like a field mouse as the shadow of a hawk darkens its hole. Her thoughts returned to the threatening letter. Karl sloughed off the incident with mild concern. However, Sheena knew him well enough to sense the feelings under his armored exterior. How far would Agra-line go to defend their game? Were they responsible for the warning? Sheena felt certain they were.

January 31, 1981; Adrian Jason Quennell; male; 24... *Giroux clearly recalled the incident as he read through the file. Quennell had been a star hockey player for an out of town team. Stéphané read further: goalie for the Philadelphia Ice Giants;*



*he had been shot while standing in the goal crease during a game.*

*It had been late in the third period; the killer had timed the bullet with a slap-shot on a break-away for the home team. The goalie had dropped to the ice; players, officials and spectators alike thought the injury was caused by the impact of the puck. But there was a lot of blood; too much blood. The unconscious player was whisked away by ambulance and the game had continued. Adrian Quennell was pronounced dead on arrival. By the time police were notified and reached the scene, the arena had emptied. It wasn't until next morning that fans had realized the ghastly truth. The city had gone into numbed shock.*

*Stéphane Giroux had not been involved with the investigation but he received all the details first hand. The bullet had been fired from the structure that supported the score board and time clock directly over centre ice. The .224 calibre missile had punched a small hole through the goaltender's face mask, entered his forehead and disintegrated inside the brain. No doubt, the sniper had deliberately chosen a time late in the game in order to be well away before police arrived. But what incredible nerve! Giroux could not fathom the confidence and coolness a murderer would need to time the shot so perfectly and trust that the killing would go undiscovered long enough to make good his escape.*

*The fateful hockey game had been televised and police had scrutinized every inch of the footage. On film, with freeze-frame action, the striking of the bullet did not match the impact of the hockey puck, but it was close enough to fool the naked eye. No*

## Watershed

*other evidence was found on the reels. The investigating officers had tried to connect this vicious killing with the Van der Weist slaying of a year and a half ago. There were similarities: the two victims died of bullet wounds to the head; the murders had been in cold blood; and the lack of evidence itself was a strong indication of a connection; there was no apparent motive; the shooter left no trail, no clue... nothing. Fearing a city wide panic by intimating that a serial killer might be lurking somewhere in Toronto, the force denied there was sufficient evidence to make positive comparisons. Unfortunately, the bullet that finished the politician had never been recovered, but the medical examiner and the learned ballistics expert (same people for both investigations) insisted that the degree of damage to the skulls was "almost identical" though one had an exit wound, the other did not. Ballistics advised that the .224 calibre was fired from a high speed, factory cartridge, faster than a .222 Remington or .223 Remington; most likely from a 22-250 or 220 Swift.*

*Detective Giroux tossed the folder on his desk and brushed his fingers over the stubble along his jaw. Stéphane now knew there was a connection. No doubt existed in his mind that the person who shot Elizabeth Van der Weist through the head was the same cold blooded assassin who whacked Adrian Quennell. There weren't two people on this continent who possessed the grit to pull it off.*

*Giroux knew something else: it would happen again.*

## Chapter 11

David Colburn demanded every effort of his employees. A tireless man himself, he tolerated no indolence, lavished praise and regard upon the diligent and conscientious. He kept the ball in play.

On this occasion, Sheena Davies was on the receiving end as the publicist assumed his pigeon strut: "Television is a marketing business; in order to market properly *you must have the right people*. A good product is benign; *'the right people'* is vital."

"You, Sheena, are *'the right people'*. I need someone informed and reliable to run this station. I want you to be the manager of CBJT Television."

Sheena accepted the position. Her natural talent and charisma stilled animosity that other hopefuls for the position may have harboured. CBJT crew worked together and succeeded together. No one bothered to be so trite as to use the term team, but the new *captain* maintained the winning spirit.

Six AM is not an early hour in the television world. Sheena started work at this time and, twelve

## Watershed

to fourteen hours later, she went home. Long days passed quickly in the accelerated pace at the station. In addition to the steady obligation of routine business and the exigency of breaking news, Sheena assumed the role of promoter for Larkin's campaign on the home front. The new manager seldom finished a hot cup of coffee and her telephone rang constantly.

CBJT profited hugely from subscription to The Consumer Advocate by other networks. National television paid willingly for every word the orator spoke. As manager, Sheena was privy to the intricacies of the station's finance: Colburn's uncanny business insight blew her away.

A February thaw followed by a quick freeze and several inches of snow left the streets of Riverside in hazardous condition. One cold evening, as Sheena exited the sanded thoroughfare and maneuvered the BMW along the slippery side street, she noticed a car following precariously close. The bright lights of the tailgater were blinding. Relief reverted to panic as she turned into her parking stall and saw the imposing vehicle swing in behind, blocking her exit.

Two parka clad men charged at the frightened girl as she leaped from the sports car and dashed toward the safety of the apartment building. The sound of an oath followed by a thud reached Sheena as she scrambled up the icy steps; one of the men had slipped and fallen. As she grasped for the handle of the entrance door, a gloved hand clamped over her mouth and a powerful grip on her shoulder spun Sheena around.

"You're comin' with uth, Mith Davieth." The

voice was a sneering lisp.

Terror filled the deep blue eyes as Sheena stared at her attacker. She glanced quickly to the second man who stumbled toward them, limping slightly and puffing from exertion.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" he wheezed. Together the thugs wrestled the journalist into their car, forcing her into the front seat. Sheena bit down hard on the hand covering her mouth.

With a cry of pain the man released his grip. His uninjured hand flashed inside his coat and reappeared, clasp ing an evil looking knife. Pointing the weapon at her throat, he snarled, "Mith Davieth, how abou' thum cooperathon before I haff to carffe up tha' pretty fathe of yourth?"

Sheena shrank back from the razor tip. She felt a sting where the deadly blade pierced her skin. Horrified, the girl tried to avert her gaze from the hideous pock-marked face of the hair-lipped knife man.

The abductor who had fallen on the ice climbed in the driver's side, pinning Sheena between himself and his comrade. Spinning wheels howled before gaining traction in the parking lot and the car lurched backward out on to the sanded access. The driver slammed the shifter into a forward gear and the vehicle rocketed away down the empty street.

"Don't lay a finger on her, Yagi," he said flatly. "And put that knife away."

When Sheena realized her worst fears were alleviated, at least temporarily, she fought to control rising hysteria. In a voice far more calm than she felt, she asked the driver, "What do you want with me? Where are we going?"

"I can't answer those questions," the kidnapper

## Watershed

said. "No harm will come as long as you are co-operative."

Sheena breathed a silent prayer of thanks: one of her abductors demonstrated a reasonable level of intelligence.

Neither of the men were masked and Sheena knew she had never seen them before. A shiver of panic went through her body; didn't kidnappers try to hide or disguise their identity? If they weren't concerned about her being able to describe their features to the police....

She tried to avoid the leering stare of the gnome the driver had referred to as Yagi. His hazel eyes glowed almost yellow, like those of a wild dog. The man bordered on insane.

"Mith Davieth..." the nasal voice whined. "Mith Davieth, are you afraid of heighth? I'm not. I'ff be'n farther in the air than you'ff be'n away from home."

"Shut up, Yagi," the driver commanded.

Yagi shifted his gaze. A retort formed on the distorted lips but he held back, noticing the grim visage of his partner.

Fear rose again when Sheena saw the lights of the city disappear behind them. They were on the highway heading east.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked again.

"Not far!" came the terse reply.

Presently the vehicle exited the four lane and proceeded down a gravel road. They passed several brightly lit farm yards and then turned down a less used, but snow-plowed road. Soon the dim beam of a porch light marked another farm yard. The driver slowed and turned into the lane.

The gnome, who had not spoken since told to

shut up, roughly pulled Sheena from the vehicle when they parked in front of a small farm house. Sheena bit her lip to keep from crying.

“Yagi, park the car around back,” the bigger man ordered as he grasped the frightened woman’s wrist.

Sheena did not struggle as she followed her captor into the dark, dank dwelling. He flicked on another light to reveal the interior. She saw a small dirty kitchen with a wide archway separating it from a smaller, but less dirty, living room. The stranger said nothing as he led the journalist to a sagging couch and firmly, but not roughly, seated her. A pair of crude hand cuffs lay upon a coffee table beside the sofa. Sheena’s eyes grew big and two tears stained her cheeks as he attached one cuff to her left wrist, the other to a length of chain securely anchored to a bolted ring in the floor.

“You have enough tether to move about in here. The chain is strong but it is light. It’ll allow you to go to the bedroom and the bathroom. One of us will be here at all times, so don’t try to escape.”

Sheena met the man’s gaze. “Please, don’t leave me alone with that... that animal,” she begged.

“He knows what will happen if he touches you.”

The hostage shivered but did not speak her thoughts: Small consolation after the fact.

The rooms contained bare essentials for short term occupancy: a table, three chairs and the broken tattered couch. A new refrigerator looked out of place beside a grimy hotplate. Cupboard doors hung askew, two were missing; cardboard cartons sat on the littered counter; an opened drawer revealing kitchen utensils stood adjacent to a single sink

## Watershed

sunken into the counter-top.

An odour of mice hung faintly; a hurried attempt at sweeping had failed to completely dispose of the evidence.

The entire residence appeared old and unused; ancient wallpaper peeled, chips of paint clung to the ceiling and littered the worn green floral linoleum. Incongruously, in the midst of this dereliction, a host of expensive electronic equipment stood out. Had Sheena not been involved in the industry she would not have recognized the filming paraphernalia: a state-of-the-art tripod mounted Sony Betacam system, audio recorder, an assortment of reels, cords and lighting; in addition there was a compact colour television with rabbit ears antenna and new AM-FM radio. To the left of this collection stood a black briefcase. Not an ordinary case, it had a curly black cord extending from one side and clipped to the posts of a car battery; at the opposite end a tiny antenna was attached.

What did it all mean?

The house was cold, but the tall abductor quickly adjusted a vintage thermostat; a furnace grumbled in the bowels of the house and soon a welcome blast of hot air, accompanied by the protesting squeal of a tired fan, blew from an open register near the disintegrating sofa.

The air felt warm but smelled disgusting. Particles of dust and mouse nest spiraled up from the heat vent. Sheena used her woolen scarf to cover her nose and mouth.

The stranger spoke, "I apologize for the crudeness of our home. Time didn't allow for red carpet."

Without reply, Sheena stood up and began to



pace. The chain clinked a menacing jingle as she moved about.

"Relax!" the kidnapper ordered, not unkindly. "We'll release you soon."

Her bottom lip quivered. "But, why do you have me here?"

"Normally, I do not confide in my... 'guests', but I have seen you on television; you are not stupid and it is inevitable that you'll find the answers sooner or later. It might be best if I could alleviate your fears so you don't pull something foolish and hurt yourself.

"I'm paid well to do what I do. And one of the things I do well is keep my mouth shut. Your boyfriend, Karl Larkin... he needs to read a page from my book. There are certain individuals who do not appreciate his little crusade. They believe Larkin has to be taught to mind his own business and stay out of their affairs. They merely wish to ensure that he understands the futility of butting heads with... the Big Boys."

"*Whom* are The Big Boys?" Sheena asked. The guard shrugged, "I realize you are a journalist and it is in your nature but you are not in a position to be asking questions."

"Agra-line," Sheena whispered her own answer.

The door banged open and the second abductor sidled into the room stomping snow from his heavy boots. He was a malformed, stooped and shrunken creature, though broad across the shoulders. Yagi said nothing as he removed his parka and tossed it in a corner. He was deep chested with thick and powerful arms; the hands were big with gnarled and nicotine yellowed fingers. Badly bowed legs made

## Watershed

him shorter than he would have been if he could stand up-right. The excited glow continued to burn in his wild eyes and Sheena saw that the shriveled miscreant looked even more menacing and hideous in the cold light cast from the room's single bulb.

The gnome walked over to the girl. When she turned away he grasped the chain and viciously yanked her around. Sheena gasped a cry of pain as the cold steel of the hand cuffs bit into her flesh.

"She's a pretty lath, Ernie," he said.

Ernie roughly shoved Yagi into a corner. "Leave the pretty lass alone!" he ordered, then muttered something that Sheena did not hear though she caught the last words: "...I will kill you."

The tone in Ernie's voice left no doubt.

Yagi shrank back and said nothing.

The tall man turned to the strange briefcase, flipped two latches and opened the lid. He adjusted a dial then extracted a telephone handset and held it to his ear. After a moment he spoke briefly into the receiver; another pause followed then he talked again. His short clipped message went unheard by the captive. Another pause; the man said one or two words then placed the handset inside the case.

The abductor turned to Sheena after his conversation. "I want you to say a few words on camera. Don't say anything foolish. Just say you have been kidnapped and if Larkin follows our instructions you will be released unharmed. We'll ship the tape to him tonight. There will be no need to contact the police.

"You and your boyfriend are very accessible... if you catch my drift...."

Sheena's reserve broke and the tears came. "You can't be serious! I have seen your faces, I can

identify both of you. You don't intend to release me,"

Ernie reached out and touched her shoulder. "As I said, you and your man are very accessible: *I know* you won't go to the police. Not now, not ever."

Still wearing her coat, Sheena brushed a sleeve across her eyes and silently digested the man's words. The abductor assumed much, but spoke with confidence and authority, like he had done this work everyday.

And he was right.

If Karl or Sheena squealed, one or both of them would be dead before law enforcement could react. There really was no escape, this man was a law unto himself. He had no rules other than his own.

Yagi had gone to the kitchen to prepare something to eat. Ernie told him to keep the noise down. He busied himself around the camera equipment, turned on the lighting then picked up a microphone and announced, "Larkin, you failed to heed the warnings issued by Agra-line Chemicals. We intend to demonstrate that we *do* mean business."

Ernie focused the camera on the young lady. The machine made a familiar whirring sound and Sheena raised her tear stained face. "I'm sorry, Karl!" she sobbed. "They want you to stop investigating their corporation. They said I will be released soon...I... I... don't know... They...they haven't hurt me..." The girl broke down.

"Good girl!" Ernie stated dourly after he stopped the recording.

Yagi brought in a tray of what looked like leftovers or rejects from a Chinese take out. "Nithe

## Watershed

lady like you must be used to all that fancy food,” he sneered.

Sheena refused to eat although she did manage a stained mug of black and bitter coffee.

Ernie and Yagi dined at the tiny table in the kitchen area. She listened to the murmur of their voices but could not follow the conversation. Paper plates and plastic utensils were tossed in one of the cardboard containers on the counter, reusable cutlery, pots and mugs were set aside then both men returned to the cell side of the archway.

“I’m taking the tape to a courier,” the older captor announced.

“Yagi will stay here?” the girl asked, fear audible in her tone.

The hazel eyes glowed more brightly and Sheena detected the menace behind them.

“Don’t leave me with him!” she begged.

“He isn’t capable enough to deliver this package.” Ernie turned to his partner, “Yagi, do not forget what I told you.”

Ernie picked up his coat and strode outside. Sheena heard the car start up. She gazed miserably through the cracked and dirty window; a sinking feeling of hopelessness overwhelmed her as the tail lights disappeared down the driveway.

Yagi leered at the captive then began to clean up the kitchen.

She sat in mute silence fearing a movement would attract the creature. About fifteen minutes passed then Yagi appeared in the archway that separated kitchen and living room. The wildness in his eyes escalated. Sheena knew that his fragile mind had snapped. With painful deliberation, he drew the deadly little dagger from inside his shirt

and slowly advanced towards her.

A scream rose in Sheena's throat and she fought it down. Panic would only further excite the hideous little monster. He mumbled incoherently as he jabbed out with the wicked weapon.

"Put the knife down, Yagi," Sheena spoke softly. "Ernie doesn't want you to hurt me. You don't want Ernie to be mad at you, do you Yagi? Why do they call you Yagi?"

He stopped and stared at the girl. "I'm Yagi," he said stupidly. "I'm Yagi... I'ff be'n higher in the air than you haff be'n away from home. Are you afraid of heightth?"

Before Sheena could reply he turned and dashed into the kitchen. The girl's knees began to quake and she collapsed on the sofa, crying softly. When she looked up, Yagi had returned. Now he stood silently but his menace had increased. He walked up to her with deliberate intent. Sheena knew she had to fight him now. She leaped up from the couch in time to avoid the thrust of the dagger. As Yagi charged by he tripped on the chain. Sheena ignored the needles of excruciating pain shooting up her arms. Quickly she gathered up a length of the tether and swung it at the menacing creature. Chain wrapped around Yagi's outstretched arms. The terrified girl yanked furiously on her anchor. The gnome gasped in agony and the knife fell from lax fingers. Before he could scoop up the weapon with his free hand, Sheena kicked the blade against the wall. It bounced up and landed partially over the furnace vent. In freeze-frame the knife teetered on the edge of the vacant register hole and then vanished into the duct work.

Yagi screamed his frustration and lunged at the

## Watershed

girl. Sheena jumped aside and received a wicked blow to the stomach. She bent over, gasping for breath. Yagi spun around and came at her again. Panic rose in the frightened girl and with it a rush of adrenaline. She doubled up the slack in the chain and, using both hands, swung savagely at her assailant. Teeth and blood flew from Yagi's smashed mouth as the steel links slashed into his face. He fell forward and Sheena kicked the falling man in the groin. She stepped over the writhing figure and viciously booted him again in the same area. Yagi passed out and lay still. A trickle of blood oozed from torn lips, his twisted features a grimace of pain.

Gasping for breath, the stricken girl was standing over her vanquished opponent when Ernie rushed through the doorway. In the melee, Sheena had not heard the vehicle return.

## Chapter 12

Karl Larkin stared dumbstruck as blank film continued to unwind on the hastily rented equipment. He had received the package from the courier the afternoon of the last day of the Canadian Cereal Grain Authority convention. The instructions attached to the film reel stated briefly: *View immediately.*

A knock on the hotel room door snapped Larkin to the present. Dave Colburn's beaming smile faded upon seeing the horror stricken visage of his friend.

"My God, Karl, what's wrong?"

In answer, Larkin rewound the cassette and viewed it again. Sheena's beautiful face, drenched with tears, tore at his heart. The anguish became too much and Karl collapsed on the bed.

"Those dirty bastards! How do they expect you to reverse what's already happened?" Colburn asked.

"I guess they don't realize how far we've come in the past three days...."

## Watershed

Larkin's mind raced. He tried to force the vision of the kidnapped girl from his thoughts. He needed a clear head and he must think of something fast.

He turned to Dave Colburn. "It isn't Agra-line."

"They just told you they represented Agra-line!"

"Yes, but these sons of bitches are not acting on behalf of the company. They are low-life scum trying to run a scam under Agra-line cover. I should have realized this before. They just want us to keep out of their business which is chemicals of a more illicit nature. Agra-line proper, I suspect, is on the level; at least they are above this.

"You see, Hal Reid dug up a heap of dirt in their Toronto office, and I think this kidnapping is actually independent of the corporation."

Karl continued, "Dave, I have to force them to release Sheena. We can't reverse the machine now, it's out of our control."

Larkin put his face in his hands momentarily. When he looked up again Colburn saw a fire that he had not seen before. "Dave, can you pull a few strings to land us air time on national television... tonight?"

Colburn's shoulders slumped. "That's impossible, Karl, not on such short notice... unless...unless we could squeeze in a slot for a 'breaking news' telecast."

"That's it!" Larkin said. "Try to arrange a clip during the late news broadcast."

"What do you propose to do, Karl?"

"We can't fight Agra-line and we can't fight these bastards in Toronto," Karl said. "But we can



effectively have them turn on each other. If the Toronto office thinks that their cover will be blown by their own people, they'll back off. They've got to!"

Larkin's campaign had gathered sufficient momentum to be an item worthy of scrutiny in the broadcast world. Tonight, Colburn called in every mark he had outstanding and left a few I.O.U.'s. Top network executive were petitioned and the publicity man was surprised to find not only cooperation but enthusiasm and honest, heart-felt sympathy as well. No one openly stated that the kidnapping had all the earmarks of a hit story.

Karl failed to understand the motivation of the media parasites, but tonight he was grateful for their bloodthirsty attitude.

When the kidnapper, Ernie, returned to find the hostage and her bleeding, unconscious attacker he became ominously quiet. The horror stricken girl now knew for certain who the more dangerous of her assailants was. Ernie roughly pulled the senseless Yagi across the floor and tersely ordered Sheena to go into the bedroom. The girl heard a pain laden groan followed by anguished retching as Yagi regained consciousness. Sheena listened though she feared for what she might hear.

"Did you attack her?" Ernie demanded.

Yagi mumbled through his smashed lips.

Ernie asked him again. This time Yagi managed to say something about Sheena losing his knife.

The bigger man left Yagi lying on the floor. He stepped into the bedroom where Sheena sat on

## Watershed

the bare, sagging springs of a steel frame bed. She shook uncontrollably. "I guess he got what he deserved," Ernie stated the apology. "I'll have to take him to a doctor. You'll be all right here. Don't bother trying to escape. You'll freeze to death before you can reach anywhere safe."

