



Blue Shadow:

The Battle of Little Red River

A sequel to Flight

By Tom Gnagey

BLUE SHADOW:
The Battle of Little Red River
[Sequel to, Flight!]

**Book Two in the
Grampa and Grandson Mystery Series**

**By
Tom Gnagey**

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A NOTE TO THE YOUNGER READER:

The author often uses the *best* word, rather than the *easiest* word. So, after some of the more advanced words he offers a synonym in parenthesis () so the less experienced reader doesn't have to interrupt the story and go in search of a dictionary or miss some important meaning.

Happy Reading!

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REMEMBERING

The first book in this series is titled, FLIGHT!

In the book, *Flight*, Albert, a retirement age writer, and Jason a recent, 12-year-old orphan, became a family and were given new identities and a new place to live (Punkin Hollar, Wisconsin) in order to hide them from Russian spies that were determined to harm Jason. Albert was a mystery writer and the CIA set the two of them up as owners of a book store. The story shows them growing together in love and trust as they become involved in a baffling mystery involving foreign agents, a noiseless airplane, and a secret underground spy headquarters. In the end, Grampa Albert and Jason caught the bad guys, but in doing that they blew their cover so had to move on. *Blue Shadow* covers the next phase of their adventures together.

It is probably best to have read *Flight* before reading this one, although this story stands alone.

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CHAPTER ONE

A New Beginning

Albert and Jason had been in their new location for several months. The tiny town was known as *Blue Shadow* and hadn't made its way onto many maps. It sat on the *Little Red River* about twenty-five miles south of Mountain Home in the north central part of Arkansas, USA. It was a beautiful area of rolling, tree covered hills, wide lush green valleys, and many rivers, creeks, and streams. Visitors to the area had difficulty figuring the difference among them – rivers, creeks and streams – but to the locals it was all quite clear – well, that is not entirely true. Going back generations to the tiny village's fascinating Civil War days, there had been a difference of opinion about whether the *Little Red* was, in fact, a small river or a good-sized creek. It still brought forth daily, heated, if good-hearted, discussions at the café and feed store where locals met to do verbal battle on the subject. It was a rite of passage for boys, at about 13, to pick a side – river or creek. That usually followed along family lines.

Other than that, it was a peaceful, usually quiet town populated by mostly eighth generation families with a compassionate and accepting nature. The population sign at the city limits was humorous: "*Blue Shadow: Home to 799 wonderful people and one cantankerous old fool.*" (Cantankerous means crabby.) Each year the residents were counted and the number changed on the sign if needed, but the rest remained as it had since 1840. Outsiders assumed that old fool had long since passed on to his reward. Residents were not all that sure. Strange things happened within those borders.

With their new identities, Grandpa Albert had become *Grandpa Harold*, soon *Harry* to the townspeople. Jason became *Gary*, soon, well, *Gary* to the townspeople. Their new

last name was Thomas. The CIA had followed the general plan used back in Punkin' Hollar and set them up as the new proprietors of a shop, frequented primarily by tourists – tourism being the main livelihood of the community. It was just south of a large section of the magnificent, *Ozarks National Forest* and benefited from the overflow of visitors. Blue Shadow offered a hint of civilization – real beds, running water, home cooked meals – harder to come by to the north.

The Clocks and Box, a shop specializing in all manner of music boxes and fancy clocks, had been in the 'Thomas' family for generations. The story was that the former, older, owner had needed to go live with his sister, thus his cousins – Harry and Gary – graciously agreed to come and run the establishment. They had been welcomed without questions. (The CIA had, of course, made the arrangements and the former owner was retiring in style in Arizona.)

In *Punkin' Hollar*, they had lived in an apartment above their bookstore. At *Blue Shadow*, they had been set up in a great little, four room, log cabin beside a creek at the edge of town.

"This place is fantastic, Grampa," Gary said once the men responsible for their relocation had finally left them alone. "A big room here in this smaller section to the west, that combines the living area and the kitchen with a big round table, chairs, cabinets and four windows that flood the area with light. Then, to the south are a sofa, recliner, table and fireplace. In the larger section to the east are the two bedrooms and the bathroom – with all the comforts of home – you see the size of that shower – the Hulk could get lost in there. I'm thinking there is an attic across the whole north section. We'll have to think if we want to do something with that. You got room for your computer and writing stuff in the big bedroom?"

"Certainly more than I expected, when I first looked upon the building from the outside. Think you can be comfortable here?"

"Of course. We're together. I'll be comfortable wherever that happens. You know that."

"I do. This newest phase of my life is becoming just wonderful despite threats from spies and being imprisoned in

their underground dungeon.”

The boy smiled and had a follow up question (of course).

“How many phases do you count in your life?”

“Phase One:”

He held up one finger. That tickled Jason – that is Gary. Harry repeated it.

