

PROLOGUE

The summer before Will Edwards was kidnapped in Colombia, a medicine man told him he held the spirit of the butterfly. That was fine, but Will had participated in the healing ceremony in hopes of easing his inflamed knees, not because of an urge to fly.

Jake Across-the-Mountain was a reputable healer. People from Monarch Valley claimed that fire jumped from his hands. Jake told Will he didn't know if he could erase the effects of thirty years of hard-rock diamond drilling, but he'd give it a go. Both men agreed this was not to be a sacred sweat — Will did not wish to offend Jake by pretending he was a blood brother in search of a miracle cure. It was simply a case of bad knees bringing friends together on a late August afternoon.

By mid-ceremony, Will's concentration had crashed. With streaming eyes and a throat as dry as the sizzling juniper before him, he could no longer hear Jake moaning away in a language more akin to wind and tree than human speech. He thought only of escape, of getting outside and freeing himself from the smoke-filled tepee. When Jake revived the embers with a second handful of juniper, Will fell into a coughing fit that nearly rocked him off his fake-fur car seat cover. He began to wonder if this healing ceremony would kill him.

Will wished he could believe in the magic of the ceremony, but the ritual seemed sadly out of touch with the present day. When his mother was alive, the ancient ways held power. Her Cree medicines worked in harmony with the older, slower pace of life.

So when Jake opened his eyes and looked through his transition lenses set in their allergy-free, flexible titanium frame and asked Will to describe what he felt, Will stared back blankly. He didn't want to admit that his legs were cramping and he couldn't breathe. Jake waited. Will recalled a soft brush against his cheek, but he assumed that a sign of healing would be... well, bigger. His knees still hurt as he

awkwardly hauled himself upright. He shook his head and grinned at Jake. No. Nothing.

Jake ducked out of the tepee and held the flap open for Will. Instantly revived by the flood of fresh air, Will greedily sucked buckets of air into his singed lungs. The summer sun soaked the men in gold as it slid behind the purple mountains beyond the river. They meandered along a path through Jake's backyard — a tangle of tall grasses, timothy, and wildflowers. Giant yellow swallowtailed butterflies, copper, blue, white, grey, sulphurous yellow butterflies, tiny elfin butterflies, speckled, checkered, angle-winged, frayed, and ragged butterflies surrounded them. The dusty golden light shimmered with their collective wing movement.

Jake absorbed the sight. "So it is true," he said.

Will looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"You have the spirit of the butterfly."

Within a week, the inflammation in Will's knees subsided. He golfed a seventy-eight and got his first hole-in-one. A thousand golf swings later, Will Edwards accepted the foreman's position from the owner of a small drilling company operating in Colombia.

ONE

WILL EDWARDS emerged from the warehouse trailer into the stifling noonday heat. *How could air be this wet?* he wondered. He removed his cap and wiped the sweat from his brow with a well-muscled forearm. It was going to take more than three days to acclimatize to the heat and humidity of Colombia, even at this elevation. His head swam with details about the drilling operation he'd been hired to supervise. Was there anything else he needed to know about the job before Sam left? He turned the corner into the shade and promptly sideswiped one of three men striding toward him. He reached out in apology, then pulled back as if stung. A pistol fell from the man's hand. In a swift gesture, the man caught the gun before it hit the ground. All three men looked at a surprised Will.

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Five minutes earlier, Will and the departing foreman, Sam Walters, had been inside the warehouse finalizing the details of the job they shared.

“So far, so good,” Will said. “It looks like you’ve made my job easy.”

“I don’t foresee any problems, Will. This is a pretty sound operation, aside from the caving we experienced on core hole fourteen. She’s tight as a hawk’s ass in a power dive now. The crew is one of the best I’ve worked with, and it looks like the men have warmed up to you already. Of course it helps when your brother is part of the crew — he’s one hell of a driller.”

Will’s brother Ted was one hell of a good talker too. He was why Will had accepted this job in the first place. At age sixty, “retirement” had blundered into Will’s vocabulary on occasion, but when the money and the working conditions were this amenable, the term existed only in the future tense. Will’s last job in Ghana was a fading memory; it felt damned good to be working again.

“Have a good trip back to Ontario, Sam, and say hi to the family for me,” Will said from the warehouse doorway. The work trailer smelled of grease and was crammed with loops of hose and wire line, spare drill rods, machine parts, and wooden crates of diamond-studded drill bits. Bags of drill mud bulged against the trailer walls. Around the perimeter, coveralls and raingear hung from three-inch spikes pounded into studs that supported the wall panelling.