The kidnapper tossed a big three star sleeping bag to Sheena. "I doubt that you can," he said, "but try to get some sleep."

Hours later the girl drifted into a fitful slumber. She did not hear the abductors return in the night. The pale light of a winter morning brought her awake to a continuing nightmare. Ernie brought in a cup of coffee.

"I had to leave Yagi at our doctor friend's place," he said conversationally.

Sheena felt a slight remorse. "Did you kill him?"

Ernie shook his head. "He's recuperating at the doctor's house. I told you."

"Are you going to release me?" she asked.

"Yes, probably tomorrow. I will wait to see if any problems arise. Your boyfriend will have the tape this afternoon. I'll know by eleven tonight if he is ready to co-operate."

"You don't understand what he is fighting for, do you?" Sheena asked.

"I understand that he poked his head down the wrong badger hole," Ernie said. "Agra-line Chemicals doesn't have time for petty lobbyists."

Sheena pressed further. "I don't think this is the way a huge conglomerate deals with 'petty lobbyists'. Especially when they could simply ignore the campaign entirely."

Ernie's jaw was set. The journalist perceived

more than he wanted her to know. "If Larkin steers clear of us, keeps out of Agra-line's affairs, we won't bother him, or you, anymore," the kidnapper stated with an air of finality.

The day passed slowly. Ernie tuned in to news broadcasts hourly on the radio and television but no mention of the kidnapping occurred. "Funny your friends don't miss you at the station. Wouldn't someone come looking when you didn't show up at work?"

Sheena didn't reply. Her work often demanded time away from the office. The crew wouldn't think anything out of the ordinary if she missed a day.

The captor's patience ran thin later on in the afternoon. He paced the room and placed several calls from the briefcase phone. Though the conversations were kept from her, Sheena noted that the guard did not appreciate the responses he received.

Following one of the calls he said to Sheena, "We'll just have to wait."

"Wait for what?"

"If Larkin doesn't blow the whistle by going to the cops I'll know we can release you. If he keeps his mouth shut and then backs off his investigation into our affairs, everyone will go away happy."

"Karl isn't investigating your operation," Sheena said. "It's Agra-line Chemicals he's after."

Ernie looked at her sharply. His frown softened to a grin. "You know, I guess you are right," he admitted. "You are right about Agra-line, but you are errant in assuming it is my organization. I'm an independent business man. It's nothing personal, just a job."

The kidnapper had brought extra food: more of

## Watershed

a care-package than brown bagged groceries. He explained that the doctor friend had supplied the victuals as he was opposed to grocery shopping in the middle of the night. Sheena tried a few morsels but she had no appetite.

No word had come and Ernie had not placed any more calls. At ten o'clock he flicked on the television for the national broadcast. Sheena watched from the broken sofa as the news team made brief introductions and the anchor person opened, "The kidnapping of an important figure in The Consumers' Advocate campaign has taken place." A picture of Sheena appeared on the screen. "Last night, Miss Sheena Davies of CBJT television was abducted. Miss Davies is the program coordinator for Karl Larkin's high profile operation. No one knows where she is being held. Mr. Larkin, leader of the campaign, has asked to make a statement:"

The camera rolled to reveal a different Karl Larkin from the polished figure audiences and viewers were accustomed to. Sheena felt hot tears rolling down her cheeks as she sat riveted to the screen. A pained expression of intense grief distorted Karl's handsome features. His shoulders were slightly slumped and anyone who knew him well would have detected a tremor in his movements. The camera homed in on his face and Sheena looked deep into the keen gray eyes and recognized the steel of the man under the strain.

She smiled.

Karl Larkin was a long, long way from being broken.

He spoke clearly and succinctly, the voice powerfully compelling: "I address the abductors of

Miss Davies. You must release the hostage in order to prevent conflict within your organization. As instigators of this kidnapping, you will suffer serious consequence at the hands of your own associates should the name of your parent company be implicated. You are *not* at liberty to assume control of the corporation and, quite contrary to a statement made to me recently, *you are small potatoes*. Release Miss Davies, unharmed, immediately. I will withhold information detrimental to the legitimate business. *Illegal* activities are not a focus of our campaign.”

Larkin’s unwavering, haunting gaze burned into the minds of his unseen audience. The moment of silence spoke thunderously.

The camera returned to the anchor person.

Ernie switched off the television. He said in admiration, “That son of a bitch has more guts than a slaughter house.”

The briefcase buzzed. Ernie grabbed the handset and answered with a number instead of the customary, “Hello.” Sheena could hear, but not grasp the words of a shrill voice of someone yelling excitedly on the other end. She followed the one-sided conversation:

“Yes....”

“Yeah, well...”

“I’m not paid to pass judgment.”

“He’s a fool, too...”

“All right.” Ernie released the call.

“You’re going home,” he smiled at the hostage. “I don’t have to remind you, though,” a tone of menace edged the softened voice, “don’t give evidence to the police. We, that is, *I* can and will retaliate. Another note of caution, and this is a free

## Watershed

one: the organization you are opposing is very big; bigger than your Karl Larkin believes. It would be unfortunate for either of you to suffer unnecessarily.”

Sheena met Ernie’s gaze. She knew he meant every word. “The police will have questions,” she stated. “What will I tell them?”

“You were blindfolded, we wore ski masks, you never saw or heard a thing!”

Sheena nodded.

While the kidnapper went out to start the vehicle, the soon to be released hostage gazed around her musty, uncomfortable prison: rodent filth and accumulated garbage, traces of Yagi’s dried blood and haphazardly wiped up vomit on the floor... was the nightmare at an end? It seemed so and Sheena thanked God and Karl Larkin for her deliverance.

The driver returned to the domicile and gently removed the handcuff and chain from the girl’s raw and swollen wrist.

Rubbing the chafed area gingerly she gazed at her abductor accusingly, “You shouldn’t be in this business, it doesn’t seem to suit you.”

Ernie touched her cheek with a gloved hand, “Karl Larkin deserves someone like you.”

He turned on his heel and strode out to the car.

Sheena followed him through the scarred door, hungrily gulping the crisp night air as she stepped out of the fetid confinement. Only those who have suffered the pain of duress can fully appreciate the absoluteness of freedom.

Ernie let his captive out of the sedan one block from her apartment. He had remained silent during the return trip. Sheena sensed that the kidnapper

despised his position but she also realized crime was a way of life for him. His car disappeared around a corner and Sheena knew the man would disappear just as easily.

The coldness of the evening snatched the girl's breath as she briskly walked the short distance to her home. Upon reaching the building, Sheena realized for the first time that her purse containing the apartment keys had been lost in the scuffle during her abduction. The terrible strain of the last thirty hours overcame the reporter as she collapsed on the frozen steps, burying her face in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

A firm but gentle hand touched her shoulder. "Miss Davies?"

Sheena shrank in terror as she looked up at the speaker.

"I'm Corporal Peterson," the voice soothed. "Everything will be all right. Here... let me help you up."

Sheena gasped her relief. "I...I...I've lost my keys."

The officer led her to his squad unit. "The purse was found under your car this evening. We have it downtown." He continued, "I'd like to take you down to headquarters for a brief questioning. We'll have you home again as soon as possible. One of our detectives will stay with you tonight. Or, if you prefer, we can guard the building."

Sheena merely nodded as the corporal opened the door of the vehicle for her.

At the station, Sheena requested the use of a telephone. The hotel operator at the Convention Centre in Ottawa quickly dispensed a hasty message left by Karl Larkin. "Mr. Larkin checked out about

## Watershed

one hour ago. He will be flying to Riverside on the 2:45 A.M. flight.” Sheena thanked the clerk, nervously checking her watch as she hung up the phone.

The interrogation by Corporal Peterson and Detective Lawrence was swift and brief. Sheena expertly dodged specific questions as to the identities of her captors and the location of her confinement. Lawrence may have sensed that the hostage withheld information but allowed Corporal Peterson to drive her home.

“We’d like to question you further when you have had a chance to rest up,” Lawrence said bluntly as Sheena left the office.

Upon entering her apartment, Sheena quickly called the airport leaving an urgent message for Karl Larkin. Personnel at the airline terminal were aware of the crisis and promised Miss Davies that the message would be delivered immediately upon Larkin’s arrival.

David Colburn slept fitfully in his seat beside Larkin on board the sixty passenger F28. Karl closed his weary eyes, however, no peaceful slumber came to him. Had he done the right thing? Would the kidnappers release Sheena unharmed? Would they release her at all? Misery tortured him and he blamed himself for the savagery his beautiful lady might have been subjected to.

Two hours into the flight, a stewardess came along the aisle and softly touched his arm. Karl looked up to see a warm smile in the dim glow of the aircraft cabin’s night lighting. “Mr. Larkin,” she said, “the Captain has received a message from



Transport. Miss Davies has been released.”

Winter darkness continued to cloak the city at 6:00 A.M. when, at last, Karl Larkin reached Sheena’s apartment. A plainclothes officer recognized the high profile speaker and admitted Karl to the young lady’s residence.

“Oh, Karl!” she sobbed, collapsing in his embrace.

Larkin held her close, whispering soothingly.

The officer discreetly left the apartment and Sheena told Karl the story, not omitting any of the details she had kept from the police. When she mentioned the name Yagi, Larkin’s curiosity increased and he quizzed her about the wizened up gnome.

“He asked me more than once if I was afraid of heights. He said ‘I’ve been higher in the air than you’ve been away from home’. It didn’t make any sense... I’m sure he’s insane.”

“Yaggie... Yaggie...” Larkin repeated. After a brief pause he murmured absently, “Yagi! He’s a rigger.”

“What was that?” Sheena asked, her voice trembling.

“Nothing... I was just thinking.”

Larkin asked no more about the monster named Yagi. *Yagi*, Karl knew, from a summer student stint in the communications industry, was a particular type of shortwave radio antenna. Because the man had alluded to a fearlessness of heights, Karl deduced that the kidnapper was, or had been, a tower climber, a rigger.

Seated on the luxurious sofa in the apartment,

## Watershed

Larkin and Sheena succumbed to exhaustion and they slept wrapped in each others arms. The officer returned to check on them and left quietly.

*The second scrap book was more of a treasure; the Adrian Quennell anthology contented Jamie Langston for almost a year. Paging through the glue stiffened pages, the yellow/orange-eyed killer reflected upon the deceased. Though Adrian had only been in Langston's school for two years, he had been the worst tormentor since Eddie. Lion Eyes frowned, "Eddie...what was his last name? ...Eddie ...Eddie 'The Hulk'! Yeah! Eddie 'The Hulk' Marley."*

*Jamie came to the last page. The picture showed plenty of blood on the ice; how could the trainers have been so stupid? Mind you, if the bullet had come out the other side of Quennell's head, the game would have been up. But the calculations were accurate, the goaltender's mask had sufficiently lessened the impact. No one noticed until too late, the tiny hole through the face guard.*

*The janitor carefully laid the book on the coffee table then sat back and closed the strange eyes....*

*A packed arena; the roaring crowd; the dying seconds of the game; cross-hairs centered on the mask, the hair-trigger moving the thickness of a shadow; "he shoots! he scores!"*

*The image faded leaving a pensive smile on Jamie's face. More teeth had stripped; the noggin gear was not far from free-wheeling.*

*Langston decided to search for old news*

## C. C. Phillips

*articles concerning Eddie's demise. Though Marley hadn't been of national acclaim, it wouldn't be fair if there wasn't a small remembrance, a few pages dedicated to 'The Hulk'.*

*Then it would be time for a new project.*



## Chapter 13

Detective Lawrence's persistent questioning failed to unearth more information than Sheena felt safe in divulging. As an expert journalist the reporter foresaw the line of interrogation before the detective voiced his next query. Sheena realized that the officer hadn't been fooled when at length he said, "Miss Davies, if you ever wish to enlighten us further, please give me a call; for now, we'll have to put the investigation on the back burner."

The near tragedy brought further attention to the campaign. The entire nation knew Karl Larkin. Newscasts were incomplete without mention of 'The Consumers' Advocate'. Television and newspaper reporters followed the orator's growing entourage. Colburn pushed Larkin harder, hoping to take his mind away from the incident. Karl became known as a tough-fisted negotiator and he had the backing of consumers everywhere. His grip loosened on Agra-line only after receiving a call from the conglomerate's international marketing division. The company offered a seventeen percent reduction

## Watershed

in Canada in order to 'restore possibly damaged relations with this country's agrarian populace.' Larkin also struck a compromise with his promoter on the issue of government spending and waste: Instead of digging up dirt from past faux pas, Karl intercepted blunders in the making. No politician cared to be singled out by The Consumers' Advocate because Larkin's machine could embarrass far more efficiently than regular channels of the media.

*The Advocate* (shortened by familiarity) had a way of subtly *insisting* that changes or adjustments be made: Larkin often expounded upon the damage caused, nation wide, by federal and provincial tax placed on fuel. He urged his audiences to petition their representatives. In early spring, without allowing recognition or reference to The Consumers' Advocate, a fuel tax rebate was announced by the federal government.

Karl jumped on the issue immediately. He protested that rebates are exclusive. He told reporters "Rebates are inefficient, patronizing scams" and further argued that a prohibitively high percentage of the intended refund would be usurped by administrative incompetence. When parliament took exception and withdrew the offer, a hush fell on the nation and a dark shadow obfuscated the campaign. Colburn guessed that the rebate had been a strategic plan from the Department of Finance, a deliberate trap to lure The Advocate. Karl had reacted predictably, the rebate was repealed and The Consumers' Advocate took the blame.

But Karl Larkin was not finished.

Through the media, and a host of rapidly organized appearances before large and influential audiences, he publicly hammered on the doors of

Parliament Hill. Instead of invoking the War Measures Act, as hyper news media predicted, government came through with a genuine fuel tax cut; a benefit recognized, not only at the gas pumps, but in every product transported within the borders of the country.

The graph began a perceptible upward trend.

Across the border the election of a new president brought a healthy injection of optimism. The most desperate economic figures since The Great Depression slowly edged toward the positive. The recession slowed, stopped, reversed.

The flamboyant Colburn strutted into his old office, now occupied by his pretty manager. Larkin sat in a plush chair on one side of the sturdy oak desk. Sheena had taken up the swivel throne of the executive.

“We’ve landed a big fish this time!” the campaign captain boasted. “The automobile union has invited you to speak at their rally in Oshawa, Karl.”

“Whewee!” Larkin whistled, “that is an opportunity I’ve been waiting for. When will they want us there?”

“Tuesday, next week. City Arena will be the location. It’s an evening meeting. You’ll be speaking to about *fourteen thousand* assembly line employees.”

Larkin gasped upon hearing the figure. Though the celebrity was beginning to accept the incredible numbers demanding his recital, arrogance, often a side-effect of success, did not alter his propriety.

“They may not entirely appreciate my views or

## Watershed

suggestions.”

“These are hard-core unionists, Karl. They believe in what you are doing.”

Sheena said in her journalistic voice, “What views of your own do not parallel those of the unions?”

Larkin spread his hands. “For this country to overcome the excessive and increasing deficit, we will all have to accept less. I can’t implore any group to hop on the bandwagon without suggesting that they do a bit of housecleaning as well. For the price of vehicles to drop nationwide, obviously the cost of production must slide too.”

Now Colburn gasped, “You would ask the strongest union in Canada to accept lower wages?”

“That is what has to be done, Dave. We can’t demand lower prices from manufacturers unless they have the maneuverability to create reduced figures. No one is without responsibility in this.”

“Aren’t we defeating our own purpose?” Sheena asked. “We’re trying to attain a better standard of living for Canadians. How can that be achieved if wages are decreased?”

Karl noted that the station manager had used the term ‘we’. He was warmed by the realization that she was with him on the battlefield. Colburn pushed ahead for personal reasons, specifically, financial benefit. Sheena, although backing Karl one hundred per cent, had never claimed to believe so much in the campaign as in the man.

The orator flashed her an affectionate smile. “Sheena, these past months have given me cause to look deeper into our economic situation. You said ‘attain’ a better standard of living. I believe that it will be difficult to *maintain* our current standard in



the decades to come. The collective benefit realized from our program will set Canada in better stead with other nations. We are losing our borrowing power with the rest of the industrialized countries and we need to reduce expenditure on the home front in order to instill confidence internationally. Similar to the scenario I explained to the first audience, back in Chesterton, Canada will be in chaotic conditions if and when the proverbial Tap is turned off by the world banking system.”

“You are right,” Colburn protested, “but is it up to you, I mean us, to risk blowing the whole operation in order to tell these people what they aren’t going to like? Hell, Karl! We have come too far with this gig to mess it up now. There’s millions at stake here!”

The room temperature dropped. Larkin glared. “Millions is right, Dave. Millions of people.”

Karl Larkin received a warm and enthusiastic welcome from the nearly fifteen thousand workers gathered at the arena in the southern Ontario city of St. Gregory. Canadians of many diverse ethnic origins had gathered. The recollection of mechanics and parts people back in Chesterton caused Larkin to grin inwardly as he envisioned the thousands of blue coveralls required to outfit this multitude. The thought of “back home” helped to dispel the chill of reckoning with an overwhelming attendance. Only the numbers were greater; the people were the same.

The Voice casually addressed the throng, commencing the oration in a conversational tone. “I met a particularly colourful character several years ago. He was a bush pilot who had spent his entire

## Watershed

life in the far north, flying the fringe of the Barren Lands. The fellow had a code for survival in the land of feast and famine: *'When there's lots... eat lots; when there ain't much... eat 'er all!'*” Larkin paused briefly while the crowd enjoyed this anecdote.

The speaker's tone changed imperceptibly as he continued. “Canadians, we have feasted in good times and we continue to feast during the famine. I believe it is time to consider the consequences of perpetual avarice.

“The Consumers' Advocate campaign to curtail extravagant, often *absurd*, profit margins on consumer goods has created an opportunity for me to study the conditions that have brought this nation to a point of financial calamity. I have found that the charge of greed, habitually reserved for our conglomerates, our wealthy corporations, is no more than the rapacity of our individuals.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am greedy also. I want more. More for myself; more for my fellow Canadians. However, I see the need to accept *less* during this current financial strait. A small sacrifice in the short term will have colossal benefit in the long run. The sacrifice must be shouldered by every individual, but not alone; together. Collectively, we can strengthen Canada's position and repair the detriment suffered through our own rapacity.

“As members of a strong and progressive union, I appeal to your foresight. Your numbers create a powerful voice, a voice that will carry to the labour unions across our nation. My request is simple: Let the Automobile Employees Union be the first to *request* zero percent. Your initiative will be the commencement of labour's drive to halt the rush

toward national bankruptcy. Accept less now or forfeit everything later and shamefully share the burden of our greed with our children.”

Searching out reaction, Larkin detected faces of hostility, disbelief and, in the eyes of a handful, understanding. The arena became charged with the static of dissension. Feverishly Karl’s mind raced, trying to regain majority support. He realized the disastrous consequence of rejection in this venue. If he couldn’t win the confidence of the unions who, ostensibly, spoke for the common labourer, the campaign would be sunk.

But Karl Larkin didn’t back up unless he was taking a run.

A notion worked its way foremost: If people of solidarity, collective bargainers, one-for-all-and-all-for-one proponents, didn’t have the guts to admit their own shortcomings, why was Larkin even here? What was the point of anything The Consumers’ Advocate had fought for?

The orator continued, apparently oblivious to the obvious unrest before him. “You people work in an automobile plant. You assemble cars. Many of you drive a vehicle of your own.

“Think about that for a minute.

“Has anyone here bought a tank of gas lately?” Not expecting a response Karl asked, “Did you notice a cut in price per litre? I can tell you that you did. Do you presume it was an act of benevolence? if so, on whose behalf? ...the oil company? ...the refinery? ...the service station? ...the government? ...No. There was no benevolence involved; the voice of consumers across this nation was the sole reason for that reduction and The Consumers’ Advocate intends that the ripple effect *will* show up

## Watershed

in the form of lower bills for everything you buy.”

Gray eyes like cold daggers pinned individuals in their seats. “When your bargaining committee sits down at the table with your employer, can you afford to accept a zero percent increase in wages?”

“There is no quick fix, no miraculous solution for the chaotic time before us. We have no one to blame—not even the government—politicians are the tools we used to dig our own economic grave. They have done our bidding... and we have bid too high. We have *’eaten lots and ate ’er all’* for too long.

“Though I beseech your union to establish an example, I appeal to each of you as individuals. The resurrection of a strong economy must be manifested,” Larkin tapped his right temple with a forefinger, “here”.

The voice dropped to that penetrating whisper that bypassed the eardrums. “I am certain my bush pilot friend could tell you: *’It is far better to eat lots than to eat ’er all and go to bed hungry.’*”

An anguished and prolonged silence followed as the speaker stepped away from the collection of microphones. The future of Larkin’s entire campaign rested in the hands of this audience. Would they accept or reject? The orator shouldered responsibility for the outcome. If the campaign failed here, it had never been destined for success.