“Phase One: my 21-exciting growing up years before I married. Phase Two: the 46 wonderful years I was married to Sarah. Phase Three: Now, these fascinating years I’m married to you.”

More laughter; extended laughter; fall on the bed and kick his legs in the air laughter. (Gary, not Harry) Times like that reminded Gary that laughter had really only been a regular part of his life since he and Grampa had formed their family back in the *Hollar*. He figured that had begun Phase Two in his life. He hoped whatever other phases would come his way could be as grand as that one was.

Like before, Gary was homeschooled by Harry for safety reasons. Truth be known, Gary mostly taught himself, just checking in with Harry over breakfast to share his progress and get a gentle nudge in one direction or another from Grandpa to make sure he was covering all the necessary bases. Gary had a tendency to pursue wonder-filled tangents (side trips) and pass over the regular, routine material.

They had been provided with a relatively late model pickup truck – blue – they shared that as a favorite color.

It was no more than a five-minute walk to Main Street where their shop was located, but it seemed like a good idea to have a vehicle as well.

And so it was that the first two months had passed.

After a remarkably good night’s sleep in their cabin, they were up and on their way into town, by foot, at seven. The four-room cabin was cozied in among acres of tall pine and oak trees where they enjoyed the sounds of the water tumbling around the rocks in the creek just out front. The shops opened at nine so they would have time for a Hillbilly Breakfast at Hillbilly Hank’s Hillbilly Kafe, which sat almost directly across from their shop at the corner of Main and South Hillbilly Street (as differentiated from the North, East and West

Hillbilly Streets.

[Hillbillies were backwoods folks who were characterized as lazy, barefoot, clad in overalls with only one strap in place and who - men and women, alike - smoked pipes made from corncobs. They made and consumed vast quantities of moonshine – illegal alcohol. Nobody could actually recall ever having seen one. They were mostly the stuff of myth and really didn't help the image of the remarkable state of Arkansas – well, except there in *Blue Shadow* where the tourist trade based on them was making folks rich.]

Main Street was wide and surfaced with hard packed gravel, rolled each morning with a two-ton roller. It looked rustic, which was the goal of the community, but it was actually high tech with a drainage system underneath that absorbed rain immediately and a heating system that removed frost and snow almost before it found the surface. Snow was seldom a problem that far south, but it did occur sometimes. The shops were strictly Civil War Era in design – upright clapboard siding, large front windows with dozens of smaller panes, and wide, raised, wooden sidewalks with overhanging roofs. *Blue Shadow* was prepared to see that every tourist who wanted to walk that street and spend their money would have the opportunity. The town was open for business eleven months a year – January was vacation time and many of the residents left town.

There were four hotels – two, facing one other at each end of Main with ample parking behind each. Along the two blocks between them lived the two dozen shops and eating establishments. The homes spread mostly north and south away from Main Street.

“Morning, Harry, Gary,” hand said. “Got a new breakfast special this week.”

He pointed at a slate board on the wall. The early crowd of old man who came in early, drank coffee and swapped lies, had already come and gone, so they had the place to themselves.

Gary looked at Harry who nodded. Gary responded.

“The special looks good.”

From the description, it apparently consisted of biscuits and gravy, grits, scrambled eggs, bacon very crisp, and patty

sausage. All breakfasts came with all the pancakes you wanted. If you wanted a biscuit to go with the assortment of jellies on your table, you raised your hand and Hank tossed one at you from across the room. Those with Frisbee experience did the best with that. The dogs enjoyed the misses. Tourists loved the fun. Town people got a fifty percent discount.

“I don’t understand how you can put four pancakes away after all that other food,” Harry said.

“A growing boy, I guess.”

He offered a big smile. Big, honest, natural smiles from him were among the nicest changes Harry had seen in the boy since the night they met. That had been a year before. It didn’t seem possible.

“So, what are you working on this week, son?”

“I’ve been learning about atomic energy – cold fusion caught my eye for today.”

“Cold fusion? That sounds like some disgusting kind of thick soup served in fancy restaurants,” Harry said.

It was worth chuckles. Gary was sure his grandfather knew about it.

“You are remembering to tackle a chapter of algebra every week, right?”

“I have found that merely tackling a book does not transfer the subject matter into ones waiting brain. I may just have to start studying it.”

It was worth Harry’s smile that time.

“At the beginning of next month, I’ll be ready to begin either algebra II or Geometry. You have a suggestion?”

“You’ll just *love* geometry. I suggest you go right into algebra II.”

“What? Oh. I see. A joke. I was figuring the same thing really. Just keep at the algebra ‘til I’m done with it.”

After Harry’s third cup of coffee and Gary’s third hot chocolate they stood and went to the front counter. While Harry paid the bill, and chatted for a time with Hank, Gary ran across the street to open the door, turn on the lights and bring the place to life.