“You betcha,” Sam said. “It’s nearly July, so the black flies ought to have chewed the ice off the lake by now. First thing on the list is to fire up the Big Merc and take the kids fishing.” Sam wouldn’t admit to being excited about going home, but it showed. Both men liked the idea of sharing the foreman’s position because long absences tended to break up families. Six weeks from now, Will would return to his family in Monarch Valley, British Columbia, and six weeks sure beat six months. “You go ahead, Will. I’m just going to double-check

these boxes of core springs and casing shoes before I go. Last time they trucked in the wrong bloody size. Catch you in the parking lot.”

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The three men facing Will wore their shirts loose in front of their jeans and looked uncomfortable, especially the one in the middle. Will thought his name was Armando, one of the geologists who worked for Blackburn Resources International, the Canadian mining company that established the camp and contracted out the drilling crew. Will didn't recognize the man with the uncombed grey hair and unpleasant expression, or the man he had bumped into, whose hand was now securely wrapped around his pistol. Workers in camp were not usually armed.

“*Hola,*” Will said, extending a hand toward the geologist. Instead of taking it, Armando quickly told Will, “*Estos hombres son del pueblo.*” *These men are from the village.* He turned to the men and introduced Will, stressing his position as foreman of the drilling crew. All four men stood together on a piece of land that promised the company at least six million ounces of gold and over thirty million of silver. Warning bells clanged in Will's head. Colombians always shook hands.

Will looked around. Where the hell was everyone? The emptiness of the camp, especially compared to the day before, intensified Will's anxiety. Yesterday, dozens of onsite geologists studied core samples, company big shots carried briefcases, accountants and cleaning staff shuffled between camp trailers, and good smells drifted from the cook shack's open windows.

Armando continued nervously. “You are going with these men up into the hills,” he said. “There's been a little misunderstanding. It may take a couple of days or so to straighten things out.”

Will stared hard at the small man while his palms sweated. Every worker sent to Colombia knew the country's reputation. Before Will's arrival on site, reliable sources assured him that the “patient” had been properly “vaccinated.” By this, Will understood that the local

guerrilla group had been paid off in exchange for worker protection against kidnapping. No, he thought, glaring at the geologist. If this were an abduction they would take Armando with them. Every worker also knew a geologist would fetch more on the black market than a driller.

The Colombian waved his pistol at Armando as if he were a fly to be shooed away.

“Ve a traer una chaqueta para este hombre,” he said. Obediently, Armando hurried toward the line of camp trailers to retrieve Will’s jacket from his quarters.

With the pistol now aimed at him, Will waited in silence, his anger rising. He realized how easily the little bastard had set him up. It was as clear as the call of a yellow-breasted kiskadee in an empty camp. When Armando returned with the jacket, he handed it to the grey-haired Colombian, who squeezed the pockets before handing it to Will. In an authoritative voice, the grey-haired Colombian said to Will, *“Tu vienes con nosotros.”* *You’re coming with us.*

Will took a deep breath and exhaled slowly and deliberately as Armando retreated out of reach. He watched a few drops of rain fall on the slick black hair of the man with the gun and thought he could probably use that jacket.

TWO

THERESA EDWARDS just wanted to reach the bathroom before she threw up. She grabbed the toilet with clammy hands and heaved. Rocking back onto the edge of the tub, she tucked her dark hair behind her ears and wondered what in the world could have inspired such a vivid nightmare.

In the dream, she and her sister Niyal were making strawberry jam. Niyal washed jars while Theresa skimmed the froth from the boiled fruit. An annoying gurgling sound came from the next room. It became louder — so loud that it interfered with their conversation. Theresa floated into the living room to tell it to stop. To her horror, her husband Will lay splayed out on the chesterfield, his eyes open and staring. Blood burped noisily from an x slashed through his abdomen. Theresa gaped, too stunned to scream. Tucked in beside him

was their seven-year-old son Michael. Bright red blood bubbled from a similar wound cut into his narrow brown chest. She watched her son's blood flow into Will's. The viscous mix oozed down from the chesterfield and puddled into her rose-coloured carpet. Panic rolled through Theresa's watery body and slammed her into wakefulness.

On this sunny June morning in Monarch Valley, Theresa cranked open the bathroom window to allow the sweet fragrance of mock orange to fill the room. She splashed water over her face, but it refused to clean away the lingering images. The pale reflection in the bathroom mirror told her something was wrong at the mine.

THREE

WHERE WAS THE GUARD? Will stole a glance at the unmanned sentry post as he was hurried by. He carried his jean jacket in his hand and wore his coveralls over his clothes. His pantlegs were tucked into his steel-toed work boots, known throughout the drilling world as “muckers.” As he passed through the camp gate, Will’s muckers still had the new smell from the Monarch Valley Hardware store and shone a glossy yellow.