David Colburn mopped tiny beads of cold sweat from his brow with a white linen handkerchief. His position, just inside the exit at the rear of the arena, afforded a complete view of the field before him. He felt the electricity of nervous tension building as each mind debated the wisdom in the words of the speaker. “Lord, don’t lose them

now, Karl.”

Robert Leonne, respected and often feared, president of the mega-union arose from his chair and nodded solemnly to Karl. He brought his hands together in a resounding clap that shattered the ominous silence. The echoes drowned in thunderous applause as nearly thirty thousand hands joined in. While thousands between himself and the orator came to their feet in a standing ovation, Karl’s agent slumped in his chair, a wasted heap.

“You worry too much, lad,” Colburn admonished Karl after hearing of the orator’s angst when he believed the crowd had turned against him. He continued to crow when he and Larkin returned to their hotel, “Never a doubt in my mind! Had ’em eating out of your hand the whole time!”

Larkin grinned at his partner. “I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall near you!”

Colburn waved off this interjection. “The unions will fall in step across the country now. Labor has enjoyed many of the fruits of this campaign. They must realize the responsibility that goes with it.”

Sobering somewhat, Karl’s promoter continued in a serious tone. “You know, we have, or I should say, *you* have, accomplished everything and more than I dreamed possible. My interest here, apart from the excitement and challenge, has been money. This operation has filled the coffers, Karl. Neither one of us need ever work another day.”

Larkin interrupted, “It was never my intention to grow fat from the proceeds of our campaign, but I appreciate your financial wizardry, Dave.

## Watershed

Considering the fragility of the entire program it helps to know we have something to fall back on when the Consumers' Advocate is cut off at the knees."

Karl shifted the subject back to the precarious perch he had just climbed down from. "Robert Leonne tipped the scale in our favour, but the balance hung for longer than I wanted to hold my breath. He would not have done so if he did not agree."

"But, the point I am having trouble stating is this: After convincing the labor people to accept less, everything from now on will be academic. Aren't we on a downhill run? Or, where do we turn from here?" Colburn asked.

Larkin agreed. "I suppose the thrust could lose steam. For my own part, I want to see results from the groundwork we have laid. Unlike you, Dave, my motivation has never been money. All the speeches, the tours, the digging and bickering... I want to see the fruits of our campaign. We are at a peak now, but we aren't ready for that downhill run you mentioned. Maybe there is a higher hill to climb before we cash in."

The promoter smiled and a glint shone in his eyes. "There has to be more excitement on that next mountain in order to make it worth the climb. I thought I'd had my share of action in Korea, but... If we aren't stepping out now, let's rattle the bureaucratic chain before we do."

## Chapter 14

Stonework had been the only extravagance of Karl Larkin's economy model two bedroom house on the acreage near Chesterton. Using stones gathered from nearby rock piles in farmers' fields, the meticulous mason fussed for weeks while constructing the handsome fireplace and chimney. The finished product was the young bachelor's pride and joy. The inaugural fire had smoked up the interior of the house because Karl, in his excitement, hadn't thought to open the damper.

He stared at the masterpiece now through dull and saddened eyes. The stone work stood alone amidst the charred ruins of his fire ravaged home. Tears trickled down Sheena's pale cheeks as she tightly gripped Karl's hand. A breeze ruffled through Larkin's hair as he silently surveyed the damage. He was unable to tear his eyes away from the scene. He reflected on the happy and peaceful times the comfortable dwelling had provided. 'House' and 'home' had significantly different definitions.

## Watershed

The muted silence was interrupted by the approach of a vehicle. A farm pickup slowed and turned into Karl's driveway. Jerry Holt climbed out when the truck rolled to a stop. The usually smiling face wore a look of remorse as the farmer approached his friend.

"Damn shame, Karl," he said. "By the time we got here with the fire truck there was nothin' left."

Jerry gave his account of the blaze while Karl paid distracted attention.

Sheena quizzed the farmer. "You said things looked 'a bit suspicious' when you called me. What did you mean?"

Jerry spread his hands, palms up. "The R.C.M.P. and fire inspector have said that the fire wasn't no accident."

"Arson," Karl pronounced bitterly.

"Yes," Jerry said. "Maybe Emory Stanton struck back. He's low enough to pull a stunt like this."

"The police don't have much in the line of evidence?" Sheena asked.

"They found a twisted gas can in the yard over there," Jerry pointed. "Cops, said it was left in the house and blew up; they took the jug to their lab but they ain't found nothin' yet. Nothin' that I heard anyway."

The farmer turned to his friend. "You got full coverage, Karl?"

Larkin nodded. "Insurance money can't replace the loss here."

Jerry placed a callused hand on Karl's shoulder. "We'll build another house, Karl. We had good times workin' together on this one."

Larkin grinned through his misery. "Yes, I



suppose we can; but I heard that the stone mason who did my work has passed away now.”

Jerry removed his cap and scratched the top of his head. “Damned Stanton. I wish I could have caught the old goat before he got the fire lit.”

The farmer invited the couple to his home for dinner and they gratefully accepted. Larkin reflected on what a terrific friend he had in Jerry Holt.

The loss of his home stirred an urgency within Larkin. He drove himself harder in an effort to put the bitterness behind him. Colburn had employed the same tactic when Sheena had been kidnapped. The orator seemed to relish risk; at times his speeches were more coercive than persuasive. The Voice on stage did not fail to convince and captivate the audience, however, people and groups receiving the news second hand were occasionally embittered. An increasing percentage of the colossal correspondence Larkin’s office received contained threatening and abusive attacks. Karl tried in vain to keep the comminatory comments from alarming Sheena. David Colburn, the fiery promoter, began to express concern.

Larkin heeded the words of caution, however, he refused to be intimidated.

Over a quiet drink at an outdoor club on Yonge Street in Toronto, Karl confided to his promoter and friend, “Dave, I am aware that our program is temporarily waning in popularity, but I have a specific game plan. As you know, we have persuaded labour organizations, major corporations, entire industries to willingly comply with our request for restraint. We will not see inflationary

## Watershed

figures in the near future and the results have already reached the consumer in many areas of goods and services. The Consumers' Advocate has been an astronomical success; far more than either of us imagined. Now," Karl paused, "now, everything is in place for a major push to make this modest reduction a significant decrease."

Colburn asked, "A major push?"

"In order to achieve our ultimate goal, the last and largest obstacle to be surmounted is the federal tax system... Revenue Canada."

The Consumers' Advocate public relations man slumped in his wrought iron chair. A whistle escaped through his pursed lips as if he had received a wicked blow to the mid section.

"Revenue Canada!" he echoed weakly. "They will lock us up and throw away the key."

Karl grinned at his deflated partner. "Dave, you were the fellow who wanted me to pounce on the government. I think you said 'Let's rattle the bureaucratic chain.'"

Colburn argued, "I thought we might yank a few chains on individual politicians. Stir the pot of controversy to keep them honest. I never meant that we should bring the entire cavalry riding down upon us."

The orator tried to console his shaken partner. "Don't worry. I won't be too vocal about it. We'll merely... hint... that the public is interested in the possibility of a tax break. The mention of tax breaks will sway the consumer vehicle over to our side of the road again. The Advocate can negotiate with Ottawa behind the scenes."

"Karl, it is too much," Colburn said. "We aren't talking about small time agitation anymore."

When we fought for the tax cut on fuel, the media jumped on the possibility of the government invoking the War Measures Act. Do you believe that was all hype? *I don't!* There's a fine line drawn here and it's attached to a hair-trigger. If you trip over the line, ...Poof!... we'll all be blown to Hell!

"Karl," he pleaded, "let's give it over. You have accomplished so much more than you ever imagined. Accept the credit due; take your bows and get the hell out."

"If we stop now, nothing will be resolved," Karl argued stubbornly. "The country will revert right back and then continue to slip. Yes, our campaign has grown far beyond imagination, but we can't drop it. We just have to tuck in a few frazzled ends to keep the seams together, that's all."

"For God's sake, Karl! This is not your responsibility. Who elected you as the world's savior? Drop this martyrdom before someone buries you."

Larkin sat back as though slapped. Glancing quickly around the uncrowded establishment, he addressed his partner. "Dave, I'm not a martyr. I'd gladly hand this campaign over to the first available replacement. However, I don't see a multitude of applicants vying for the position. Can't you understand my motivation in this? Don't you see why I can't quit now?"

"You know I will stick with you, Karl. I just hope we can live through it."

As if in support of Colburn's apprehension, Larkin received a call from Sheena that evening. As they talked, Karl detected a note of anxiety in the

## Watershed

soft voice of the beautiful journalist.

“Honey, is something bothering you?” he asked gently.

“No, no, everything is all right,” Sheena stammered, and then she sobbed, “Karl, someone has been phoning me... I... I think it’s Yagi. The voice is muffled but sounds like a hair-lip, a terrible lisp; Yagi can’t disguise that. He said that he can see me sometimes and knows where I live.”

Larkin called the police in Riverside requesting protection for Miss Davies. He spoke at a luncheon the next afternoon then boarded the first available flight back to Riverside.

Sheena met the orator at the airport and Karl stayed close to her most of the following week. He picked her up and dropped her off at work; whenever she had an appointment he escorted her. The first evening, as Sheena lay encircled in Karl’s strong arms, she asked him about their future.

“Where are we headed, Karl?” she asked, gazing into his soft gray eyes.

“Could you be more specific?”

“I mean us,” she pressed. “Where will all this take you and me? Sometimes it seems so unreal. When we are alone together it is a sweet and wonderful dream. But... but the horrible nightmare begins again the minute you leave.

“Karl, I know about the threats. There are millions of people pulling for you but it only takes one to stop you. I’m scared... I don’t want to lose the only man I will ever love.”

Larkin avoided the imploring blue eyes. “I must not stop now. We have come too far and there is so much at stake. It’s close, Sheena, very close.”

“But, what for?” she cried. “What if some

lunatic like Yagi assassinates you? What if one of your targeted groups hires a hit man? Everyone will still lose, but what you and I have will be the greatest loss of all.”

“Sheena,” Karl soothed, “no one is about to assassinate me. A handful of people are perturbed, I suppose, but the benefit of the campaign is for all Canadians. People realize this and they understand the seriousness of our nation’s financial predicament. I have no malice toward anyone personally and I don’t believe there are many grudges toward me either.”

“What about Emory Stanton?” she argued.

Karl dismissed the question. “Emory may have torched my house, but he wouldn’t kill anyone.”

But Karl lay awake long into the night unable to dismiss the agony and fear he felt for Sheena. He would be leaving soon; would the annoying calls and threats return the moment Karl was gone? Would Yagi be lurking in the parking lot when Sheena returned home alone? Police could not provide sufficient protection; even round-the-clock private security could slip up. Larkin stared into the darkness, gritting his teeth in fury and frustration. At last he fell asleep, his arm around the beautiful lady who meant more to him than his own life.

Karl had determined that Yagi would torture Sheena no more.

Friday dawned late under a threatening, heavy overcast sky. A southeast wind howled and the thermometer dropped. Larkin drove Sheena to the television station, promising to meet her back at the apartment later.

## Watershed

“You will be all right here,” he assured her gently. “I may be late this evening, so take a cab home after work. Make sure the driver stays by until you are inside your apartment building.”

Sheena shivered as she watched him drive away. No unusual messages or threats occurred since Karl’s return to Riverside. Still, she did not feel comfortable. Karl had spent a good deal of his time on the telephone and seemed preoccupied all week long. What had kept him so aloof?

Full darkness, accompanied by a sleet laden drizzle, had descended when, at last, Karl knocked on the door of Sheena’s apartment. The orator’s face was ashen and he trembled slightly.

“Karl, are you all right?” Sheena gasped as she helped him out of his rain soaked jacket.

“Just a chill,” he shivered. “I had a flat on the Bronco... March definitely is not my favourite month.”

## Chapter 15

The annoyance calls from Yagi ceased. Sheena had had her telephone number changed and presumed that the little monster could not sort that out or had found a new target for his abuse.

Colburn had arranged important engagements in Vancouver and up the west coast the following week. "Yagi is probably somewhere else now," Karl assured Sheena when the couple embraced at Riverside airport.

"Take care," she murmured, standing on tip toe to kiss his lips.

The Vancouver media hovered around the orator like bees in a clover patch when Larkin's entourage landed at the international airport.

A whirlwind tour of coastal British Columbia followed. The hypnotic voice swayed the logging, pulp and paper people, won the support of the dock workers and entranced the civil service.

Colburn marveled at the silken, mesmeric delivery of each address. The champion of the cause had followed the campaign almost from the

## Watershed

beginning and fascination had seized the older man whenever Larkin spoke. Karl's polished orations now exceeded previous allocution. The Voice controlled minds like opiate narcotic.

"You should have been a preacher!" Dave grinned upon rejoining Karl following an impassioned speech to a forest products firm. "I'm sure you could go to Hell and convert the congregation."

Larkin welcomed Colburn's support. For the first few months of the campaign he resented the promoter's avaricious nature, believing that monetary gain governed the man's heart and soul. Now Karl understood his friend. Dave Colburn had a heart of gold and it wasn't necessarily wealth that kept it beating.

He said, "I'm not Daniel Webster."

Dave said, "The coast media has really hopped on the bandwagon. Everywhere we go here people are already informed. Our proposed Pacific coast visit has been front page news ever since we booked the first presentation."

Canadians had come to realize the fragility of their nation's economic base. More importantly, they realized that they were individually responsible to put it right. As Larkin had argued convincingly, "If governments were capable of rectifying the problem, don't you think they would have done so by now?" Politicians, previously reluctant to spread distressing news for fear of having the blame thrown in their faces, now spoke openly of the financial crisis. Larkin's appeal continued to capture television prime time. Many informative telecasts



picked up the trend and began broadcasting productions paralleling Larkin's. No one within sight or sound of media failed to grasp the enormity of the situation. Canadians were setting aside their personal ambitions in order to achieve a common goal.

The enchanting Voice surrendered nothing of its allure as Larkin appealed bilingually in Quebec and the Maritime provinces. Professing imminent economic calamity, the illustrious speaker expounded upon the exigence of pulling together. A celebrated member of the media proclaimed, "Canada hasn't been this united since the 1972 Russia-Canada hockey series." Deflated prices across the nation convinced consumers of power in numbers. Now, those same energies exhibited in attaining the deflationary goals were channelled toward national unification.

Sheena Davies remained late catching up on paper work in the manager's office at the CBJT television station. She watched the broadcast of Larkin's address to the Maritime fishing industry. Watching the man she loved and seeing the audience's response to him helped to alleviate her growing uneasiness. The people believed in Karl Larkin. His unselfish commitment had captured the hearts of the population. The pretty manager felt a twinge of jealousy having to share him with an entire nation.

A worried frown flashed over the lovely face. "But, where will it end?"

During Karl Larkin's tour of eastern Canada, a

## Watershed

partially decomposed body was pulled from the cold rushing spring flood of the High Water River near Riverside. CBJT television cameras were on site as police fished the grotesque corpse from a swirling eddy in the back flow of the current.

Sheena Davies donned her 'reporter's cap' and rushed with the camera crew to broadcast live from location. Upon glancing at the swollen battered body, she shrank back, stricken far more than a seasoned reporter should have been. Her professionalism returned but the young journalist appeared unusually pale during the news clip.

Positive ID could not be made and no clues from personal effects helped the police solve the mystery. An autopsy revealed that the person had suffered a broken neck; probably from a fall along the clay cliffs lining the river's south banks west of the city. In a statement to the public, Chief of Police Seth Freemont said that the person had taken a fall during the winter months and the body had washed into the river with the spring run-off. "At this time, foul play is not suspected although we will keep the case open as we hope to identify the victim and notify next of kin." The chief added that any helpful input from the public would be appreciated.

Sheena called Karl from her apartment the evening the body was recovered. Karl had not heard about the incident and had to calm Sheena to fully grasp her conversation.

"Hold on now, Sweetheart. What's this about a body? in the river? Relax, it's not the first..."

Sheena slowed down to repeat the story, adding dully, "Karl... It was Yagi."

"Yagi!" Karl echoed. "Well, he seemed to travel in dangerous circles. Probably he upset the

wrong people....”

Sheena fought to regain composure. “Yes, maybe the man called Ernie didn’t take him to the doctor after all. But... I swear it was Yagi who made those phone calls... and that was weeks after my abduction....”

Larkin said philosophically, “If the body were indeed Yagi, the disgusting little monster deserved his untimely end... If the police are right about him having a broken neck, he probably didn’t suffer.”



## Chapter 16

The vehicle of the consumer campaign rolled along smoothly (Colburn's smile didn't reach his eyes when he said "*Too smoothly*"). The route taken over the spring had little hardship and few pitfalls. A delayed but encouraging economic report from Parliament Hill announced that housing starts were up. The deficit, though slightly higher, had not swollen unchecked; a direct result of significant reduction in government spending; employment figures were now enjoying a distinct upward swing and the normal seasonal layoffs due to winter had been remarkably favourable (Karl Larkin had plead with employers everywhere, "*keep the work force working*"). Though the parliamentary report did not mention The Consumers' Advocate, the media went to bat for the crusade. Before newspaper ink had dried, Larkin had been deemed responsible for every positive statistic announced.

The fertilizer and chemical campaign had greatly assisted western farmers. By the time the crop had been sown, prices were down fifteen to

## Watershed

sixteen percent from the previous season. The general markdown signified an unprecedented event in the annals of crop production.

The country held firm on gas and oil prices in the face of world market increases; disproportionate charges had not occurred at retail outlets. The feds did not reinstate their fuel tax. The spin-offs from cheaper gas and diesel, especially in the trucking and transport industry, could not be measured. Larkin felt certain the favorable effect rippled throughout the economy.

Karl and Sheena found time to relax and enjoy two weeks of much needed rest. They rented a cabin alongside a tranquil lake in the province's beautiful central park region. Accessible by air, the renovated trapper's shack provided the seclusion and privacy the young couple craved. The amorous pair could not have survived upon their fishing ability.

"It's a good thing we brought food supplies with us!" Karl chuckled one evening as they attempted to fillet a small pike that had inadvertently bit the lure.

The vacationers passed a few hours indoors, though daylight was in plentiful supply at this latitude as the sun approached the summer solstice. Mosquitoes were a plague morning and evening; black flies throughout the day. But the insects were reluctant to travel far over the water, so Karl and Sheena escaped the swarm in a canoe. Larkin demonstrated his dry land heritage by upsetting the unstable craft on two occasions. The novices soon became proficient after the double dousing in the frigid lake.

Karl and Sheena were paddling along the

picturesque shoreline, oars silently slicing the glassy waters, when a giant bull moose, his new growth of antlers already huge and heavy with velvet, ambled out of the forest into the early morning mist. He tested the non-existent breeze and visually scanned as far as his near-sightedness allowed. Satisfied no danger lay before him, the mighty brute plunged into the cold water and swam into the lake. Immobilized, his human audience gazed in awe. The Goliath ungulate trailed a wake like a small motor boat. Upon reaching firm ground on the opposite shore, the bull heaved his drenched body out of the water, shook himself like a wet dog and disappeared into the forest.

Karl and Sheena both looked down at their untouched camera equipment. "Couldn't capture that moment anyway," Karl grinned.

Beavers, muskrats, a lone mink and a playful family of otters fell prey to the shutters of the visitors. A young black bear made nightly rounds looking for the source of the tantalizing smells emanating from within the cabin. One afternoon a martin darted through the shrubbery exciting a commotion among the squirrel population. Each evening Sheena succumbed to the haunting siren call of a loon.

The summer-like weather cooperated beautifully for the couple. All too soon the distant throb of the Pratt & Whitney engine on the De Havilland Beaver announced the conclusion of their peaceful stay.

Larkin found himself in front of the microphone before the last echoes of the loon had died.

## Watershed

Something had changed.

A malignant shadow, a bastard son of Fate and Fear, infiltrated the campaign and manifested itself in the minds of the three individuals most closely involved. Larkin felt it, but in his headlong rush, failed to heed; Sheena attributed her darkening dread to the nightmare of her kidnapping; the campaign manager recognized it for what it was: There is only one direction when you are at the pinnacle....

*From the growing accumulation of newspaper items, stories and pictures pertaining to the Consumers' Advocate, Jamie Langston selected an abbreviated biography of Karl Larkin. Yellow-orange eyes scanned the article. Less than a year ago, the man had been a nobody; a civil servant fired from his job. As Jamie's grandfather used to say, "He didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of." Overnight it seemed, the orator had become the most popular man in Canada. He had taken a front seat to the Prime Minister! It didn't make any sense! It made Jamie's trigger finger itch.*

Back in Dave Colburn's office following the holiday, Larkin listened intently to the promoter's discourse. "Well, Karl, the spotlight has left you—and the Consumers' Advocate—for a while now. You have accomplished far more than anyone could have dreamed." The usually beaming face showed lines of strain and appeared older. The receding hairline was fringed with more gray than had been there a year ago. Colburn's years were catching up to him. Karl wondered how his own body (and soul) had suffered.



