

## Chapter 1



### Bartonville

He felt different. More energetic, more alive. He bred with female after female in his flock without tiring. He stayed awake through the night. He feared no predator.

Then a turkey hunter shot him.

The setting sun overlooked a crisp, clear evening in early November. South of Bartonville, Illinois, a farmer had leased his wood lot to two turkey hunters. Big and burly in their bulky camouflaged outfits, they had just bagged one.

"Good shot, Pete!"

"He's a big 'un!"

Pete and Bob walked up to the tom turkey, bleeding on the cold ground. The rest of the flock had scattered into the woods. He had exceptionally good plumage and weighed perhaps twenty pounds. Pete reached down and picked him up by the neck.

"He weighs at least twenty-five pounds!"

Then the turkey's eyes opened—and gleamed red. He kicked with his spurs and pecked savagely at Pete's arms and eyes. Dozens of his hens attacked the men from behind.

"Gobble! Gobble!"

He felt different. More energetic, more alive. He had no memory of being shot, but a certain turkey satisfaction at killing his killers. He also enjoyed pecking at their dead meat. He

had always liked frogs, but this meat tasted better. He led his flock down the road, in search of more predators to eat.

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Bill Westcot, the coroner of Midley, Illinois (population 512), had seen his share of grisly deaths, but this one took the cake. Two hunters apparently pecked to death by turkeys. How could this be? Wild turkeys were normally shy and secretive, not even as aggressive as geese. Bill looked up as a man came in—average height, maybe five nine, medium build, not fat, not skinny, roundish face, hazel eyes, and brown hair. He would be hard to remember. But Bill had known him all his life.

Sam Melvin, the reporter for *Midley Beacon*, dropped in for his daily chat. Sam and Bill had been friends since elementary school, and they had both stayed around Midley all their lives. Bill, a short, stocky guy with blondish hair, had gone off to school and become a coroner.

Sam had stayed in Midley after high school, doing odd jobs, until he got on with the *Midley Beacon*. As a reporter and blogger for a small-town weekly paper, Sam wasn't especially busy, and he liked to socialize.

When he saw what remained of the corpses on the mortuary slabs, Sam exclaimed, "Gowlurp! Gaawka-urop!" He ran to the bathroom and puked. After washing out his mouth, he returned, eyes averted.

"Who in the hell were those poor bastards?"

"Peter James and Robert Smithville, according to their drivers' licenses and their shooting permits."

"They look like someone went at them with a thousand pickaxes."

"Yup. Pretty gruesome, even for me."

"What in the world happened?"

"As far as I can tell, they were pecked to death by a flock of wild turkeys."

"I've never heard of anything like that!"

"Yeah, that's not really normal turkey behavior."

"Could they be rabid?"

"Turkeys don't get rabid, Sam."

"They don't attack hunters either. Is 'death by wild turkey' what you'll put on their death certificates?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Well, that's what I'll put as my story headline then. It'll be in tomorrow's paper."

"Make sure when you write it up, people know that 'wild turkey' is a bird and not liquor."

"How can you joke when you have these poor fellows on the slab over there?"

"It's a job. You get used to it."

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He led his flock in the evenings and mornings across the woods and fields. They rested during the day. They did not encounter any more predators. If he'd been human, he would have sighed. They settled for their normal forage, as well as small amphibians. They met a couple of other flocks of wild turkeys. He defeated their toms and took their hens. His flock numbered over a hundred now.

He smelled something on the wind. Turkeys. He headed that way, leading his flock.

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Leaning on the gate to his barn, Amos Yoder, owner of Yoder Turkey Farms, looked over his turkeys with pride. He raised over ten thousand turkeys, all fed on non-GMO grain that he

grew himself. His internet business was booming. He was even selling turkeys on Amazon! Selling organically fed turkeys over the internet had led to him buying a Cadillac and motor home with cash after growing up on the family turkey farm. All he had to do was keep the turkeys clean and comfortable and fed.

A life of hard physical labor had given him arms thick as a chuck roast. People always thought of him as taller than he was because of his broad chest and big head. Most of the time, he took things as they came. In trouble or opposition, he was an immovable rock.

Behind him he heard the "Gobble! Gobble!" of a turkey. He thought one had slipped out of the other gate in the barn. Turning around quickly, his mouth dropped. Over a hundred wild turkeys were running at him! A big tom with a reddish stain on his breast led the charge. Their bright-red eyes chilled Amos's blood.

"Gobble! Gobble!"

Slipping around the gate to the barn, he grabbed his gun. Aiming carefully, he shot the tom in the breast. He dropped like a stone. The remaining turkeys continued in a wave toward the gate, flying up and bouncing off the heavy mesh used to keep the turkeys in. "Gobble! Gobble!" they screamed in futility.

Amos smiled smugly. "That'll keep them out." But the tom stood up. He wobbled a little and led the flock to the other side of the barn.

"I swore I hit him!" Amos put down the .22 long rifle he'd used. In the office he pulled his shotgun out of the gun safe. "Let's see how he handles a shotgun blast! At least I won't miss with this." He ran to the gate at the other end of the barn. The turkeys flew up, trying to peck their way through the mesh.

"It's like Hitchcock's *The Birds*," Amos grumbled. "But they didn't have a pump-action shotgun in that movie."

He cracked open a door and blasted them. Three or four turkeys exploded in a spray of blood and feathers. But the rest didn't flee in panic. They turned as one and charged toward the door. *BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!* As fast as he could pump, Amos fired shell after shell of 00 shot into them. Over two dozen fell into piles of shredded meat. Then the first ones he'd blasted stood up. The turkeys' exposed muscle glistened red with blood, with entrails hanging down and dragging on the ground—but they hopped and staggered toward him.

He was so dumbfounded—the turkeys actually reached the door. *BLAM!* Three more birds turned to turkey burger. Click. Out of ammo. He tried to slam the door—but the big tom blocked him. He had blood all over his breast, but he pecked and kicked with his spurs like a demon.

"Ow!" Amos slammed the butt of the shotgun into the turkey with a satisfying crunch. Three turkeys flew through the open door and landed on his face. Spurs gouged his cheeks and eyes. He thrashed wildly, but dozens more piled on. A pile of pecking, kicking, gouging turkeys soon buried him.

"Gobble! Gobble!"

The mound under the feeding turkeys twitched and was still.

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He felt strong, powerful. He now had many more hens with which to breed. So he went to it immediately.

The turkeys only had one door ajar into the barn, but as dozens and hundreds and thousands joined the flock, the weight of them sprung the door completely open. They found

other predators around the barn and dispatched them. They spotted the grain silos and feasted. They continued into the woods and fields around the barns, ever expanding their territory.

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