The sporadic raindrops suddenly turned into a violent deluge as Will was hustled into the back seat where two serious-looking men sat. “Pardon me,” Will said as he climbed over a pair of long, thin legs. No response came from beneath the Aussie-style hat. The second man made eye contact and nodded as he crowded into the side of the jeep to give Will another inch. He needed twenty.

The Colombian with the pistol hovered athletically over the gearshift next to the driver, aviator sunglasses masking his face despite the rain. The grey-haired Colombian banged his door five, six, seven times. When something finally clicked, the jeep shot off at full throttle. Will yanked his Coffin Dodgers baseball cap down over his short black hair and hugged his jacket close to his body.

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As long as the jeep moved quickly, the occupants stayed dry. Will could not see past the three heads in front of him, nor could he see through the windshield, which was clear as zinc. The hiccuping wipers failed to clean the window, forcing the driver to stand several times and swipe it with his sleeve. Will leaned into his fellow passengers as the jeep skidded sideways around hairpin corners in its race down the mountain. He cursed the driver for not having the sense to lock the hubs and imagined the whole bunch of them tumbling ass over teakettle down the mountain. Decelerating only slightly, the jeep lurched onto a narrow wooden bridge that crossed the river. Below them, the agitated Rio de Oro frothed and swirled around giant boulders. Will held his breath, knowing how slippery wooden bridges can get in the rain. Seconds felt like minutes until they bumped onto solid ground again and all four cylinders strained to climb the opposite bank. Tires spun and mud flew wildly as the red rainforest muck was churned into butter.

About twenty gear-grinding minutes later, the driver rounded a blind corner and plunged the jeep into a wash of mud that blocked the road. Everyone jerked forward in unison. The driver's mirrored sunglasses crashed against the steering wheel.

Recovering instantly, the driver adjusted his sunglasses and rocked the jeep back and forth while the grey-haired Colombian seethed. Clearly exasperated, the grey-haired man climbed over the door of the jeep, followed by the armed Colombian. Will and the other two men were pistol-waved out of the back seat and told, "*Ahora, nosotros vamos a caminar.*" *Now we walk.*

Will brightened. Until now, he had not known the other two men were also hostages. Amid the mud splatters, the cursing, and the relentless downpour, he smiled. He was not alone.

The grey-haired Colombian left the road and surged up the mountain as if it were a city street, breaking trail through tangled vegetation that had not been buried by the mudslide. With his pistol, the second guerrilla directed Will and the others to follow.

Will looked up at the cleared mountainside. The remaining stumps looked pathetically incapable of stopping the flow of mud. He wasn't surprised the slide had occurred, just thankful it hadn't buried them when it came down. They progressed slowly. Thick vegetation concealed a litter of slippery broken logs, branches, and rocks that caused the men to stumble. Despite years of physically demanding work, Will's heart jumped around inside his chest like a caged animal as he puffed and scrambled his way up the mountain.

At the top of the slope, they reached the source of the slide, where the road had collapsed and left an impassable hole. Will thought it would continue to erode with every rainfall. On the other side of the gap the road reappeared, as did the grey-haired Colombian. He had waited only to berate the armed guerrilla for allowing the hostages to dawdle, and then he charged ahead again.

"*No hablen,*" the armed Colombian reminded Will and the other two hostages, who had paused to catch their breath and say a few words to each other. Through his fogged and water-streaked glasses, Will looked down at the toy-sized jeep and driver, still stuck in the mud. Below the jeep, he glimpsed the Rio de Oro through the overhanging shade trees that protected its banks. On the other side of the bridge, the river snaked past the cluster of trailers that made up the Mariposa mining camp. About five hundred metres beyond the camp, Will could see the two drill sites scratched into the red earth, uncomfortably close to the river. He felt a slight nostalgia for the mining camp — it had always been a home base no matter where in

the world he was. He had a feeling that this would be his last view of anything familiar for a very long time.

For some reason, Will's Native ancestry gave people license to call him names, to accuse him of stealing or cheating, and even threaten him at knifepoint. But he'd always had his freedom. But from now until his rescue, or his escape, Will would have to obey these armed men. His first challenge would be to walk in the opposite direction from his known world.

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Even if they were allowed to talk, the rain pelting against the broad-leaved forest around them would have drowned out any conversation between the men. Will thought about the phone call that had brought him to Colombia.

Ted had made a ton of money when he worked for T-Rex of Timmins Drilling Company last year. He had earned more in six months in Colombia than Will made in a year chasing jobs around the world. Ted also pointed out that the company always paid on time, bonuses were bustier than a *Playboy* centrefold, and the working conditions were better than anything in Africa.