“As I’ve told you,” the publicity man continued, “this program has netted us the entire rainbow, not just the pot of gold at the end. I have had my accountants look after your share; something we have never discussed. You, Karl, are a very wealthy man.”

Karl interrupted, “Dave, there’s something more than money troubling you. Get it off your chest.”

Colburn smiled, “There isn’t any beating around the bush with you, is there, Karl? All right, what I want to say is this: Let’s bow out; now, while we can go graciously. It will be autumn before we are even missed. It’s summer —holidays, vacations— people are busy with their private lives now. We are temporarily out of the picture; let’s stay out.”

Karl chewed his bottom lip while he carefully sorted his thoughts. “Dave, we would be leaving the job unfinished. Financial improvements are visible today, but they won’t last without proper direction. The purpose of the whole campaign has grown to include the viability of a nation. That can’t be completed in a year or two. It will take years of dedication, planning, direction.”

Dave Colburn pressed knuckled fists against his temples and then nervously drummed fingers on the desk. “Karl,” he said, “you will never live to see that day. There are twenty-five million people behind you, but you have a handful against who will not allow your campaign to continue. Don’t you realize an assassin could be out in the parking lot right now? We have been lucky, if you call threats, kidnappings and arson lucky. We are all unscathed today. But, what about tomorrow? We haven’t had

## Watershed

a bit of co-operation on this tax reduction plan. When you go public the nation will revolt. The feds have got to be scared shi... sleepless by your power. They will have people checking up on your every move. Believe me, they could discredit you with or without evidence! You would be hung out to dry before our lawyers had a chance to even propose a rebuttal.”

Larkin pondered this anecdote. Dirty pool wasn't in his game, therefore he tended to overlook that aspect in opponents. Doggedly he argued, “We could beat them to the punch. Our biggest asset is the media... we have to keep the news world backing us.”

“That's another thing! How long before the government pulls the plug on their own national broadcasting network? Or start dictating what they can promote? You think we're in a free country? Why do we even have government funded television and radio?”

“Well... they aren't the only show in town. Not anymore.”

“Yes, but there is another federal agency concerned with communications and they carry more clout than this campaign.”

Larkin shrugged his dismissal, “I don't believe the government is so concerned that they will censor broadcasts. And I don't believe they're setting out to defame me either.”

The heavy set man slumped as he expelled a huge sigh. “Karl, the *very least* they will do is to defame you. We are stepping on important toes and those toes are attached to feet that can deliver one hell of a boot. We swing the media, the feds make them swing. It is too big, for God's sake!”

The sincerity in Colburn's voice strangled the torrent from Larkin. The younger man arose from his chair and slowly paced the room, occasionally beating a fist into his opened palm.

"We have pushed so far that turning back or stopping now is impossible. Do you honestly believe there is corruption to the point of murder in this country's political arena?"

Colburn leaped to his feet, the wheeled swivel chair spinning away, "Hell, it won't be corruption; it will be *fear* that pulls the trigger on you. There won't *be* any governmental body if you keep on. Already the citizens pay more attention to you than the politicians. You have a potential bomb in your hands and there are *twenty-five million* pieces of shrapnel.

"If the government doesn't shut you down, you will be forced to besmear them. When the income tax cuts that you are confidentially seeking become public the country could revolt. If you suggested the people demand a five percent tax rollback, they will demand fifty and when it doesn't come about... there will be rioting in the streets."

Dave softened, "I'm not doubting your ability, but I have seen the media machine too long to assume that they won't stir the pot. One suggestion will spark the fuse and you would have to wax mightily to ever stop the charge. You are sailing an ill wind between Scylla and Charybdis."

With childish bullheadedness, Larkin repeated, "I can't stop now. It means too much and we are so close."

"We're close, my boy," Colburn put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Real close. I can't see the fire, but I can feel the heat. We are standing on the

Watershed

doorstep of Hell!”

## Chapter 17

*Iris and the kids enjoyed the holiday at Stéphane's parents' farm in central Quebec. The youngsters were busy with Grandpapa from the time they arose until Iris and Grandmère put them to bed. Stéphane tried to enjoy the break but his mind was preoccupied. He had left Toronto in the hands of a killer.*

*The detective had pleaded with higher ups to devote more manpower and energy to finding the sniper, however, the practice of ignoring an issue in hopes that it will go away is much easier than taking the bull by the horns; especially when the bull is not in sight. However, in the police force, "Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt" is not always the best strategy; neither is going over the heads of your superiors. In a brief note to Mayor Sangell, Stéphane urged his lordship to take a hand. The city father did, and consequently, Giroux's two week vacation in Quebec was sans salaire.*

*Humbled and back among the salaried contingent, Giroux was thankful that his job did not*

## Watershed

*require a partner. He didn't need sympathy and he didn't want ribbing. But, the detective admitted to himself, the break had given him time to think and an opportunity to view his problem from a distance. Stéphane returned to the skimpy files with renewed vigor. Now that he had convinced himself there was one trigger man for two separate homicides (his research had not uncovered any other closely related crimes) the 'bloodhound of the cold case' patiently set about compiling every piece of information, every tiny bit of background data on the two victims; somewhere there must be a thread, a link that would correlate the Van der Weist slaying with the assassination of Adrian Quennell. It was a long shot and could be completely off target. It was all Detective Giroux had to work with... until the next attack.*

The hot, dry, glorious days of summer started off at a fast trot and were racing by in a blur at the end of August. Harvest came to the prairies and Larkin's campaign picked up momentum following the season lull. In the blink of an eye twelve months had passed but Karl Larkin was light years away from where he had been one year ago.

He had to ask himself, "Where am I now?"

Colburn wanted out.

He wanted them all out and the campaign dissolved. But the main spring in the drive of the Consumers' Advocate would not abandon the two people who meant everything to him.

Larkin's program continued to be invisible in

the House of Parliament. Politicians trod daintily around issues concerning The Consumers' Advocate when home to their constituencies and were cautious not to publicly denounce the monumental crusade. In Ottawa they did not acknowledge its existence.

Reporters, organizations and individuals constantly plagued the orator with questions and requests regarding the alleviation of taxes. The media began to create an imaginary contest between the feds and the consumer group. Comic strip images of the finance minister and Larkin in ridiculous modes of combat appeared in millions of newspapers. In the face of Larkin's apparent reluctance to lock horns with governmental powers, a pre-budget motion passed, unanimously granting an increase in personal income tax, unemployment premiums and national pension plan contributions.

The silk glove had been tossed into the arena and Karl Larkin's hand was openly challenged.

Results of a brutal internal revenue audit of the orator's personal accounts failed to produce the embarrassment keenly calculated by the department. As Dave Colburn had predicted, the bureaucratic vehicle attempted to defame the nation's newest celebrity. *Accidentally* (Colburn preferred *conveniently*) Karl's income tax records were leaked to the media. The campaign manager's private battery of ace accountants and Larkin's glib tongue embarrassed the auditors and pacified the muckrakers.

A brilliantly conceived notion of mysterious origin insinuated itself among newspapers and airwaves: a hypothetical debate involving Karl Larkin, the Finance Minister and/or the Prime Minister. From media fiction to media fact, the idea

## Watershed

rapidly gained popularity with the masses. Larkin remained oblivious to the challenges thrown up by third parties but, unknown to the journalistic jackals, the orator solicited council with the federal office. The finance minister demurred when the Consumers' Advocate requested a private meeting. Larkin recalled how swiftly the government vehicle rolled when it decided to squeeze him out of the civil service. The Minister's obliquity infuriated Karl now. In a candid handwritten missive, the orator left nothing to misinterpretation:

**To the Right Honourable Graham  
Neon:**

**Please arrange to schedule an appointment between your office and the Consumers' Advocate. Topic of discussion will be the recent pre-budgetary announcement. At your option a private meeting may be held or we can publicly discuss on the steps of the parliament buildings. In the latter instance, I insist upon full media coverage.**

**Sincerely,  
Karl Larkin**

Karl decided not to include a deadline for the appointment. Neon's sense of urgency may be piqued if he feared a surprise public confrontation.



Finance Minister Graham Neon's lips puckered with scorn as he read the delivery. Apparently the problem was not going to be swept under the carpet. In a hastily arranged conference, heated words not becoming senior government officials ricocheted around the minister's office.

Anger distorting his handsome features, the finance minister protested, "The bastard is taking over the country! Everyone and their damn dog gobbles up every word Larkin spits out."

Deputy Minister Jules Lefebvre, balding and pot-bellied, echoed, "That's right. The government in this country can do whatever it pleases. So long as Karl Larkin agrees."

Neon raged on, "And the fucking media carries the bloody torch for him like he's some kind of god!"

Lefebvre's double chins wobbled as he nodded agreement.

A soft voiced, posture perfect, elderly advisor interrupted, "He has done what we could not do. The electorate's faith in this man is bolstered by the lack of confidence in ourselves. Before you put spurs to your high horse, consider what a great patriot this fellow is. He isn't attacking you or anyone else. It is fear of your own shortcomings that have fostered your anger."

A button popped from the vest restraining Lefebvre's expansive belly. Ignoring the older man's assertion, he declared, "We can't let him get away with this. *We are the government. We are in charge.*"

The veteran spoke softly again, "You are elected to do the will of our population. As for being in charge, that is a precarious and often short-

## Watershed

lived position.”

Keen blue eyes stifled further tirade as the statesman continued without raising his tone. “There are very few politicians today who place the country’s welfare ahead of their own. If you believe in Canada, you believe in Karl Larkin. *In my opinion*,” he glanced meaningfully toward the fubsy sycophant, “and I have been here long enough to have one, the two names are synonymous. Who do you believe in, Mr. Lefebvre?”

Later, in the absence of the elder advisor, scotch on the rocks cooled sour tempers which had been further inflamed by the official’s comments. The castigated politicians now nursed wounded pride.

“Caldwell thinks pretty highly of that Larkin,” the rotund Lefebvre grunted as he tipped the amber liquid over shrinking ice cubes.

“Yeah,” Neon responded, holding out his glass, “The old goat doesn’t seem to have the party strings anymore. Larkin will be the demise of all of our political careers and Caldwell is on his side.”

Lefebvre tossed back two fingers of scotch, wiped a sleeve across his mouth and grinned malevolently, “We ought to have them removed.”

The pair vacated the dimly lit cocktail lounge and flagged a taxi to the Minister’s suite. The rounds of drinks that followed lubricated the pair’s animosity toward Karl Larkin.

“Thish campaigner-consumerz bullshit should have been nipped in the bud!” Graham Neon slurred while supporting himself against the back of a chair.

Lefebvre grunted assent from his seated position. The bullet head nodded drunkenly; in the absence of a neck, trembling double chins returned

to rest upon his chest. “Le’s hire a mechanic. That’ll stop the whole she-bang. If Larkin is toast they’ll have no one to follow....”

Next morning, Finance Minister Graham Neon appeared less bright than his name suggested. He had a headache. Combing his hair hurt. Wisdom gods found at the bottom of empty bottles levied an unhealthy tax for the their advice.

Grudgingly, Neon admitted the meeting with Karl Larkin could no longer be denied.

Karl Larkin read the terse invitation with mild amusement. The charismatic Finance Minister lacked his public shine in black and white. Between the lines Karl read more than the brief note imparted. The Ottawa appointment turned out to be timely for Larkin as the Consumers’ Advocate had appearances scheduled for southern Ontario.

Larkin arrived promptly at the offices of the Minister of Finance. The official’s initial attempt at sincerity failed, both audibly and visibly, as Graham Neon apologized for being too busy to respond to Larkin’s earlier messages. Karl’s casual shrug spoke louder than if he had actually said, “*Don’t bullshit me!*” Intimidated, the politician conceded that Karl Larkin, having been there only a few minutes, was already more at home in this office than he was. The transparent cloak of cordiality fell away; the minister shifted to the offensive.

“Don’t bother getting too comfortable,” he snapped as Karl, uninvited, seated himself in one of Neon’s plush chairs. With exaggerated flare, the Finance Minister checked his wristwatch. “You have ten minutes; I am a busy man.”

Content to remain seated, Larkin fixed a cool

## Watershed

gaze on the bureaucrat. Fear flickered in the politician's shifting eyes. Karl said, "There won't be a need for me to talk to you when you are not a busy man."

The full impact of the statement dealt Neon a body blow. He shuffled past his adversary and took his seat behind the cluttered rosewood desk. "Just what exactly is your game, Larkin?" he asked.

"It is not a game, sir. Politics is a serious business. Though I am not a politician, there are politics in my program. You and I are here for the same reason: the people want us here. However, our objectives seem to differ greatly. Your goal is personal and short term. Mine is national and for the long run."

Neon interrupted, "You are here to oppose our tax levy. Raising taxes is certainly not conducive to my personal gain. It is political suicide these days."

"So it would seem," Larkin agreed. "However, in three years when election time rolls around, you will spend a good portion of the tax dollars you are exacting now to bolster your image then. The people want, or feel obligated, to vote for someone; it may as well be you."

Neon rose halfway out of his seat. "You. An uneducated farm boy. What do you know about this country's financial affairs? If this office deems it necessary to increase taxes, that is what we will do. If the people don't like it, they can boot us out next election."

Larkin coughed an interruption. "Excuse me. I don't recall any letters of learning behind your name, Mr. Neon, and, yes, I have looked. Another point for you to ponder is the number of 'farm boys' in this nation's political history, or the 'farmers'

currently among your colleagues and opposition in the House. However, it matters not an iota if a politician is a farmer, lawyer or circus clown, the best learning is common sense. And that, Mr. Finance Minister, is where your education fails you.”

The orator continued without allowing Neon a rebuttal. The voice shifted. “This is not a matter of qualification. It is an issue of understanding the problem, and the problem is simple: Taxes and deductions from personal incomes are the very weapons that are beating our economy to death. Every increase now defeats itself. Can’t you visualize the welfare and unemployment statistics rising with each tax increase? How can it be otherwise?” Larkin held out his right hand, fingers extended and retracted a digit with each statement: “Governments siphon money out of the taxpayers’ pockets; buying power decreases; demand decreases; production decreases; and unemployment, welfare and crime increase....

“What do you do to combat the latter problem? Another draw on incomes to create a better standard for the socially dependent; build more prisons. It is a vicious, tightening circle and who is going to pay when the entire nation is on welfare or in jail?

“Meanwhile, from global perspective, the World Bank has turned its back on Canada.

“How consummately incongruous that the second largest country in the world, with a paltry population of twenty-five million and an enormous chunk of the total resources on the planet, should be facing a financial crisis.”

Neon’s aggressive attitude had vanished, leaving a slumping, deflated ego. “If you have all

## Watershed

the answers,” he asked, “where can I find the money to pay the bills if it does not come from the people?”

Karl said, “You had better find out where the ‘bills’ are coming from. This nation can no longer maintain losing propositions. We cannot afford flagrant overspending. There has to be more support and less strain on the backs of the individuals who bear the load.

“And, there must be more people sharing that load; more lifters, fewer leaners.”

The finance minister grimaced. “You have it in a nutshell, don’t you? Well, I will admit to wanting personal gain. Sure, I would like to be re-elected. I want... I *want*, the same as everyone else *wants* in this greedy nation. To stay popular I have twenty-five million people to please, at once. Now, Mr. Larkin, you tell me how to deal with that. In my experience, the sting of a tax hike doesn’t last as long as the bite of a government cut.”

Larkin sighed. “What is your idea of popularity? If you want your name in the history books, surely you would like to be mentioned favorably. To take initiative now could well be political suicide today, but twenty years from now you will be viewed as an economic mastermind. Besides, this nation may not be so greedy as you perceive; not everyone is ‘looking over the fence’ anymore. However, there are few people who will refuse a handout. And that is where —figuratively and literally— ‘the buck stops’. Genuine popularity must be earned, it cannot be bought.”

The finance minister persisted, “Mr. Larkin, I have been in politics for many years. There is no pacifying the people anymore. This portfolio has been the toughest and here I am at the forefront,

receiving the blame for economic problems that began before my time. I am aware that economically, we are slipping, and, frankly, it is beyond my power to prevent it.”

“That’s a cop-out.

“And cop-outs are all this nation has seen from inept federal governments in the last three or four decades. So predictably repetitive: a change of leadership, a change of political party, a new finance minister, a new budget, over and over. Nothing personal, they are all the same. Never has the issue of government spending been seriously addressed. Opposition parties break off constantly and when they are elected, revert to the same policies they argued against. They don’t even have to eat their words. It is time for major surgery in place of band-aid measures. Governments can no longer continue to base economic decisions on votes. Someone has to accept responsibility for our future.”

Karl Larkin used about fifty minutes more than the time allotted by the finance minister. He had not expected to hammer out any specific measures, but Karl was disappointed the parley wouldn’t lead to further discussion. Though Neon clearly understood, even agreed with, the orator’s thrust, Larkin could not be certain the politician had the guts to accept the responsibility. Even if he did, he had his entire party, including the Prime Minister, to convince. Finance Minister Graham Neon would be in a catch-22; Larkin suspected the man would take the path of least resistance.

The ball bounced back into Larkin’s court.

Cynthia Hestleton, Karl’s badger in Ottawa, unearthed a scandal and a half of interesting benefits for

## Watershed

government officials residing in the capital. Although the information was not secret, neither had it been publicized. Larkin laughed without mirth while perusing the energetic reporter's inventory of parliamentary perks: liquor expenses, shoe shines, masseur and masseuse charges, haircut allowances, first class travel; from free parking to international air charters, the list went on and on. Karl pondered: Why would politicians in the Senate or House of Commons—in power, or in opposition—consider changing the situation? For many, it was luxury retirement with a salary. The parties may change roles at election time, depending upon the whim of the electorate, but none of the bureaucrats were prepared to sacrifice the legendary '*goose that laid the golden egg*.' In essence, they were paid to do a job for the people who elected them, then given sufficient perquisites to ensure the job was never carried out responsibly. The 'Old Boys Club.' With a pension.

"Well, Cyn, this is a disgrace and I appreciate your legwork. I suggest that you free-lance these tidbits. It may appear too trivial and unnecessarily inflammatory for our campaign to express concern with government spending in this area. Maybe you could tip off a reporter from a national paper. That will preserve our low profile and hopefully curtail just a little of the lavish spending. As for embarrassment... I think these people are immune."

Eden Caldwell had spent his entire political career in Ottawa. He had supported many of the original policies and ideals of his party, had attended ministers in numerous portfolios and faithfully served the most recent position as senior adviser to



the Finance Minister. Government and politicians today did not seem to have the responsibility and loyalty of the bureaucrats of days gone by. The veteran had chalked up this notion to his age, but lately, his cynicism had more fuel.

Caldwell's capacity as an adviser necessitated that he express his opinion; expression did not include berating. Perhaps he had stepped out of bounds when defending Karl Larkin. The lubricious Deputy Minister was more than Caldwell's ulcers could stomach. Graham Neon was an eel, not worthy of the high profile post he held. Eden could only speculate why the Prime Minister had appointed Neon as Minister of Finance and his toady, LeFebvre, as deputy minister, and then insist that Caldwell be installed in an advisory capacity. Did the PM have a twisted sense of humour?

Siding with the orator had cost Caldwell favour among the less seasoned of his colleagues. A verbal slap-in-the-face stings longer than a backhand and, in politics, as in real life, wounded pride often leads to retaliation. However, over the course of nearly four decades, many adversaries had underestimated the strength of the distinguished statesman. Eden's knowledge in every facet of the parliamentary parade was unsurpassed; not much happened in the capital without Eden Caldwell's awareness. He had 'a fly on the wall' in every room.

The senior adviser to the Minister of Finance sat uncomfortably straight at his time worn desk. Nervous fingers drummed rhythmically as he contemplated: Something is odoriferous in the city of Ottawa. A jelly bean jar of cabinet members, backbenchers and associates were scheming something. Clandestine meetings, whispered

## Watershed

conversations, furtive glances and exaggerated nonchalance whenever Caldwell appeared announced more than if the closet cabal had broadcast over the public address system; mischief afoot in ballet slippers generates more noise than hobnailed boots. Caldwell knew he had not been counted out in error.

Membership in the cabal grew. A string of the original players were expelled.

Among the elite were several elite among the elite. These included the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition and a hockey sock full of time-tested members from both sides. In all his career, the single preclusion of Eden Caldwell had been during military crisis. There were no wars affecting the nation at this time so the statesman could conclude only one reason for his ostracism: Karl Larkin.

Caldwell's apprehension grew when he witnessed a senior military man leaving a closed meeting. The colonel wore a grim mask of duty on his weathered features. The keen blue eyes of the adviser followed the purposeful stride of the soldier.

## Chapter 18

Karl Larkin was now spending the majority of his time in the nation's capital. He had no allies here and, except for the meeting with Finance Minister Neon, had not held audience with any bureaucrats. The Consumers' Advocate, he now believed, would be incomplete without a reckoning in the House of Commons. Just over a year ago, Karl was ready to abandon the program when Colburn had hinted that they should take issue with the feds; now Colburn and Larkin had swapped shoes.

Public appearances lessened; the promoter insisted it was no longer safe. However, the media continued to accompany Larkin's every move, sustaining the requisite popularity level.

The Advocate quickly gained favour when Karl publicly denounced the games commission for imposing a tax upon lottery ticket sales. National news broadcast Larkin's brief and pointed speech: "The recent tax on lottery tickets is a flagrant money grab. In any other walk of life such an imposition would be labelled racketeering. Canadians, we will

## Watershed

not starve without our weekly supplement of tickets. Insist that the tax be removed by refusing to buy.”

Lotto sales plummeted immediately; in less than a week the tax was repealed.

Karl Larkin further alienated himself on Parliament Hill.

Dave Colburn ceased to strut and the pigeon chest had deflated. He was, and looked, a beleaguered man; age was catching up with him. Sheena Davies had recently joined her employer and Karl in the capital city. Though radiantly beautiful, she also showed signs of stress and lack of sleep.

“Karl, the police have charged Emory Stanton with arson in connection with the burning of your house,” Sheena reported as she turned from the telephone.

“Emory?” Karl asked. He recalled that Jerry Holt had named Stanton at the time of the fire. “What makes the police suspect him?”

Sheena recited the latest news from her office at CBJT. “Apparently, a local man named Harvey Schmidt saw Emory’s pickup parked in your driveway the night of the fire. Schmidt even read the ‘Chesterton Motors’ sign on the door.”

Colburn said, “Boy, it sure took this Schmidt bird a long time to come forward. What kept him quiet?”

Larkin recalled the service station owner’s tired eyes and harassed look the night Karl began the campaign in Chesterton. “I guess Harvey held no allegiance to me either.”

Sheena continued, “Stanton had been drinking. The day following the fire, police found an empty liquor bottle near your yard with Emory’s

fingerprints on it. Stanton was picked up for driving while impaired that night.”

Larkin’s shoulders sagged. Brushing a hand over his brow he sighed. “My God! What have I done? How many more lives have I trampled in this runaway?”

Sheena gently gripped Karl’s wrist. “Your campaign has not allowed for compromise. If it had, it never would have gotten off the ground. You knew people would be hurt, but the majority, including those who were adversely affected in the beginning, have now reaped the benefit of your vision.”

Colburn said, “Stanton asked for what he’s getting. Imagine how guilty he felt when you were black-balled. I bet that old crook never lost a wink. But... I’m afraid there are a lot of Emory Stantons in this world... no doubt, some of them will have a grudge against The Advocate.”

Larkin strode to the window of the high-rise suite Colburn had rented for their prolonged stay in the capital. He surveyed the city through saddened eyes. Across the river stood the beautiful, time weathered parliament buildings; the red and white flag of the nation waved in the breeze.

“I’ve done my best,” he murmured.

Sheena moved beside Karl, following his gaze. “Canadians believe strongly in their nation’s future. They believe in this campaign and you, and most importantly, they believe in themselves. Even those you have referred to as social parasites have begun to take up the initiative, pulling their weight, doing what they can instead of wallowing in self pity. The recession is behind us. There are new opportunities opening every day. Karl, you are the man

## Watershed

responsible for it all. Your foresight, your fortitude, have changed the economic picture of an entire nation. You can't condemn yourself for the few unfortunate consequences."

Larkin drew the lovely lady into his arms, and whispered, "Save the accolades, I have my reward already."

Sheena searched his face; the grey eyes were haunted. "Oh, Karl, I am so afraid. All you have done... your unselfishness... and now you have become a target. Where will it end? Will another Emory Stanton gun you down? We can't even bow out if you want to."

Colburn spoke up in the background, "I have been working on a plan to shift you from the forefront, Karl. It may be desperate and by no means foolproof, but we cannot fool ourselves any longer: You have to back off before you are removed permanently."

The orator looked over Sheena's head, meeting the saddened eyes of his friend. Karl did not feel so cocksure any longer. Maybe Colburn was right. Maybe someone did want Karl dead.

The full impact of that realization came later that afternoon when Eden Caldwell made an appearance at Larkin's suite. Colburn had gone out, leaving Karl and Sheena to themselves. Larkin gave a start as familiarity struck him upon answering the knock at the door. The tall statesman introduced himself and Karl invited him into the suite.

"You look familiar, Mr. Caldwell, have we met somewhere?"

The white-haired adviser smiled faintly. "You probably have me confused with Martin Caldwell,

the mayor of Brant; the little town out west where you helped preserve the railway? Martin is my brother.”

“That’s it.” Larkin said. “You certainly look alike.”

“Martin is a year older than I. We are quite close although our political levels are far removed. I am one of Graham Neon’s advisors.”

Larkin was taken aback at the mention of the finance minister. He recovered quickly, saying, “How is Mayor Caldwell and his town? I am afraid we haven’t heard any news from that area recently.”

“The folks out in Brant still have their railroad and they intend to keep it. Collectively, they are a convincing force in that community. Martin informs me that you are the prime reason for their success.”

Karl accepted the kudos with a warm smile as he ushered Caldwell into the sitting room. Caldwell bowed chivalrously as Larkin introduced him to Sheena. The young couple felt an instant attraction toward the veteran politician; there was nothing insincere about him; he left no feeling that you should wash your hands after making his acquaintance.

Seated in the plush chair Sheena offered, the septuagenarian leaned forward, searching Larkin’s face. He spoke with earnest urgency, “Mr. Larkin, your life is in danger.”

Sheena gasped and colour drained from her face. Karl grasped her hand and, though his voice was strained, said, “Go on, Mr. Caldwell.”

“There is a conspiracy to have your campaign stopped... at any cost. I am ashamed and embarrassed that our nation could stoop to this level of criminality but, I can assure you, this is definitely

## Watershed

the case.”

Caldwell related his suspicions quietly, as though his every word may be overheard. “It is not restricted to one person, not even one political party. There have been many private and secret meetings going on. These discussions initially included several top ministers and a few Opposition kingpins. Lately though, a colonel, a dutiful old lobo from the military, has been sitting in on these closed conferences. Mr. Larkin, I know this man and I know his business.”

Karl spoke his disbelief. “You must be mistaken, Mr. Caldwell. I haven’t even pressed the federal government publicly. Why should they fear one man? Surely there is another explanation.”

“The group of national figures currently representing this country are a very nervous and insecure lot. They know that your campaign is a certain solution to our growing economic dilemma. However, for them to admit your success is to succumb to defeat themselves. None are about to commit political suicide by joining forces with you. You threaten their security and, conceivably, you control their futures. They intend to deal with you in the quickest and most efficient way available.”

Karl did not doubt the elder statesman’s sincerity as Caldwell continued, “I have come to you for a number of reasons, Karl. You have helped my brother and the community I still call home. You have displayed a love for your country that I have not witnessed in... in decades. You are too good a man to be simply wiped out by a mob of hysterical imbeciles. And, most of all, I have to prevent this abominable act before this corruption overtakes our entire nation.”



Sheena struggled to regain composure. She asked "Do you mean they intend to... *assassinate* Karl? How can he escape?" Tears came and she buried her face in her hands. "My God! If they want Karl dead..." She looked up. "Is there no one who can help?"

Larkin held Sheena in his arms and rocked her gently as Caldwell tried to console the girl. "I don't believe they have made definite plans." He smiled ruefully. "You know how bureaucracy works: Karl could be an old man before they decide on a place and time. But, the military does not function that way."

The aged gentleman rose to leave, "I am positive there is a conspiracy; get out while you can. Perhaps if you were to quit now, they would stop. Otherwise there will be no place to run and no place to hide. They will have you covered wherever you go."

Karl Larkin rapidly became introduced to fear: real, terrifying, gut-wrenching fear. He faced a firing squad and had a snowball's chance in hell.

Dave Colburn returned to find the young couple on the verge of panic. Shades were down, lights dimmed, furniture had been shifted out of line of the windows. Larkin's face was drawn and ashen. Sheena's eyes were red and swollen. Deathly pale, both looked like they had been out in the Styx.

The flamboyant executive surprised the couple with his composure. Larkin recalled a story Colburn had related about being in a particularly tight spot during the Korean War. The man possessed more metal than his appearance indicated.

"We can't outrun this, Karl," he stated flatly.

## Watershed

“Hiding won’t work either.” The stout man paced the floor, pounding his fist into an open palm. “Sometimes the best retreat is a frontal attack...” He paused a moment, thinking aloud, “The more you stand in the public eye, the better chance we have of keeping you in one piece.”

Hysteria creeping into in her voice, Sheena broke in, “They could shoot him down in the street, or on stage, or... or right here. They might blow up the apartment. They could...”

Karl gripped the girl and tried to calm her. “Honey, panicking won’t help us. Let’s listen to Dave. We’ll make it through this.”

“You have a banquet tonight, don’t you, Karl?” the older man asked.

“Yes. It’s some ‘do’ for chartered banks.”

“We’ll attend as planned,” Colburn said. “I’ll have another place for us to spend the night. This location may not be safe enough.”

Sheena straightened. “We have to be in Toronto on Wednesday. Can we go there ahead of schedule; unannounced?”

Karl’s frustration surfaced. “Damn it. I don’t want to play cat and mouse with these bastards. Running away won’t solve the problem....”

Colburn interrupted, “I’ll make a few calls from a public phone. Maybe I can drum up a little protection.”

“Bodyguards?” Sheena asked.

“Protection.”

*“Karl Larkin, The Consumers’ Advocate,” posters adorned almost every car on the subway trains and the city buses that Jamie Langston rode;*

*news and television commercials, even the radio playing in the office building where Jamie performed custodial duties, beat the drum for the upstart orator. At times the advertising drove the yellow-orange eyed recluse to the brink. The collection of articles on this Larkin charlatan was growing so rapidly there may be too much for one scrapbook. Frustration perked, something had to be done soon.*

*News arrived that Larkin would be coming to Toronto. Lion-eyes increased visits to the shooting range; the diminutive caretaker also began to check out suitable venues for the Larkin 'welcoming committee'.*

The powerful financiers did not detect the turmoil within the mind of their guest speaker when Larkin addressed the banquet meeting of the Chartered Banks. A powerful and arrogant audience, they were no less moved by the hypnotic voice than the farmers and merchants in the town halls on the prairies. Karl admonished the banks for showing scandalous returns during recessive times. He conceded that profits were bankers' business but reminded them of how firm the foundation of Chartered Banks would be in the event of a collapse of the national Bank of Canada. "When our dollars are pesos, our international banking credibility will be worth pesos as well."

Colburn had a sleek, stylish sports car parked near a side entrance. The campaign captain ushered Karl and Sheena through the exit and out into the brisk Ottawa air. The trio quickly climbed into the vehicle and Colburn sped away.

## Watershed

“We’ll drive to Toronto tonight,” he announced. “I’ve transferred our overnight bags into this car, a friend will bring the rest of our belongings from the suite. No one has to know where we are until Wednesday evening.”

Sheena snuggled close under Karl’s arm and dozed fitfully as the miles fell behind them in the early winter darkness. Colburn watched the road and checked the rear-view mirror constantly. Again, Karl marvelled at the change in his companion. No one could have guessed the strength of the publicity manager. The fellow had wallowed in lavish living, sparing no expense in surrounding himself with those luxuries he could afford. Larkin had once considered him a hedonist. Now, his grim visage, highlighted in the glare of oncoming traffic, bore a look of fierce determination. The real Dave Colburn.

The driver stiffened, then said, “We are being followed. There should be one vehicle behind us, but I believe there are two.” Karl glanced back apprehensively. How could a person tell if he were being pursued in all that maze of headlights?

Dave Colburn accelerated and Larkin watched a vehicle pull out immediately to charge down the adjacent lane on the left. As the car neared them, Dave tapped the brake pedal three times. Larkin noted the dim red flare of their brake lights. On cue, a third vehicle directly behind Colburn’s automobile flashed its lights on bright and quickly dimmed them again. A shotgun rider. Larkin’s driver grinned. “We’ll have some action now.”

Colburn’s foot smashed the accelerator to the floor and the powerful engine growled as the car surged ahead. White-knuckled, Larkin braced one

hand against the dash and glanced at his partner. "Good choice of rental cars," he said.

Dave muttered, "It's not a rental."

He manoeuvred the speeding vehicle through slower traffic then nailed the pedal on an open stretch. Larkin craned his neck to watch behind. The shotgun car pulled up closer, almost touching Colburn's rear bumper. In the distance, the unknown vehicle broke away from the cluster of lights and bore down upon them.

Sheena cried, "They're gaining on us!"

The menace pulled up beside and Karl noted it was a hulking big sedan. He surmised the vehicle must have a modified engine in order to reach their current speed: the speedometer needle dipped out of sight on the clockwise side of the meter.

The guardian vehicle flashed its lights again and immediately cut left. Colburn eased off the gas and dropped back a car length. The big shotgun unit nosed into the hole Dave created. Horizontal leapfrog. Now, the shotgun driver was parallel with the unknown vehicle. As they ran grill 'n grill, the protection automobile veered left; sparks lit up the night as the vehicles smashed together. Karl winced as two sets of taillights separated then came back together in another shower of sparks. Colburn maintained his position as a third swipe brought the forward units together again. This time, the left hand car lost control and careened across the highway. Dave, Karl and Sheena flashed by as the out-of-control sedan crashed through a guardrail, became airborne and then disappeared in the darkness.

There were no further signs of pursuit. Colburn's shotgun driver tapped his brakes three

## Watershed

times, then accelerated into the night. Dave took an exit ramp, deftly swung into the slower traffic and continued toward the big city via a less traveled route.

Sheena found her voice, "Nice run, Mr. McQueen."

Colburn grinned. "I don't know how much excitement my old ticker can handle. I'm growing too old for this kind of exercise."

The three friends motored along in silence. Only occasional traffic occupied the secondary route at this hour. Out of nowhere, a car running without lights appeared behind them, it pulled up along side and then dropped back. The shadow vehicle turned on its lights— actually one light as the left beam was absent— then dropped back to follow about ten car lengths behind.

Colburn smiled without warmth. "Looks like our man won the battle and avoided the cops as well."

"He'll be needing auto-body work I expect," Larkin said.

"That car is headed to the crusher. It will be about the size of a suitcase by morning."

The one-eyed shadow car followed Colburn's unit until he turned off the thoroughfare and entered the residential section of a Toronto suburb. Snow had fallen here; the sidewalks were white though the pavement was dark and slushy from traffic.

"Where are we headed?" Larkin asked as the manager motored through the quiet lamp lit streets.

"I have a pal here who's willing to help out. He owes me a couple," Colburn said but offered nothing more.

Sheena studied the driver. "Dave, you must

have a lot of friends around here. How did you line up the intercept vehicle on such short notice?"

"It wasn't all that short notice. I have been making plans ever since your abduction. These people I have called on are dependable and they are my personal friends. They can and will go to the wall for us if we need them."

Sheena opened her mouth to press for more information but Larkin squeezed her hand gently and changed the subject, "I wonder if we can secure police protection or are they part of this conspiracy as well?"

Colburn's face remained a mask as he said, "I'll engage the police. We may have to embarrass them, but the public will demand the assurance of your safety."

Larkin felt Sheena shudder beside him. She remained silent and Karl sighed. "We're in over our heads."

Colburn turned the vehicle into a cul-de-sac and rolled to a stop in front of a cedar sided bungalow. Yellow light glowed over the doorway illuminating the neatly shoveled walk. As the visitors climbed stiffly from the vehicle, the front door of the house opened. A couple, no longer young, dressed in night clothes, called cheerfully to their guests. Dave Colburn made introductions once the trio were inside the home. Karl and Sheena immediately warmed to their new hosts; Cal and Emma Knight were sincere people.

Larkin apologized for the late intrusion.

Cal Knight waved an air of dismissal. "Nonsense, I've been following your campaign, son. It's time we had an opportunity to repay you!" He gave Colburn a slap on the back. "Besides, if ever I

## Watershed

owed a favour to anyone, that person would be my good friend Dave Colburn.”

Colburn grinned through his weariness. “We’re not as young as we were in those days, are we, Cal?”

Mrs. Knight had ushered Sheena away from the men and returned briefly to inquire about the young lady’s overnight case. Their hostess’s face showed concern. “Sheena says you encountered trouble along the highway?”

Dave shrugged. “Just a little car chase, Emma - no harm done!”

Karl moved to retrieve the luggage but their hostess waved him back. “You best stay inside. If the bag isn’t too big I will bring it in.”

Cal Knight’s bushy eyebrows had raised. “Tailed you, did they?”

Colburn and Larkin followed the gentleman into the sitting room. While he opened the glass doors of a liquor cabinet and poured three tumblers of scotch, Dave briefly outlined their encounter adding that the intercept vehicle had found them again.

“One head lamp was missing....”

Knight grinned, “Bob edged them a little too hard. He always was in there with both feet when push came to shove.

“...Maybe none of us would be here if he had been any other way....”

Larkin’s questioning look invited Colburn’s explanation. “There is a small group of us ’model citizens’ who have a less than model past. Cal here, Bob —the fellow driving that interceptor tonight— and a handful of other guys now scattered across Canada, spent a little extra time overseas after the



Korean War. You know, young, full of big ideas and looking for adventure. We would have been considered mercenaries, I suppose. Anyway, we knocked around East Asia doing odd jobs for odd people for a few years. Eventually, our unit dissolved and everyone, that is, the survivors, came home to Canada. We pretty much went our separate ways and, until last fall, hadn't been in close contact for years."

Larkin expelled a low whistle. "You were a mercenary?!"

Colburn smiled and patted his ample paunch. "That was in another lifetime. We weren't working for any government, it was high pay for dangerous work. Our biggest contracts were for mining companies. We cleared the way, and I don't mean cutting jungle, so that the miners could work in safety."

Knight added, with a touch of pride in his low voice, "We were pretty damn good at what we did, too. Those of us who made it were able to set ourselves up when we came home."

The Knight's were excellent hosts. The motherly Emma Knight doted upon Sheena as if the young lady were her own daughter. She admonished Dave and Karl the next morning. "The poor child is a nervous wreck. This is no business for an innocent young girl. You men had better find a safer line of work."

"We're working on it, Mother," Cal Knight responded in defense of the scolded.

Dave Colburn added, "She's a tough and seasoned reporter, Emma. Sheena can stand the heat."

## Watershed

After breakfast, the orator either sat down and fidgeted or stood up and paced. Cal Knight, noting his guest's nervousness, suggested they go for drive. It was a dull and smoggy day and the snow had begun to melt when the three men emerged from the bungalow. Cal had been out before daylight; he had secreted Colburn's high performance vehicle in the garage and left his own car out on the street. The trio climbed into this unit and Cal drove to downtown Toronto.

"We'll tour past the Centennial building where you are to speak Wednesday, Karl," Knight informed his passenger. "The Chamber of Commerce plans to have about four-fifty to five hundred people on hand for your presentation; I have enlisted *the right people* for security. They will appear as Chamber invitees, and no one needs to know about the extra precautions. You will be safe as a babe in arms while inside. We will do what we can to prevent an assault before and after."

As Larkin and Colburn viewed the beautiful architectural wonder, Karl found difficulty in perceiving the precarious position he now held. His vision of Canada had never included the terrible black cloud of doubt surrounding him now. "Is this my country? Are these conspirators really the elected politicians of our land? If so, what has become of freedom of speech? Where is democracy?"

Dave Colburn studied his companion, reading Karl's mind. "We're in a hell of a mess, lad."

"To me, the vision is so clear, so near. Will it all vanish if they manage to eliminate me?" Karl asked with a tremor of fear in his voice.

The campaigner consoled his dejected partner.

“They may attempt to destroy you, but they will never quash your ideas, your dreams. These will continue on to fruition. There is no stemming the tide now, no matter what the government does. With luck and good planning we’ll ride this out, pass over the reins and let someone else carry the torch.”

Colburn turned to look out the window, “All we have to do is stay alive over the next few weeks.”

Karl followed the gaze of his friend, “How do we stay alive for the next few weeks? You said you could encourage the police to provide more security. How are you going to do that? And what happens after the next few weeks? Is it all going to evaporate like this fog or maybe dry up and blow away?”

Cal Knight said dramatically, “It’s best if you don’t know everything right now. For the time being I suggest you keep your head down!”

Larkin felt like a scolded child. Damn it, this was his life they were playing with. Why shouldn’t he be informed? He bit back a retort, realizing that he owed everything to these two men, now, and in the future. *If* there should be a future.

Upon returning to the Knight residence, a paled Sheena met Karl at the door.

“Have you heard about Eden Caldwell?” she gasped.

“No! What happened?” Karl asked anxiously.

“He was found dead in his suite this morning. A preliminary report suggests foul play.”

Larkin slipped off his winter jacket and dazedly walked to the kitchen where he sank into a chair. Shoulders slumped, chin on chest, he looked a defeated man.

“My God! Murdered,” he whispered.

Colburn paced the floor. “Cal, if we can root

## Watershed

out the bastards responsible, we'll make 'em pay."

Cal Knight seated himself opposite Karl. "This man Caldwell, is he the one who informed you of the conspiracy?"