"That boss of yours is going to run out of money paying you by the hour *and* eleven dollars a metre," Will had said.

"Ha!" Ted replied. "You don't know Nick. He's the kind of guy that would run short himself before he left a worker unpaid. But he doesn't have to worry about that here. The mountains are honey-combed with gold. You ought to come down and grab a few nuggets for yourself."

"Is that why you're calling me?" Will sat down at the kitchen table and gazed out the window at his son's bike, abandoned on the front lawn. He could hear Ted drawing in his breath.

"Well, they need a drill boss. Nick's looking for a guy with experience teaching local guys how to drill. Someone who can talk Spanish. The crew is all Colombian."

There was a long pause. Bikes weren't stolen from yards very often in Monarch Valley, but Will wished Michael would get in the habit of locking it in the garage when he wasn't riding it. "You don't say."

"I told Nick I'd give you a call and see what you were up to. I think you're the right man for the job. Anything happening up there?"

"Nah. Things are slow." *Slow* euphemistically described mining in British Columbia. Drillers like Will were either doing home repairs or getting yellow fever shots and stocking up on malaria pills for Africa. *Dead* was a better word. "How's the security, Ted?"

"It's real good, Will. T-Rex has never had a problem in the five years they've been down here. I've heard the company that owns the mine has taken all the precautions. Things look top-notch. There's a fence around the camp and security guards 24/7."

Will detected the eagerness in Ted's voice as he described the skid-mounted rig, the average depth of each hole, and the dependability of the crew. "You'd share the foreman's position with another guy, so you could get home more often." Ted paused. "How would you like to be getting paid for what you're doing right now?"

Will wondered if Ted could see the potato peeler in his hand. His brother was single: no wife, no kids, no home life. No complications. Happy to have survived his past life, such as the late-night encounter on a Maracaibo highway with the cops who took a shine to their new Toyota pick-up, Will did not envy Ted. They had made it through some wild times working in places where civilization had yet to be declared. Unlike Ted, there were people in Will's life that he cared about more than himself.

Will thought about his wife Theresa. She kept a jar full of jobs for him when he was home. The new cupboards improved the kitchen, and the living room looked much bigger painted "Gentle Morning Breeze" than panelled in dark wood. When Ted had phoned, Will was at loose ends. Michael didn't have any more out-of-town hockey

tournaments, so the team didn't need a driver. Kelly spent her time in the company of other twelve-year-old girls. Theresa worked full-time. Will wanted to work, and they needed the money. But Colombia? Theresa didn't like places that weren't safe.

"I'll have to talk to Theresa," he said at last. "I can't say anything for sure until then."

"Remind her that I worked here a year ago and came back with my pockets jingling," Ted said. "That's something for me. Jesus, Will, you'd have spare change even after buying that new four-by-four you've always wanted."

Money stuck to Will better than it did his brother. Two Christmases ago he'd wired cash to Ted so he could get home from New Caledonia. Ted's wages were often gone before he was.

"I'll talk to her. Where are you?"

"I'm in Bucaramanga. Remember that old hotel with the cantina? Well, the hotel is still here, but the cantina's gone. So is the three-legged dog. Oscar's nephew built a new restaurant — the food is good, and the rum's not watered down anymore. Anyway, you can get a hold of me at the Hotel California. Oscar knows me pretty good.

"I'm gonna call you back on Wednesday. Same time, okay? Give 'er some thought, Will. Nick doesn't like to wait around when there's work to do."

"Thanks for thinking about me, Ted. You stay out of trouble. I don't want my next call coming from any cement rooms without windows in downtown Bucaramanga." The brothers shared a memory that smelled badly of another time and another place.

That Wednesday, Nick Nordstrom, owner of the T-Rex drilling company, hired Will over the telephone with a two-thousand-dollar signing bonus. Will's plane ticket read June 21, two weeks after the national election in Colombia.

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Will illuminated the dial on his watch. Six o'clock. The rain had stopped, but the forest continued to drip. Will's clothes were soaked as much from the exertion as from the rain. Water squelched inside his boots. He didn't know they had reached their destination until the armed Colombian told them: "*Sientence.*" The three captives sat with their backs against the same tree.

A camouflaged soldier carrying an AK-47 emerged from the forest and stood beside them. Will struggled to see into the blackness of the forest. He thought he could see more soldiers — all moving with wraithlike ease in the low light, seemingly unencumbered by their rifles and bandoliers. Awed by such a show of military hardware, Will knew escape was out of the question. He was also sure that the situation would require more than "just a couple of days to straighten out."