Sheena answered for the younger man, "Yes, Mr. Caldwell came to Dave's rented suite in Ottawa. He warned us that someone might be out to kill Karl."

Larkin added, "He indicated that the senior officials had planned the whole thing in secret. They have called in a military man; a Colonel."

Knight leaned forward. "Colonel? Did Caldwell happen to mention a name?"

Larkin looked to his distraught sweetheart. "I don't recall a name."

Sheena shook her head. "Mr. Caldwell just said, 'They've called in a military man, a colonel. I know this man... I know his business.' Then he said something about an 'old lobo'."

Cal Knight swung his gaze to Dave Colburn who had suddenly ceased his pacing. "I think we know this man, too," he said.

## Chapter 19

Sheena had additional news: a single vehicle accident on the route that Colburn had driven last night had claimed the lives of two men. Names were not released; officials believed the vehicle had been speeding and the driver lost control. Another item was that Canada's national television and radio network had been ordered to stop all coverage of the Consumer Advocate campaign. Several top executive within the federal corporation had been fired.

Knight scoffed, "We've been receiving better coverage from the American channels here anyway. In the past three or four months the Yanks have really jumped on this campaign."

Larkin looked at Colburn. "The feds are desperate. Maybe they will shut down your station, Dave."

The publicity manager winced, "My network is private; I'm not affiliated with the government... but they did pay CBJT a whack of change over the past year and a half."

## Watershed

“Conceivably, they may shut out private networks as well; federal government has content control.”

Knight interrupted, “The feds have no control over American broadcasting and borders are meaningless to airwaves; you can’t stop the signal.”

“Well, out west, we’re usually too far away to pick up broadcasts from south of forty-nine,” Karl said.

Sheena intervened, “Do you think they will ever release the names of the two who died in that car accident?”

Colburn shrugged and Cal Knight said, “They can’t hide everything from everyone forever.” He reached for the telephone, “I’ll make a few inquiries.”

Colburn engaged Larkin in a discussion as to the contents of his speech for the city’s Chamber of Commerce. “Forget the normal platform,” he urged. “There will be plenty of media on hand; probably more than ever now that the government has slapped the hands of its own network. Now is the time to open the ball on these tax hikes. Let’s hit the buggers hard before it’s too late.”

Karl tried to veto this direction. “We’ve stirred up enough grief; one dead man is too many.”

Colburn, who had completely re-reversed his attitude of a few days ago, rebuked, “You didn’t kill him.

“You didn’t kill him, but if you don’t act now, *you* may be next. Your *only defense* is an open attack. The media has to be stirred up to bring this into the light. Can’t you see, the yellow bastards won’t come out from the shadows? It’s like guerrilla warfare. If you implicate them before they

get you they'll be falling over themselves to make sure nothing actually does happen to you! You are safe on centre stage and it is where you have always belonged. I beg you, Karl, listen to me now. This is an area that I know better than you do."

Larkin had never heard such desperate sincerity from anyone. The campaign manager's emotion struck a chord deep within.

Karl shrugged in resignation. "All right, maestro, you've named the tune, let's see who's going to dance...."

*Mrs. Giroux sighed, set down the paper she had been perusing and rubbed tired eyes. She smiled at her husband, "There is a mountain of material here, dear."*

*"The tough part," Stéphane Giroux looked up from the heap of documents he had been sorting through, "Is that it could all be a wild goose chase. I may be on the wrong track entirely, but this is all I have to go on. But, what is a common link between a twenty-four year old star hockey player from Philadelphia and a career building, thirty plus, female politician, from Toronto, killed more than a year apart?"*

*Iris Giroux moved to the sofa where her husband sat. She placed a hand on his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "You know you are on the right track, Stéphane, you are never wrong."*

*The detective reached up and clasped the soft hand. He smiled ruefully, "Apparently I was wrong to go to the mayor."*

*"We have eliminated the obvious possible connection: romance. Adrian Quennell and*

## Watershed

*Elizabeth Van der Weist had probably never even heard of one another, much less had an affair. Therefore, there could be no jealous third party. No, it is something else. We'll have to concentrate in that two year period when Quennell resided in Toronto. Addresses, schools, work, something must be a link, but it is so obscure we may need a microscope to pick it out."*

*"We won't find it tonight," Iris squeezed his hand, "so let's go to bed and hope the kids don't crawl in with us."*

"...and the latest tax hike is another nail in the national coffin. This irresponsible, habitual tapping of incomes, siphoning of dollars from all tax payers, whether corporate, business, or the salaried worker, offers nothing in return. This levy came with no explanation, no excuse, not even mention of what it was earmarked for. And the House voted unanimously! Why? Ladies and gentlemen, there is something akilter on Parliament Hill.

"The Consumers' Advocate, that is twenty-five million Canadians, have worked long and hard to push Canada's economic figures into black ink; to slow the recession and put our unemployed back to work. You are all business people, you know how to balance your own accounts and you cannot fail to realize the magnitude of the Advocate's success."

Larkin smiled, "I would not have been invited here tonight if you thought otherwise."

The orator spoke with forceful captivation, no tremor in the voice, no visible sign of the subsurface panic seeped through the outward calm. It was the first time he publicly denounced the government.



Never, in all the hundreds of presentations, had he so deliberately sought to discredit, embarrass the nations' administration. Big City Chamber of Commerce members and guests were spell bound. The glorious voice, so captivating and entrancing when seeking support or during negotiation, held no candle to the thunderous presentation of Larkin on the attack.

Many individuals and organizations (occasionally quite large organizations) had ineffectually criticized governmental tax reforms and laws in the past, but never had there been anyone wielding this amount of power; the voice of the entire population stood behind Larkin and when they spoke, parliamentarians retreated to their last stronghold: Parliament Hill.

The repercussions of Larkin's speech were visible to the knowledgeable audience he now held. Tomorrow's newspapers would burn with this fiery outburst which the media themselves had fueled over the past several months.

Karl Larkin continued softly, the golden voice penetrating, possessing. "The Consumers' Advocate is totally opposed to the recent tax increases. Business and individuals can no longer support the disappearing billions of Canadian tax dollars. If the governments of this nation refuse to alter their spending tactics, we must contain their revenue source."

The speaker left the podium to the sound of resounding applause. Larkin continued to hide his apprehension when he later circulated among the Chamber's guests. He tried to pick out Knight's private security but no one appeared out of place. Cal Knight had said, "The right people"; obviously

## Watershed

they were. The select media in attendance shelled the young man with a battery of queries. Larkin could not answer questions about his future plans. He had none. He had no immediate plan either and he could not explain the sudden attack on government spending. Colburn hustled through the crowd, his face ghostly pale as he grasped Karl's sleeve and escorted the speaker to the hall foyer.

"You really opened the ball, Karl," he panted. "Tomorrow will have Parliament knob buzzing like an ant hill on fire."

Larkin expressed concern for his partner's obvious distress. "Dave, are you feeling okay? You appear as though someone stepped on your grave. You instigated this attack, it's too late for second thoughts."

Colburn brushed a sleeved arm over sweaty visage. "...Just need some fresh air...let's step out for a bit."

Worry for his partner's condition caused Karl to forget his own immediate danger as they crossed the lobby and exited the main entrance of the Centennial Hall. The agent inhaled a deep breath and eased toward the bright glow of the side lighting. The stout man was spun in a half circle and going down before Larkin heard the definite, barking crack of a rifle shot. Colburn collapsed on the wet pavement grasping an already blood soaked left shoulder.

"Hit the dirt!" he screamed to his shocked partner. Time lapse photography could have captured Larkin's paralyzed movements as Colburn gazed in suspended anguish.

"Roll under that car!" Colburn bellowed.

Karl skidded on the slippery concrete and

squeezed against a parked vehicle. His eyes frantically searched for his injured friend and found him pinned tightly against another stationary auto. There was no sign of a sniper.

“How bad are you hit?” Karl gasped.

“Just a flesh wound,” Colburn gritted through clenched teeth. Then, to Larkin’s astonishment, the wounded man flashed a pained grin.

The roar of an engine and whine of tires from across the street preceded the stampede of people from within the Centennial Building. Larkin leaped to his feet hoping to pick out an identifying mark, but the vehicle vanished in the heavy downtown traffic. Reaching his wounded companion, he helped Dave to a sitting position. Blood was dripping off his fingertips and the entire sleeve was soaked. .

“We’ve got to stop the bleeding!” Karl said, tearing the coat material to make a pad. A tall, angular woman pushed through the crowd. “I’m a doctor,” she announced and stepped forward to assist while others jostled for a ringside view. Karl turned to the group, “Call the police! Get an ambulance!”

Media personnel now hummed like hornets around a stick poked hive. “How did it happen? Did you see who did it? Which way did they go? Is he all right? Who is behind this?”

Larkin’s head buzzed as he and the doctor applied pressure to the seeping gash in Colburn’s arm. Though Colburn groaned in agony, he grasped the improvised bandage and with Karl’s assistance, came to his feet.

Karl could not believe his eyes! The familiar pigeon chest puffed out farther than Larkin had ever seen it and the bullet-struck victim commenced a

## Watershed

rather unsteady strut in front of the onlookers.

“They were after Karl!” Colburn said. “That shot barely missed him and caught me. Where are our law enforcement people tonight? This man’s life is in danger. It is not the first attempt either. He requires police protection.”

Pain and shock led the promoter to incoherence as the police and ambulance arrived. Larkin rode in the emergency unit to the hospital. On arrival Colburn was rushed away to surgery. Karl phoned Cal Knight’s residence to inform them of the shooting before they heard it on breaking news.

The police questioned a shaken Larkin, who had nothing to offer. He had scrambled under the parked vehicle before seeing anything. The shot originated across the street from the hall. The escape vehicle, a dark sedan, disappeared unidentified.

Cal Knight arrived at the hospital. He signaled discreetly to Larkin who imperceptibly acknowledged his recognition.

Karl spoke to the emergency doctor who treated his friend. “Not a serious injury,” the bespectacled, white-coated surgeon assured the younger man. “I put in five or six internal sutures and about ten on the outside. The arm will be sore and he will have to wear it up in a sling for a few weeks. We will keep him here tonight for observation; he’s not a kid anymore.”

The physician then helped Larkin to slip away through a side exit, avoiding the reception area buzzing with reporters. From his vehicle, Cal Knight hailed Karl and the two escaped the hospital parking lot undetected.

“A close call?” Knight asked.

Larkin studied the driver in the dim glow cast by the street lights. "I'm not so sure that it was an assassination attempt...."

Knight smiled dourly, "Well, no one was killed, that's the main thing."

The media exploded with double headline news: 'Consumers' Advocate Campaign Manager Shot'; 'Larkin Attacks Feds On Unfair Taxing'. The fact that Larkin could not be reached for comment increased the clamor. Had the orator gone into hiding? Were the feds responsible for the attack? Conjecture and surmise filled the void.

Dave Colburn, on release from the hospital, cheerfully responded to the dozen reporters and camera crews jockeying for position.

"At this time," the publicity man announced, "we have no information regarding who is responsible for the vicious assault of last evening. Obviously, my colleague was the intended victim of an assassination attempt. The Consumers' Advocate is requesting a complete investigation and also demanding police protection for our campaign."

A short reporter in a long coat squeezed forward. With a self-important air, he challenged, "Last night, you indicated that this is not the first attempt on Mr. Larkin's life. Could you expand on that please?"

Colburn briefly sketched the pursuit incident along the highway between Toronto and Ottawa. He did not give correct dates and made no mention of a third vehicle.

"Threats have been made, two attacks have failed. It is time for our law enforcement people to provide security for our citizens. If Larkin were a

## Watershed

political figure, *the army* would have been called in before this.”

The agent could not escape the throng of media when he exited the hospital. A parade of vehicles followed his taxi. Colburn went to a hotel, booked in to a room and again faced the horde in the lobby. “Ladies and gentlemen, I cannot help you with the whereabouts of Mr. Larkin. Now, please, I have a bullet hole in my arm and I need rest.”

This did not deter the more avid of the paparazzi, but Colburn was able to elude them later in the afternoon. Through previous arrangement the campaign manager resurfaced at a residence where Larkin and Sheena had hurriedly been relocated. Cal Knight, for the time being, had vanished but the media had not.

Larkin waited at the door as Dave, with his left arm slung up near his chin, strutted brazenly down the walk. Colburn’s taxi pulled away as a blue and white patrol car slowly idled past the house. Several occupied vehicles were parked along the street; two more cars rolled by with the drivers craning their necks for a look at the residence.

“Looks like we have company!” the agent grinned. “I took great pains to escape from the reporters and here they are ahead of me.”

“Sheena and I had a police escort for the last few blocks, I don’t know who tipped them off.”

Colburn winked, “I told you the boys in blue would come to your rescue.”

Larkin did not share the humor. “They have brought the entire press along too. Come in before we are shot down by all those cameras.”

Once inside and the door closed behind them, Sheena and Karl unloaded their frustration on the

injured Colburn. "Damn it, Dave, how could you attempt such a foolish stunt? You could just as easily have been killed!"

Colburn shrugged then winced from the pain. "I didn't overestimate the ability of my man, now don't you kids underestimate me. It will be awhile before the feds direct anymore attention your way, Karl. You're as free as a bird while those boys out there," he indicated with a jerked thumb, "are keeping an eye on you. When the security is pulled off we will know orders have come down from higher up; then we'll start to worry."

Larkin ushered his friend into the spartan sitting room and poured three drinks. "How's the shoulder today? he asked.

Colburn grimaced. "Stings like hell when I move it. I've had worse though."

Sheena said, "You've had worse bullet wounds?"

"Yeah, it's said that trouble comes in threes. I always wondered when I'd take the third hit."

Larkin, his hand shaking, passed the drink to the campaign manager. "Here, take this before I spill it. You've been shot *twice* before?"

"A North Korean nicked me during the war and I took a slug in the leg when we were doing a contract for that mining outfit I told you about."

Larkin stared at his partner, "There is more to Dave Colburn than I would have guessed."

The promoter simply raised his glass and said, "Well, here's to us; may there be no more bullet holes."

"To us!" Karl and Sheena echoed.

Colburn looked around, "Decent little place you have here."

## Watershed

"I'm a hostage again," Sheena groaned. "This caged life is wearing me down. I'm wasting away."

Larkin said, "You don't look wasted away to me."

Colburn sipped the liquor then smacked his lips. "Boy, the country is humming today. Your tax war has really stirred the pot. Even the taxi driver was bouncing with excitement."

Sheena flicked on the television and switched through the channels. Colburn and Larkin, hearing her gasp of astonishment, focused on the screen: A reporter standing in front of a small house was telling the world that Karl Larkin was taking refuge here!

"I'd like to open the curtain and hang a moon," Larkin said.

"Let's go out for lunch," said Colburn. "No reason to stay cooped up where everyone knows we are anyway. We can be assured of plenty of company, so less chance of danger. Besides, I am hungry, and," he winked at Sheena, "we don't have to live like hostages."

Larkin backed Colburn's high performance automobile from the single car garage. The trio proceeded along the snowy street with a parade of vehicles in tow. Upon their arrival at the selected restaurant, Colburn and his guests were seated in a semi private booth and treated to matchless hospitality and service. One overzealous reporter retreated when Larkin gently insisted upon privacy, promising a brief conference after lunch. While the injured Colburn sputtered and fumed, Sheena carved his dinner into bite sized pieces.

As promised, Larkin delivered a short speech then fielded another torrent of questions: "No, the



police have made no arrests. Yes, the Consumers' Advocate intends to request a repeal of the recent increases in taxes, unemployment insurance premiums and pension plan contributions. Yes, we believe the department of finance will cooperate. Governments are, after all, the voice of the people."

The short reporter, wearing the long coat, who had challenged Colburn earlier asked haughtily, "Why should parliament pay heed to The Advocate? They are the ones running this country."

Larkin fixed the man with a steady gaze that made him shrivel. "The Consumers' Advocate does not make demands; it is the medium by which Canadians have their say. Arguably, politicians are people too, and while they may feel safe on a united front on Parliament Hill, each of them has a constituency he or she must return to. If an elected official fails to do the bidding of the constituents, that member loses the confidence of the people. Today, that confidence is not to be taken lightly.

"All levels of government in Canada must hear and address the demands of the people. Voters will no longer be forgotten or ignored until the next election campaign. Elected officials will *represent* the electorate... or... be replaced."

Karl begged away from the press. Rejoining his friends, they vacated the dining establishment and motored back to their temporary quarters. The parade of vehicles followed. A uniformed police officer escorted the trio into the residence, cautioning reporters to remain at an acceptable distance.

Once safe inside and free of eaves droppers Colburn exclaimed, "That mini presentation to the

## Watershed

media was just perfect, Karl. We'll keep throwing tidbits for now, but soon I will land a really large scale presentation."

"How large is large scale?" Sheena asked.

"The most!" Dave blurted. "National coverage, throngs in attendance... the coup de grace!"

Larkin laughed. "Assuming we are still in one piece at that time, how will we preserve our hides afterward?"

Colburn did not return Karl's levity. "If you are still alive then, my friend, there won't be anything to worry about afterward."

*The attempted assassination of Karl Larkin disturbed Jamie Langston; the janitor felt a sense of propriety toward the orator. The drive-by shooting had, in Langston's opinion, been a bungled, hurried waste of time. The sniper must have been quite novice; he didn't even shoot the right person! However, there had been no opportunities to allow Jamie to make acquaintance either. Patience strained its leash, the next attempt may be successful and all the work put into the Larkin collection would have been for naught.*

*A possible solution came when Jamie learned that news media were aware of Larkin's address. It wouldn't be difficult to track down the famous man; Jamie had to act quickly before another killer got there first.*

*Patrol cars made regular circuits past the house where Larkin and his colleagues had taken refuge. News media hung around like ravens on a roadkill. No one paid any attention to the kid*

C. C. Phillips

*trudging along the dirty, sloppy snow-laden  
sidewalk lugging a violin case.*



## Chapter 20

In one of the cocktail lounges of a large hotel near the Parliament buildings in Ottawa, a gray haired man in military garb sat alone, in brooding silence, over a half finished drink. He was oblivious to all around him though he had spent a lifetime on the alert. A low but clear voice reached his ears through the dull throb of conversation in the room.

“Colonel Gabriel Waters.” It was not a question.

The military man stiffened. Turning slowly, he flashed a brief smile of recognition.

“How are you, Cal?” the soldier asked, grasping the proffered hand.

“I’m doing alright, Gabe. Age is catching up... can’t seem to stop that.”

Cal Knight took a chair at the Colonel’s table and called to the barkeep, “I’ll have a scotch and bring another for my friend here.”

“How about you, Colonel? Still in the service, I see.”

“Yes.” The military man shook his head. “I

## Watershed

almost retired, then Jenny got ill... I had nothing left but my career."

"Emma and I heard about Jenny's passing. I'm sorry Gabe."

The drinks arrived and Knight raised his glass, "A lot of scotch over the rocks since last we met, my old campaign partner. It is good to see you again."

"Salute," Colonel Waters rejoined.

They silently studied each other as memories of years ago came flooding back.

"I have followed your career, Gabe, you've served our country and the United Nations well. I have read between the lines here and there at times though. Not all of your escapades made the front page. And, in recent years, you've been involved in highly confidential operations."

The Colonel's raised eyebrows and inquisitive stare prompted Knight to continue. "When we came home —you, me, Colburn and the others— we all tried our hand at one thing or another. But I knew *you* had it in your blood; there could be no civilian future for Gabriel Waters. When you signed up again, I wondered if I should, too. Because I often wondered how my own life would be had I remained in the service, I kept an active interest in your career. In fact," Cal chuckled, "it became a hobby. Gabe, I know more about you than you remember about yourself!"

The aging Colonel grinned, "I don't know whether to be flattered or resentful. But you Cal, you've been quite successful in your profession, unless things have changed since we last met."

"No, it turned out well for us, I'm retired; have been for... eight years, I guess."

Waters sighed, "I am not surprised that my

military escapades are common knowledge. Nothing is secret these days.” The military man paused. “You didn’t find me here by chance, did you, Cal?”

Knight smiled now. “Still the terrier, sniffing out a rat. No, Gabe, I am here to see you and I think it is urgent that we talk... somewhere more private than this.”

The Colonel studied his military comrade. “Let me buy another round for auld lang syne. Hopefully your business is not so pressing that it can’t hold for a shot of the highlands.”

Dave Colburn traveled long distances from the temporary home and never used the same public phone twice as he set the stage for what he hoped would be Larkin’s greatest oratory achievement. Constantly followed by security forces and plagued with reporters, the publicity man handled the grim situation very well. In fact, the realization occurred that he actually enjoyed the limelight. During a brief phone conversation, Cal Knight dropped a bomb on the warm feeling of security in which Colburn’s group temporarily basked.

“Dave, the car that tried to run you down out on the highway that night... the Colonel says it had nothing to do with him or the military. I had looked into it before talking with Gabe. I couldn’t make a connection but I still don’t have all the information.”

Colburn inhaled and expelled the breath in a long sigh. “Yes. I thought perhaps the move came too soon for upper security.”

Cal Knight asked, “Have you any other ideas? Is there someone else we should be watching?”

Colburn answered with another question.

## Watershed

“How much is Gabe willing to expose? If he’ll talk, find out if Graham Neon ever attended any of the Colonel’s meetings. Neon probably harbors a personal grudge for Karl and may be arrogant enough to try something through his own channels.”

“Gabe doesn’t like his position in this, at all. However, a military man must follow orders. He is in a tight security situation as well, you know. He has agreed to meet again, though. I shall quiz him about Neon then.”

Colburn gently replaced the receiver of the public phone after saying, “See what you can uncover, Cal. I will give you another shout later.”

Upon returning to their dwelling, the campaign manager informed his companions about Cal Knight’s discovery.

“Have you any idea who else wants your hide?” he asked a shocked Karl Larkin.

Sheena exclaimed, “Who *doesn’t* want his hide? God! How are we ever going to live through this? Where does it end?” Frustrated, she stomped out of the room.

Larkin gazed miserably at his partner. “Dave, I haven’t a clue who might be after me. I believed my friends outnumbered my enemies, but, in the truest sense of the word, you two are my only friends.”

Colburn said, “In the truest sense of the word, you don’t have many *enemies* either, Karl. Now quit the self pity and try to think of a person or persons who may want you dead. We will have a much better chance of protecting you if we know where the attack is originating.”

Sheena returned to the room, looking chagrined. “I’m sorry Karl, I should be past the age of throwing tantrums.”



Karl slipped his arm around her and drew her close. To Colburn he said, "Dave, I don't know who is out to get me."

Sheena said, "Maybe Emory Stanton is plotting to kill you. He burned your house."

Larkin shrugged off this theory. "Surely he wouldn't commit murder. Besides, Emory would wait 'til I was back in Chesterton rather than traveling two thousand miles to do something that could be done at home."

Colburn said, "We can check it out real quick anyway. I don't care if this place is bugged, we'll call the Chesterton detachment and make a few inquiries."

Karl paced the floor nervously while Colburn placed the call from another room. Soon the agent returned, his visage grave.

"Emory Stanton didn't try to run us off the road: He hanged himself last Friday."

News of the car dealer's death further plummeted Larkin's depressed spirit. Another man had died. Karl tried to convince himself that he had not set the noose for Emory Stanton's demise. The man displayed a tendency toward insanity whenever his alter-ego was revealed; maybe the suicide was inevitable. The orator could not, however, dispel the haunting feeling of guilt.

Two days after the report of Stanton's suicide, Dave Colburn returned from one of his many forays into public domain. "We're bringing it all together," he said proudly. "The *big* stage is set, my boy! You will address the nation; forty thousand attendees, millions via television and radio!"

"Forty thousand! What venue?" Sheena

## Watershed

asked.

“The brand new dome, Patterson Place, right here in Toronto. It’s the only indoor stadium large enough.”

“This is the grand finale you’ve been so secretive about?” Karl asked.

The campaign manager clapped his uninjured arm around Larkin’s shoulders in an avuncular hug. “Stay alive for two more weeks and we will have the nation, politicians and all, eating from our hands.”

Larkin said, “I never wanted everyone eating out of my hand, I just want them to have *enough to eat!*”

The agent was not to be denied his moment. “This is the opportunity I’ve been planning for. It’s the last hurrah, the great crescendo!”

As Colburn laid out his vision of the address Larkin would give, Karl’s eyes grew wide with astonishment. “Dave, do you intend to write my speech as well? I have never seen you so enthusiastic toward this part of the campaign. Why the sudden change?”

The public relations man sucked in a deep breath and expelled it slowly. Sheena and Karl, recognizing the symptoms, braced themselves for a lecture.

“About six months ago, I realized that we had all the coin, plus a little, that a man might ever need. At that time I tried to convince you to abandon this crusade. Our motivations obviously differed. As the campaign rolled on, The Consumers’ Advocate became more and more controversial. Consequently, danger grew—you may recall Karl, *I predicted that*—and at the same time I began to understand you and realize your ambitions. Today,

Karl, I want everything that you have fought for. That big bright neon dollar sign flashing in mind pushed me for forty years and all at once I realized that that particular ambition was not for me at all.”

Karl silently absorbed his companion’s sincere confession. At length he spoke. “I am not surprised to hear this from you, Dave. We have all changed more than any of us realizes through our tribulations. I am proud of the strength and selflessness you have shown. Without you, I would have quit. And,” he added, “frankly, now *I* would like to take the money and run.”

*“Detective Giroux, Line two....”*

*The phone had been ringing all morning. Stéphane grabbed the annoyance, “Detective Giroux.” he growled.*

*“Having a rough day, dear?”*

*“Sorry, Iris, this phone is driving me nuts today —everybody and his dog are gearing up for this Consumer Advocate production— not me directly, but there is so much going on. Anyway, it’s really nice to hear from you. What’s up?”*

*“Maybe nothing, I’ve been cross referencing addresses from the pile here: I found that Elizabeth Van der Weist lived on the same block, possibly next door, to one Jamie Langston, a school mate of Adrian Quennell. Can I be any more obscure than that?”*

*Giroux groaned. “That’s beyond obscure and out the other side. Give me the information, I’ll check it out. Maybe I can interview a former student or two just to see if there was anything peculiar back then.”*

*Iris recited what she had found, then added,*

## Watershed

*"I'll keep reading through this stuff in my spare moments. One thing about your cold cases, time isn't critical."*

*The detective was silent a moment, then said, "I have a really bad feeling about this Advocate deal. It could be an opportunity for half a dozen psychotic killers to make a bid for the limelight."*

*The telephone directory had a long list of Langstons and, though no Jamie Langston was entered, a Langston was still listed at the address Iris had given. Rather than call, Stéphane Giroux decided to leave the office and do a little leg work; he had had enough telephone conversation for one day. He drove to Mississauga to check out the house numbers his wife had given him. Iris's information had revealed that Elizabeth Van der Weist had lived there for eighteen years, from babe to adult. After their daughter's death, Van der Weist's parents had sold the house and moved to Scarborough. The student, Jamie Langston, had resided two houses down from the bungalow that had been the late candidate's home. Giroux checked the house number and read The Langstons on a small wooden plaque. No one answered the ring of the doorbell. However, the place appeared to be recently occupied: no excess mail bundles peeked out of the box, the walk had been shoveled this morning.*

*It had been a long shot anyway....*

*Giroux slowed his car as he passed through a school zone. He read the name: Danial McAllister High. On impulse, the detective wheeled over to the curb and parked. A host of ubiquitous sounds, odors and sights greeted him as he entered through the double doored entrance; schools, rocks and*

*petrified wood, they don't change noticeably. Stéphane walked past several classrooms, their doors slightly ajar, and came to the administration office, its door wide open. A bespectacled secretary, hunched in a sturdy oaken swivel chair, looked up accusingly when he walked in. Her fine gray hair was pinned back behind her head in a tight knot. Set in a thin hawkish face, her dark beady eyes peered through wire rimmed glasses; her bony frame showed under a coral cotton blouse. A silk scarf of a lighter colour and fastened with a rose coloured brooch was draped around a scrawny neck and her blue veined hands with unadorned fingers protruded from the sleeves of the blouse; Ms. B. Beasley (students pronounced it Beastly) was stamped in bold letters on the name plate. Just the person Giroux had wanted to meet; the secretary had been here as long as the school.*

*Stéphane held up his badge and announced, "Detective Stéphane Giroux, I have a few questions to do with students from the late sixties, mid-seventies. Is there anyone employed here who may have been around six to fourteen years ago?"*

*The lady drew herself up, her voice held no surprises as she croaked, "I've been here thirty-two years, officer. What would you like to know?"*

*What Stéphane learned was that Ms. Beasley, though frail in body, had a fair memory. She recalled Adrian Quennell, though he had only attended Danial McAllister for two years. He had been an imbecile, completely lacking in academia. The track and field coach and the sport coaches loved him. Except for the the coaching staff, Quennell had been a fly in everyone's ointment.*

## Watershed

*Teachers and students alike had been happy to hear that the troublesome jock was leaving. Elizabeth Van der Weist, on the other hand, had been the very embodiment of the model student. Valedictorian in 1969, athletic, smart and beautiful, Liz had pleased coaches and teachers. Everyone wanted to be her friend, she had no enemies.*

*Ms. Beasley could not be persuaded to abandon the Elizabeth Van der Weist topic though Giroux tried twice to interrupt. The secretary simply shrugged her thin shoulders, she could not recall the Langston boy. "But Elizabeth, now, when she was murdered, the police came to the school and asked questions then, too. It was so terrible...."*

*People remember the really bad and the really good. No one remarks mediocrity. The detective decided to knock-off early, the telephone in his office would be hot from the bells ringing to no answer.*

Strategy demanded that Larkin and his friends change location. Sheena remained with Karl; her managerial position at the television station in Riverside seemed of small importance now. The bleak rented house where the couple hastily moved the night of Colburn's shooting, yielded to the spacious luxury of a penthouse suite in Toronto's downtown core. Unless the press were to rent helicopters, they would be unable to keep the orator under constant surveillance. Security remained priority —Knight's people were never far away— but tension ebbed and tone lightened among the founders of The Consumers' Advocate. Though the provenience be no less significant, fear and

trepidation, like winter, eventually lose their edge. Given sufficient space and time, human nature will laugh at anything.

Sheena, Karl and Colburn laughed at the hype and propaganda in the news as media sensationalized the scheduled oration. An alert journalist christened the event a “Watershed”. The word quickly became the catchphrase and every reporter with a pen or microphone ran with it. Colburn loved the free advertising. Larkin prepared, rehearsed his address; something he had not done since the first meeting in Chesterton.

Late one evening, shortly after the move to the new suite, Sheena and Karl were viewing a newscast –Watershed the headline story– when Colburn buzzed the intercom. Larkin opened the electronic security door and the agent followed his puffed-out chest into the room.

“We’ve identified the road runners and their collaborators,” he said.

“Road runners?” Sheena and Karl echoed.

“The hired driver and his cohort that tried to run us off the road.”

“Who are... *were*... they?” Karl asked..

“Cal Knight and the lads did a little digging, actually *a lot* of digging: Ralph Neon and his Deputy Finance Minister, Jules Lefebvre, have been up to serious shenanigans. They paid two small time thugs to run us off the road.”

“The Minister of Finance.” Sheena said. “Have they been arrested?”

Colburn grinned malevolently. “The police have not been informed as yet. We are waiting for a more opportune time.”

He continued, “You have no worry about them

## Watershed

from now on. Those boys have their tails in a crack and are sitting pretty tight.”

Larkin shook his head in awe, “How do your ‘friends’ unearth this information?”

*To Jamie’s dismay, outdoors in wintertime posed a new set of problems: there was no proper location, no position that allowed for either a quick undetected escape or a place warm enough to exercise the infinite patience the sniper possessed (shivers and frozen fingers do not aide marksmanship). The orator and entourage moved out of the house before Lion Eyes could establish the perfect location. They moved into a high-rise that left Langston no opportunity. On the other hand, the shooter reasoned, if they were safe from Jamie Langston, they were safe from interlopers as well.*

*And then the media began spewing the phrase of the month: “Watershed”. Fever glowed in the yellow-orange eyes: Jamie Langston and Karl Larkin; centre stage, Patterson Place.*

*During its construction, Patterson Place had fascinated the custodian. News reports said the titanic enclosed stadium would accommodate forty thousand spectators. Langston was among the throngs who visited the edifice on its gala grand opening and was blown away by the vastness of the interior; it left one feeling insignificant, like an amoeba on a cow pie.*

*Now Jamie would have the opportunity to participate in the most controversial event the new arena may ever host.*

*With less than two weeks to go, Langston wangled a custodial position at the massive complex. Working regular hours, the strange-eyed*



*janitor put in extra time seeking out a seating arrangement for a proper welcoming and send-off for Karl Larkin. High up, among a confusion of conduits, cables, ventilation and ductwork, Jamie nimbly scampered over the catwalks and through the maze of steel girders and cross beams supporting the massive roof structure. Far below, at ground level, lay the open area of the arena and in between, all around the circumference of the complex, tier upon tier of seating. Where would Jamie sit?*



## Chapter 21

*“Detective Giroux, Line three.”*

*“Giroux.”*

*“Yes... are you the officer who visited Danial McAllister High School last Tuesday?” a thin voice quavered.*

*“Yes, I am. Is this Ms. Beasley?”*

*“Yes, I just wanted to let you know that I have recalled the Langston child. Jamie was one of Adrian Quennell’s favourite marks during his tenure at our school. Mind you, Jamie wasn’t exactly Elizabeth Van der Weist either...”*

*Giroux listened patiently to another spiel about the valedictorian of 1969 then graciously thanked Ms. Beasley.*

*Stéphane hung up the phone and stared at it a moment. Maybe he now had a suspect with a motive for killing the Philadelphia goaltender. And this guy had lived two doors down from Van der Weist. It definitely required further investigation.*

*There was no response at the Langston residence in Mississauga, however, three out of four*

## Watershed

*J. Langstons listed in the directory did answer their phones: None of them had attended Danial McAllister High School and therefore were not interested in a class reunion.*

*Giroux tried the fourth J. Langston number off and on throughout the day but received no answer. J. Langston's address was not far out of the way for the detective when he headed home at five o'clock. Stéphane decided to pay a visit. He fought the rush hour traffic and fumed. Time seemed to be closing in and he could not fathom why. This was the day of the Consumer Advocate presentation at Patterson Place. Maybe Stéphane's subconscious had been feeding him adrenalin.*

*Pay attention to your instincts.*

*The detective parked in a vacant stall at the apartment complex parking lot. The building was running to disrepair in a neighbourhood that needed a face-lift. No page system governed entry, the normally locked entrance door was held ajar by a rolled up newspaper. Giroux strolled in and sorted out the numbering system. A mail box having the name 'Jamie Langston' and '3B' stencilled on it let the detective know he at least had the 'Jamie' part correct. The entire building held an eerie, spooky aura. The officer followed along the untidy and dimly lit hallway until he came to a door bearing the alphanumeric 3B.*

*As he was about to rap, Stéphane heard the ring of a telephone and waited to see if someone answered. After five rings the caller gave up; it gave the detective an excuse not to knock thereby alerting adjacent tenants. He looked furtively up and down the narrow hallway, picked the lock and let himself in...*

*Karl Larkin!*

*A full-size poster of the Consumers' Advocate stared at Stéphane from across the room. It was the same picture as those found in the subway stations. The detective stepped inside the suite and closed the door behind him. More photographs, news clippings and another, smaller poster, adorned the walls. Magazines with pieces cut out and a pair of scissors lay on a squat but sturdy coffee table. Giroux reached inside his coat and loosened the stubby .38 revolver in its shoulder holster; This place gave him the creeps.*

*He continued his investigation. The room, other than the mess of magazines and paper trimmings, was exceptionally neat and spotless in contrast to the entrance and hallways of the building. Giroux studied a no-longer-new photograph on a lamp table: "Harley; Jamie; Emma; Langston 1973." Something distantly familiar caused him to make a closer examination. The kid in the middle stared at the camera with an intensity as to bore a hole in the lens. Stéphane brought the picture closer then held it farther back; the eyes were orange! He had seen this kid on the subway a year or two ago. Stéphane replaced the picture on the stand and thought back... The kid had been holding something in his hands when on the train... a violin case. Giroux whistled. It wasn't a violin in the case!*

*Feverishly, Stéphane searched the rest of the apartment. The violin case was not there. In a linen closet the detective found three scrapbooks neatly stacked on a shelf. He flipped open the first, a thin book with only a few entries: "Student Drowns In Niagara Falls While On School Tour." Giroux*

## Watershed

*scanned the article but the name and incident meant nothing to him. He extracted the second and third books.*

*Bingo!*

*It was all there, right up to gruesome pictures and "The Bloody End" scrawled on the last page of each book.*

*An urgent call of Nature led Giroux to the lavatory. He received the surprise of his career upon entering the little bathroom.*

Watershed arrived.

The evening held a winter chill as Karl, Sheena and Dave emerged on the street below their highrise. Glancing skyward, Larkin wished with all his heart that he might penetrate the city's glowing haze to see the stars. How long since he had gazed up at a beautiful round full moon? A feeling of hopeless despair descended upon him as leaden feet carried him toward the sacrifice.

Cal Knight chauffeured the innocuous sedan which carried the orator and his friends to the massive domed sport complex; two security vehicles, one in front, the other behind, provided escort. Knight let his passengers off near a delivery entrance then parked the car inconspicuously about a hundred yards back from the building. The man of the hour was hustled inside.

The entourage had arrived one hour ahead of the scheduled presentation. Larkin detested the waiting. He perspired in spite of the moderate temperature inside the huge edifice. Sheena applied a touch of magic from a make up kit. The pallor was hidden but strain haunted the fevered gray eyes.

Colburn had disappeared but now returned.

Lines of worry creased his face, too. "It's filling up out there! You'll have a full house tonight, Karl."

Larkin was not thrilled. How many assassins were in the audience? Would he be allowed to speak or would he be gunned down at the first opportunity? Maybe he worried for nothing, after all, security personnel were here in droves. Could they be trusted? Larkin was walking on egg shells and he did not like the feel of it.

Colburn tried to ease the tension. "Just like Chesterton! Right, Karl?"

Cal Knight briskly entered, having checked with the security people near the dressing room. Echoing Colburn's words he smiled, "She's a full house, Karl, close to forty thousand... all waiting for you."

Larkin grinned tensely; in reference to the venue he said, "Do you think I can pitch a no-hitter?"

Karl shook hands with Colburn and Knight. He held Sheena close and kissed her warm red lips then turned abruptly and, with Larkin-like determination, strode out on to the curtained stage.

"God help me," he breathed....

*The portable red light on the unmarked squad car flashed brilliantly in the city twilight as Giroux frantically weaved through traffic en route to Patterson Place. He radioed Dispatch from his vehicle and asked to have the apartment sealed and officers posted to nab Langston if the sniper returned. He also demanded to talk with his captain. Captain Tooley called back in seconds and Giroux informed him that he feared an assassination attempt on Karl Larkin tonight. Tooley sputtered,*

## Watershed

*“Every available man is already at Patters...”*

*The radio went dead.*

*Stéphane couldn't tell if he was transmitting or not; definitely, the receive side had crashed. Driving with one hand, he switched through the channels, clobbered the mike on the dash and let go a string of French expletives, but no further communication came his way. He wheeled the car into the reserved parking at the side of the domed complex, leaped from the vehicle and, alternately shouting “police, coming through” and “excusez-moi” elbowed his way through the line-up to the entrance doors. There were throngs of people inside, too. Flashing his badge to the gate and security people, Giroux desperately scanned the gigantic foyer for colleagues. No one in G-TAP Blue appeared nor did he see any plainclothes officers; there could have been fifty of them buried in this crowd.*

*On the coffee table in Langston's suite, Stéphane had found a crude diagram of the stadium. He had quickly pocketed the drawing along with several other pages he felt may be pertinent. Now, finding a space to stand back of the wave of humanity, the detective retrieved the documents and studied them in more detail. There was a small inset depicting ductwork and ventilation; measurements were indicated; estimated distance (in yards) to centre stage and a list of tools required. The podium for the presentation would be at the opposite end of the building from the entrance. Though the distances were marked, there were sixteen possibilities. Which one had the killer chosen? Which side of the stadium?*

*The officer had to be inside the arena and he*



*needed to be able to see high up into the domed roof.*

*Across the foyer, free of the commoners, an entourage of dignitaries filed along a stairwell leading, Stéphane presumed, to the VIP boxes. The detective recognized his lordship, the mayor of Toronto. Mayor Sangell held his wife's hand in his left and in his right he carried a small pair of opera glasses.*

*Giroux did not hesitate. Holding the badge above his head he plowed through the crowd and took the stairs, two steps at a time, in pursuit of the mayor. Hearing the officer's shouts, the party stopped and stared bemusedly as the badge waving plainclothesman hustled up. If Mayor Sangell recognized Giroux as the troublemaker he had suspended last summer, he gave no indication, however, an air of impatience flashed across the politically smiling countenance.*

*Stéphane stated authoritatively, "A matter of direst emergency your lordship, I must commandeer your opera glasses."*

*Another flash, more than impatience, flickered in the hard eyes, but the mayor simply said, "Of course," and handed the tiny optics to the officer.*

*Instead of descending the stair, Giroux stepped past the mayor's clique and disappeared through a service door on the second level.*

*The door allowed Detective Giroux a full view of the capacious arena in front, above and below him. Few people had gathered in the immediate area, but they were steadily filing along the tiers of seats. He estimated the building was already at three quarters capacity.*

*The detective stopped to catch his breath and*

## Watershed

*study the drawing again. He tried to put himself in the killer's position: the shooter would need a clear view of the stage or at least that portion where the speaker would be standing; the shooter had to slip into position undetected and stay concealed during the operation; there had to be room to semi-comfortably fit a person and a rifle; there had to be a quick and accessible escape route... or did there? When Langston —Giroux was convinced it was Jamie Langston— killed Elizabeth Van der Weist, the sniper had stayed in a tree for at least fourteen hours; maybe this attempt would be the same? No, the idea seemed too unlikely; police would cross-sectionalize and fragment the area to narrow down the origin of the bullet and then search every square inch of the zone. Not even a fingerprint would be hidden from them. That is how they knew where the killer had been positioned for the Quennell murder. But on that occasion there had been no fingerprints, just a minute powder residue from the muzzle blast.*

*Still, Giroux reasoned, this particular assassin was a cool customer, taking calculated risks no ordinary murderer would consider. Perhaps Langston was of the group of insane killers who craved notoriety, one of those who wanted to be caught.*

*Stéphane focused the tiny binoculars; Mayor Sangell had an eye for quality in optics. As he scanned the ceiling and girders, the officer did not expect to see an orange-eyed monkey scampering along the beams, but he scoped the layout taking in every detail with the same assiduity he exercised when studying people. Of the sixteen places Langston had marked on the diagram, Giroux could eliminate six; two more were unlikely; the*

*remaining eight were suitable. The range, for an expert marksman, was immaterial anywhere in the building. The eight options were evenly split, four along either side. Giroux had to find the right one before Karl Larkin was shot. If, and it was a considerable if, the sniper was even in the building tonight. No doubt Langston had been planning the hit, but that did not mean it was a definite go. Not definite enough for Giroux to insist the orator be kept off stage; maybe not even definite enough to abscond with the mayor's opera glasses.*

*The rifle would be pointed toward the stage, therefore, Giroux had to be in a position to look down the business end of the barrel. He made his way to ground level and proceeded along the aisles bustling with jostling spectators, many of them carrying their coats and sporting KARL LARKIN FOR PRIME MINISTER tee shirts. It would be impossible to focus the glasses while standing among this moving throng.*

*He saw no fellow officers. People were still scrambling to their seats when the lights dimmed and the speaker appeared on stage. Giroux had managed to scan two of the positions but he now realized that he would have to be several tiers higher in order to see far enough into the cavities.*

The orator stepped to the podium. A chain of microphones bristled in an arc across the front and Karl noted that the logo of the national news cast was stamped on one of them; the feds must have repealed their ban on Consumers' Advocate coverage. Larkin took a sip of ice water, wondered if it had been laced with something lethal, and, for

## Watershed

the hundredth time, arranged his 'cheat' notes. Ready or not, he signaled the waiting stagehand. Stage lighting dimmed as the curtains were drawn open. A spotlight centered on the orator as the stage director announced above the din of applause, "The Consumers' Advocate, ladies and gentlemen; MR. KARL LARKIN!"