A cigarette thrust in his direction interrupted his thoughts. The stocky captive held the pack out to him. Will shook his head and whispered, "*No, gracias.*" The other captive eagerly accepted. Will noticed the lit end of his cigarette trembled. It could have been the cold.

Will turned toward the older captive and said, "*Mi nombre es Will Edwards. Call me Will.*" For the second time that day, Will extended his hand to a man he did not know. This time, the gesture of friendship was returned.

"*Mucho gusto,*" the man said. "*Mi nombre es Luis.*" Both men smiled at each other. Luis' Spanish was that of an educated man, whereas Will's driller's Spanish reflected the language of the working class. Still, his rudimentary language skills allowed him to understand the commands of his captors and, just as importantly, to communicate with his fellow hostages. Will remembered seeing the face of freed prisoner Terry Waite on the news several years before. The Englishman tried to negotiate the release of some hostages in the Middle East and ended up a prisoner himself for years. The news reporter spoke about fear and isolation because Waite could not communicate

with his tormentors or fellow captives. He had to tap on a shared cell wall — one tap for A, two taps for B, three taps for C, and so on. Will recalled how the big man laughed about having a name that required so many taps. *How in hell could he do that?*

Luis introduced the younger man, who compulsively turned his hat in his hands, as José. He paused long enough for a soft handshake, then returned to his task. Even in the dim light, his face looked pale.

“Which mine are you from?” asked Will. José shot him a hateful look.

Luis answered for José. “We’re not with any mining company,” he said. “I’m a metallurgist from Bolivia, and José is my apprentice, from Medellín. We are working on a river project for a Canadian environmental group in partnership with the German government.”

“So why are you here?”

Luis shrugged. “I have no answer for you. My guess is that these guerrillas were ‘fishing’ and José and I were on the wrong river at the wrong time. This section of the Rio de Oro is in ARA territory. Our test kits and river gauges are on the bank, waiting for our return.” Luis smoked his cigarette as close to his fingers as possible. “I don’t expect we’ll be here long, but I’m sure our gear will be gone when we get back. *Maldita sea!*” He squashed the stub against a nearby stone. They sat in darkness. “And you, Will, why are you here?”

“I’m a Canadian worker from the Mariposa goldmine.”

“Oh-ho, my friend,” Luis said. “Welcome to Colombia.”

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Will heard the approach of boots before he saw the soldier. Brown hands appeared out of a woollen cape and extended a spoon and a plastic bowl to each captive. The bowl warmed Will’s hands as he looked into his rice flecked with bits of mystery meat. Then the boots retreated into the darkness. When they returned, it was to take the prisoners’ bowls and announce that they needed sleep.

Accompanied by one guard, while another watched Luis and José, Will stumbled through the wet bushes in the dark to a place where he was told to urinate. He couldn't remember the last time someone watched him pee. It was a humiliating reminder of lost freedom and lost dignity. When they had all taken their turn, the hostages followed the soldiers to a stone shelter. A groundsheet and three woollen blankets were piled on the rubble-strewn floor of the shelter. When Luis spread out the groundsheet, Will thought it would be a tight fit even for three kids. He sighed, removed his wet coveralls, and rolled them into a pillow. An armed guard stood watch as the three men wrapped themselves in their own separate woollen cocoons and crowded together on the plastic sheet.

Will had spent more of his life outdoors than indoors — he was comfortable without walls around him. But he didn't remember the ground being this hard. Seven days ago he sat in his recliner watching a fishing adventure in the Scottish Highlands on TV. Aside from being damp and cold inside a crumbling stone shelter, he was as far away from a fish-filled loch as he could be. And the kid leaning against the shelter would have been holding a fishing rod instead of a loaded rifle.

Awake and alone with his thoughts, Will listened to the forest drip, soak and seep, tap and flutter, click and rustle, whine and hum. Others were in control and he couldn't do a damned thing right now to change it. But they didn't control his emotions. On this night, the first of his confinement, Will decided that there were places he would not allow his mind to go. Thinking about how Armando had betrayed him at the camp was one of those places. He would bury it, along with a thousand angry relics from the past. He shivered as the heat from his body seeped from his blanket into the stony Colombian ground. And then he thought about his wife and his family.

It would be Kelly's thirteenth birthday today... or was it yesterday? Or tomorrow? Had he lost track of time already? He recalled the

apprehension in Theresa's liquid brown eyes when they said goodbye at Spokane International Airport. She was never very good at hiding her feelings. He loved his wife, and he worried about her worrying about him. He carefully placed his glasses on the ground above his head and wiped away his tears.