"Good evening, Canada!" the orator boomed.

The exuberant crowd were on their feet

"I never dreamed of being here tonight. In fact, in light of recent events I am indeed surprised to be *here* at all! I sincerely appreciate your attendance and your applause...."

The acoustics of the dome were surprisingly efficient, the softest whisper, amplified over state of the art electronics, reached every ear in the theater. Television cameras, radio equipment, transmitters, and antennas delivered the address across Canada. The entire population held audience.

The speaker suppressed anxiety, ignored fear and shuffled doubts aside as the magic voice burst forth to stimulate and capture the minds of a nation:

"Through the co-operation of *twenty-five million* people in this great country, we have made stupendous strides in proving that consumers are in charge. I applaud each and every one of you who have made those selfless sacrifices that have placed us on the top. By suppressing our own rapacity, we are moving forward at an unbelievable pace. We are winning!"

"Machiavellian moguls may no longer mislead our citizens. We are not to be duped by fabricated rumor within the market place. At the risk of repetition, I urge you again to recall the great

famines in our recent past: Remember the sugar shortage, coffee and cocoa scarcities, and, of course, the infamous energy crisis? Did anyone arrive here tonight in a fossil fueled vehicle?

“As consumers, we have the power to question these fabricated shortages which so effectively create the desired result: panic buying. If, suddenly, it is announced that there is a shortage of, let’s say... porridge, we won’t rush to the store to pay an exorbitant price for every package of oatmeal available. We will eat corn flakes until oatmeal is priced right.”

A quaver of stern resentment insinuated its way into the recital.

“The price of oatmeal porridge is not curtailing the advancement of our economy at this juncture. The Consumers’ Advocate has constantly striven to sustain employment for those who will work and encouraged those who won’t work to change their habits. A slap-in-the-face has come to wage earners and employers in the form of an increase in Unemployment Insurance premiums. Does anyone believe the increase is an incentive to hire? To work? *I believe*, if anything, there should be incentive, not penalty, for people willing to work and for employers wishing to hire.”

Larkin paused; the thrill had returned. He did not anxiously scan the crowd for assassins, snipers waiting to cut him down. Here, at the podium, is where Karl Larkin belonged. Here, he was invincible.

*In spite of the urgency, Giroux had to pause and listen to the speaker. The voice was to hearing as French wine is to taste. The man was not an*

## Watershed

*orator, he was a narcotic. The detective glanced around: the entire audience seemed entranced.*

*Moving up several rows, Stéphane sat on the cement landing to steady himself and again searched the ceiling. The near alcove revealed nothing, if he shifted slightly right or left he could see back into the two ducts previously checked. Nothing moved or looked out of place.*

The golden tongue continued. “While on this subject of employment, I’d like to recite a brief anecdote: Three or four years back, a couple friends and I were moving an old up-right piano. It was heavy. One of the lads, Ron, was a tall muscular chap; he took one end of the piano while the other fellow and myself carried the opposite end. I thought things were going along pretty good, but Ron called back; “Hey, I don’t mind you guys catching a ride, but do you have to drag your feet?””

Laughter rippled across the nation.

“Are you catching a ride? Are you dragging your feet? The disgrace is far greater to have able-bodied, healthy individuals *who won’t work* than for those unfortunates who desire employment and can not find it. The burden of those unwilling to work—the individuals who are dragging their feet—should not rest upon the backs of the employed. I strongly believe in employment insurance; it is a necessary tool for the working man, but there must be no incentive for parasitism!

“Now, just as the nation stands poised to enter a new and profitable future, we are slapped with an added burden of increased taxes. Taxing will not stimulate the economy! Removing the moneys from

the hands of citizens to satisfy more government spending is inexcusable; racketeering at the highest level! Read the deductions on a pay stub; the average Canadian does not work for a dollar in their own pocket until June of each year. Does that make sense to you? Who are we working for for the first six months? Industrial nations thrive through the efforts of industrious people. We must have reward and achievement; not penalty and disappointment.”

Applause rocked the stadium.

*“Three to go,” Giroux muttered aloud and mused that he would have looked the fool if he had been able to sound the alarm tonight. He put the glasses to his eyes again and searched above. He swung back to the far side previously visited. Something, an indiscernible lump, a vague shapeless shadow, materialized in the number three duct. Stéphane was certain it hadn’t been there before. And... another discrepancy: the grating had shifted! Stéphane climbed higher and worked his way back the way he had come. He paused every few steps to refocus on the duct...*

*A flicker of light, a reflection, then darkness. Something moved! Stéphane scaled the tiers and positioned himself behind a pillar. With binoculars focused on the duct the officer peered around the column; again he was thankful for the Mayor’s expensive taste in optics. Just enough light filtered into the darkness, Giroux fine tuned the focus.*

*Orange eyes stared back.*

*The detective scrambled up the next three levels, tried to avoid a huckster, but the man deliberately shifted, blocking Giroux’s passage. The vendor wore a broad metal tray, with a stainless*

## Watershed

*steel cover, belted across his midsection and held up by another strap around his neck. Stéphane read the banner across the front of the tray: T. Dibblachuk's Fine Ukrainian Sausage.*

*"Interest you in a fine sausage-in-a-bun, or a genuine 'Karl Larkin For Prime Minister' tee shirt, sir?" the man asked.*

*Stéphane tried to push past, but the hawker persisted, saying in a low voice, "How about extra cartridges for your .38, Detective Giroux?"*

*Giroux stopped short, took a second look and recognized the sausage salesman: Corporal Kowalski, a fellow member on the force. "There is a sniper up there!" Stéphane explained hurriedly. "Do you have a walkie talkie?"*

*In answer, the officer extracted the device from inside his candy cane striped jacket.*

*"Call in backup, have three or four go to the outside of the building and cover the vents. I think our shooter may have a plan to escape through one of the ventilator ducts on this side."*

*Stéphane stepped past the undercover man then turned back as a vision of Langston's apartment subliminally flashed through his mind. "Oh, Ski... the sniper is a woman."*

The gray eyes sparkled with excitement. Colburn had said, "We'll have them eating from our hands." The Voice was a high energy diet.

"We have the power to appeal that which we feel unwarranted. There is no need to simply accept and adapt. This is our nation, twenty-five million strong! We are the electorate, the elected must act on our behalf!"



The din reached a crescendo as forty thousand people came to their feet cheering enthusiastically. Larkin reached for the tumbler, stepped back from the podium and sipped the no longer iced water. This was his moment. He stood at the pinnacle of his career. A nation stood behind him, its future in his hands.

*The sniper listened to the oration. Granted, Karl Larkin had a magical talent for speaking, but the orator deserved nothing more than Jamie Langston did. Life had blessed Larkin with enchanting speech and given Jamie lion-eyes. That was not fair and it had to be rectified. The roar of the audience below simultaneously thrilled and angered the pint-sized custodian. Were they cheering for Larkin down on the stage or had they finally recognized Jamie Langston up here, at the top? Forty thousand people were rocking the building, applause and cheers drowned out all else. The crowd had come for a show; they wanted to see Lion Eyes in action.*

*The last of the cogs stripped away on Langston's brain gear....*

*The smooth, custom stock snuggled into place; the scent of fine gun oil assailed her nostrils; cross-hairs shifted, wavered, then centered rock-steady on Karl Larkin's forehead. It was a longer shot than on the goalie, but still, not difficult. Jamie paused, brushed back a lock of unruly hair and nestled back into shooting position. The trigger set moved, but she could not hear the minute snick above the noise of the crowd.*

*Detective Stéphane Giroux was able to move*

## Watershed

*quickly along the catwalk between girders, there was no worry of alerting the assassin, for the din in the building would mask the approach of a locomotive. He found the hidden entrance to the duct and cautiously peeped inside. About ten feet along the tunnel, Langston lay prone on the floor of the metal housing, rifle held in position. Giroux, snub-nosed .38 in hand, squeezed into the opening and clawed singlehanded toward the shooter. Stéphane watched in horror as the killer sighted through the scope. The detective brought up the pistol and his finger tightened on the trigger. Langston's head came up and a gloved hand brushed across her forehead. The brief movement gave Giroux time to shift in. As Jamie again sighted on the target, the detective shoved the hand-gun behind the sniper's ear.*

*"Don't shoot."*

*The Ruger spit a thin, silent, streak of orange flame out the end of the barrel.*

*Giroux's gun barked deafeningly inside the tin ductwork.*

*Stéphane could not see the orator from his position but, as the ringing of the blast died in his ears, he noted the continued applause had not changed pitch. Langston had missed.*

*Giroux had not.*

The orator was never to know that, as he moved to reach for the water glass, an assassin's bullet plucked several strands of hair from his head then continued on to pierce the stage backdrop and bury itself into the construction beyond. Neither did Karl see the rush of police and security personnel as

they converged on the area below the fatal ductwork. Among the thousands chanting "Larkin, Larkin, Larkin," a dozen such incidents could have transpired.

Larkin attempted to resume his exhortation three times before the vociferous crowd returned to order.

"Tonight, tomorrow and until reparation occurs, we *will insist* that our government repeals this most recent abomination. Constituents must hound their individual members of parliament, for they are the voices we have elected to speak for *us*. If we continue to be ignored, Canadians will withhold the tax tithe entirely. United, we have impunity, for who will be held responsible?

"Remember: This is our nation; it does not belong to an arcane clique sequestered within the halls and rooms on Parliament Hill. Politicians are the *you and I* that make up this magnificent country and I know our elected officials will respect and oblige the demands of Canadians for *they are us*."

Without announcement, Larkin terminated the colossal oration. He simply stepped away from the podium, bowed slightly and the curtains closed around him.

As the orator hastily exited the stage, the resounding applause of forty thousand erupted again. The roar continued to grow in volume, reverberating through the stadium from rafters to foundation. Larkin immediately encountered security personnel and his companions. Sheena glowed with excitement; Colburn glowered with apprehension. Karl swept the beautiful lady into his arms and held her close. "We're still alive."

The adrenalin rush ebbed; vulnerability

## Watershed

returned.

Dave swiftly hustled the young couple along the dimly lit passageway and back outside. Crisp winter air welcomed them. As two armed security guards escorted Larkin and his friends from the building to their awaiting vehicle, Cal Knight intercepted the group. He drew Colburn and the security people aside while Larkin and the girl hurried to the parked car. In the shadow of a support frame, Knight detained Colburn and the escort for several minutes animatedly discussing a late change in plans....

The explosion disintegrated the sedan.

A deafening blast radiated outward and upward, sweeping all in its path, leaving annihilation in its wake; missiles of debris hammered against the sturdy walls of the complex; a grotesque orange fireball, like nuclear holocaust, mushroomed skyward. Colburn instinctively raised his unhindered right arm to shield his face from the intense heat and brilliant light; Cal Knight was hurled backward against the wall of the complex; a piece of shrapnel buried itself in the thigh of a security guard who collapsed, writhing in agony, on the frozen pavement. Thick foul smoke descended, stinging eyes, burning nostrils and filling lungs.

Victims coughed and choked in agony. Eardrums bled and faces were blackened. In the immediate hush of the aftermath, pieces of flaming debris continued to cascade down out of the faded darkness hovering over the city.

“My God! My God!” Colburn screamed as he rushed to the bomb blasted wreckage.

But he was too late.

Nothing tangible remained of the vehicle or its

occupants. Charred scraps were scattered for a city block. Windows in the near side of the stadium were shattered. A blackened manhole cover, which must have been directly under the sedan, lay steaming beside the curb twenty feet away from its port.



## Chapter 22

A stricken nation reeled in shock from the horror and the implications surrounding the bombing. Thousands paid tribute at a memorial service held in Toronto. Dozens of cities, towns and villages, where Karl Larkin's golden speeches touched minds and hearts, staged their own memorial service. Chesterton, the orator's home and the birthplace of the Consumers' Advocate, made plans to erect an epitaph in memory of their famous son.

Three days following the brutal murder, Dave Colburn appeared briefly before a host of cameras and reporters. Pain and strain were evident in the haggard features. Lack of sleep had left deep, dark pools around the eyes; his face was drawn and tense. An old man.

The pigeon chest had deflated but the inner strength still burned as the campaigner spoke, "I am proud to say that Karl Larkin was my best friend. He loved his country and a greater patriot has never lived. The fiend that Larkin abhorred: corruption,

## Watershed

has brought about his end, but the legacy Karl left behind must not be allowed to die along with the man. The Consumers' Advocate cannot be inhumed. Consumers will carry on the campaign and see Karl's dream through to fruition. Together we shall deliver the Canada our friend so selflessly envisioned."

Cal Knight stepped forward and led Larkin's apostle away from the continuing battery of journalistic queries.

Later, in Cal and Emma Knight's home, Cal said, "This afternoon, in front of the press, you sounded convincing, Dave, but... *can you* fill Karl's shoes?"

"No. No one can do that. I intend to keep the wicket warm until we find a pseudo replacement."

Knight objected, "There may never be another voice...."

Colburn nodded solemnly, then slumped in silence a moment, before saying, "You know, I'm disappointed Karl did not get to launch his 'Buy Canadian' campaign. He had given me an outline; in typical Larkin fashion he wanted to promote Canadian made products while at the same time ensuring that our own companies did not cheat our own people."

The ex-promoter shook his head and gave a short laugh. "Karl told me the idea came to him while he was washing a frying-pan up at that cabin he and Sheena went to for a holiday. The pan reminded him of one he had at home. Apparently, Karl had spent triple on this top-of-the-line, Canadian made, guaranteed, no-stick unit, but it wasn't a damn bit better than the cheap models made



overseas.”

Tears welled in Dave’s eyes. “That’s how Larkin’s mind worked.”

Cal said softly, “I don’t know, Dave, even if you found a speaker *half* as good as Karl, you could never match the man he was.”

Colburn leaned ahead. “What the Advocate needs is a medium, a method of reaching everyone without sacrificing the messenger. Television, radio and newspapers were the tools Karl used and, along with his own magic, he used them extremely effectively. But those tools are one-way communication; in order to reach the masses forcefully they must be able to respond en masse—like a whole network of interactive communication—and it has to be quick....”

Knight changed topics, “The sniper, or rather, *sniperess*—it was a female—named Jamie Langston who shot at Karl during the address at Patterson Place apparently had no affiliation with anyone. She was a deranged attention-starved lunatic; had news clippings and pictures of Karl pinned up all over her apartment. The detective who shot her had been on the trail for months. Apparently she is the one who murdered that lady political candidate a few years back and also shot a star hockey player.”

Colburn grimaced, reflecting upon his colleague’s narrow escape. “Bloody crazy people, you don’t know who the hell is in their right mind anymore. God, *it was* time for Karl to get out... he almost didn’t make it....”

The telephone rang and Knight picked it up. Colburn went to the washroom while his host conversed. Upon his return, Dave found Cal smiling

## Watershed

brightly.

“That was none other than Colonel Gabriel Waters; you recall, Dave, that I had gone to him instead of the police with the information we dug up about the road runners? Gabe just told me Neon and Lefebvre were picked up and charged this morning. Their hooligans weren’t just trying to *scare* you by running your vehicle off the road; they intended there should be no survivors.”

“At the speed we were traveling that night, it’s a certainty we would not have come out of a crash unharmed... but what makes the Colonel think they were trying to kill us?”

Knight scowled. “Gabe said the illustrious minister and his deputy have also been charged with conspiracy in the murder of Eden Caldwell. I wouldn’t want to be in their shoes right now. Ottawa has egg on its face and is looking for a scapegoat... those bastards will be hung out to dry.”

Dave Colburn nodded then said, “Before he was killed, Eden Caldwell had mentioned the Colonel to Karl and Sheena. Caldwell had also insisted that there were many federal people involved in a conspiracy to stop The Consumers’ Advocate. What about them? Did Gabe divulge any information in that direction?”

Knight puffed his cheeks and slowly let out his breath. “It is going to be dirty when Neon and Lefebvre start to sing. Gabe did not go into detail, but he hinted.”

Colburn grinned wryly upon hearing the latter statement. “I suppose justice will take the helm. At any rate, with our Finance and Deputy Finance Ministers behind bars, the Feds will have a tough time convincing the nation there was nothing wrong

in raising taxes.”

Gideon Foster crossed his long legs and picked at an imaginary speck on his immaculate white suit. His tanned features were startlingly dark against the bright attire. Jerking a thumb to indicate a young couple on the terrace, he asked the barmaid, “Whose the bloke with the lovely little sheila?”

“Oh, they just arrived in last night; newlyweds from Canada.”

“She’s a looker, eh, Feral?” Foster teased.

The waitress retorted, “He’s a handsome sort, too. And you should hear his voice. It could melt ice.”

The man in white didn’t take the bait. “Aw now, it’s not ’ow you talk, it’s what you say.”

The waitress patted Foster’s shoulder. “He does have an odd way of putting things.”

“Yeah? ’ow’s that?”

“Well, this morning I heard her ask him what they should do today....”

“Yeah, and what’d ’e say?”

“He said, ’How about a drive in the country, I’d like to see what the creatures are up to.’”

# Free Books

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C. C. Phillips grew up on a mixed farm along the edge of the Great Sandhills region of the Canadian prairies. 'The Hills' provided a wonderland of adventure and enchantment for a growing lad, his dog and saddle horse; the semi-annual two day cattle drive through the heart of the uninhabited landscape were highlights of the year.

As a youngster, Phillips attended a country school for the first six seasons of his formal education, making the three mile trek on horseback, buggy or cutter. It was here that he realized a love of stories and writing under the tutelage of Mrs. Harrison, a young teacher hailing from Britain.

With the family farming operation lacking in capacity, a young C. C. Phillips entered the work force, delving into a variety of occupations. He worked for a manufacturer of lenses for eye glasses, a tire retread plant and in the communications industry. Writing was relegated to a hobby as he turned his attention to providing for wife, son and daughter.

Phillips's adventurous spirit moved him and his family to La Ronge in central Saskatchewan, and from there to Uranium City in the province's extreme northwest corner. The latter, once a thriving mining community of five thousand, had dwindled to a near-ghost town of two hundred. Here, the wildlife, scenery and solitude captured his heart and rekindled the writer's imagination within.

Throughout the course of his life, C. C. Phillips has continued to write. Now retired, he is able to devote more time to pencil, pen and keyboard. The restoration of a pioneer's homestead shack, destined to be a writing retreat, occupies Phillips's moments of leisure. He and his wife currently reside in their country home in southern Saskatchewan.