With the coming of fall, the mornings were a bit cooler and the crowds were a bit smaller and arrived later. They

were still learning about music boxes and clocks, but were surprised at how much information they had already acquired. Their merchandise was not run of the mill (common place). A clock typically wasn't just a clock – it gonged, or had little people moving from here to there as the hour struck, or the face changed through a rainbow of colors, or it coo cooed, or . . . on and on. Gary's favorite had a propeller driven, one seater airplane from the early 1900s that took a few turns around the top of a house. It was on a wire shaft with its propeller spinning.

The music boxes ranged from the beautiful, expensive models – some encrusted in jewels – to the ridiculous, represented by the one shaped like a coffin in which the lid opened at the top of every hour and its occupant sat up as it played some simply dreadful music. Many of the cheaper ones proclaimed the Hillbilly theme.

When Harry arrived five minutes later he found Gary standing in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips.

“Things aren't right in here, Grampa.”

“Like what?”

“Every music box I've picked up to wind is completely run down. And look, they are sitting every which way on the shelves and tables. Somebody was messing with them in here over night.”

“Check the back door, son,” Harry said picking up several of the items as if to verify for himself what Gary had said.

Gary called up to Harry.

“Lock's been damaged. Door is ajar (cracked open).”

Harry was chuckling as he approached Gary to look over the situation back there.

“What, Grampa? This is serious stuff!”

“Oh, I know that. Your phrase just now reminded me of a fourth-grade joke. ‘When is a door not a door? When it's ajar’.”

“I remember that one. Guess it's required material in fourth grade. But seriously, what do you think is up? More bad guys. You think the same bunch from the Holler?”

Gary was clearly panicking.

“I wouldn't think so. We were navigated through a

labyrinth (maze) of towns, cities, states and even countries on our way here. Let's do a little of our own investigation before we notify our handler."

Their 'handler' was an agent who remained close by, and was unknown to them for security reasons. They could contact him in times of crisis and he would inform them of problems if the agency suspected any. Harry didn't see that as a crisis – not at that point, anyway. There were several village policemen who mingled with the crowds dressed as Civil War soldiers – the Gray Uniform of the south, of course – but he wasn't ready to apprise (inform) them of the situation. They returned to the main room.

"Anything obviously missing?" Harry asked as he stooped down to check the safe behind the counter, which ran the length of the west wall.

It had not been tampered with. He removed the cash drawer from it and put it up in the register to make ready for the day.

"I have no idea if anything's missing other than organization and appearance. The place is a mess. How about you getting out the inventory sheets. As I wind each piece up and put it back where it belongs I'll give you its stock number and you can mark it off. If any don't get marked, we'll know what was taken. There might be finger prints."

"They are each touched every day by lots of folks. Do you think prints will help?"

"Probably not. But if one set recurs on every piece we might have something."

"I won't say don't do it, but I think it's a longer shot than makes good use of our time."

"I see now it's just the music boxes that are out of place. That's clearly a clue of some kind. Something about the boxes and not the clocks. Maybe a musician who's always late for work."

It got a smile from Harry. Gary thought it really had deserved more, but didn't press it. His smile continued for some time.

It took a half hour to wind, replace, and check all the inventory. Nothing was missing.

"Hmm?"

“Hmm?”

“We need to get that alley door fixed. What was the carpenter’s name we used to fix the broken cellar window when we first arrived?”

“Baskin.” Gary said. “Rupert Baskin. How in the world could you forget such a unique name?”

“Just testing you, son.”

“Your nose is growing, Grampa. You are suggesting I need to get him here post haste?”

“And probably *quickly*, as well, huh?”

That time they shared the chuckle. Gary ran down the block to the man’s business and an hour later he had come and made the measurements for a new, metal jacket door, reset in a far stronger frame.

“First breaking and entering I can recall in years,” Baskin said. “*Blue Shadow’s* a kindly place. I’d say it’s somebody from the outside. Either of you two ever have any enemies.”

“Can’t understand who it could be,” Harry said while Gary did his best not to burst out in uncontrolled laughter. Harry and Gary have enemies? Of course, not, unless you count a hand full of vicious Russian spies with plans to drown Harry and do who knew what terrible things to Gary.

“Well, I’ll have that new door in place by mid-afternoon. I’ll be as quiet as I can about it. Don’t want to scare off your customers.”

“Kind of you, but let’s just get the hole closed up as soon as you can.”

It had been Harry.

The two of them returned to the front room. Gary turned the sign in the window to ‘OPEN’ even though it was a bit early. A boy – seven or eight – trotted up to the front door and managed his way inside. He held an envelope and handed it to Gary. He turned to leave without comment.

“Wait just a minute, kid. Don’t you want a tip for your trouble?”

The boy stopped and turned back toward Gary. ‘Tip’ seemed to be a magic word. Harry had heard the interchange and approached them. Following Gary’s lead, he opened his wallet searching for a bill. Gary continued speaking to the boy.

“Who sent you with this?”

“Not s’posed to say.”

“A resident of *Blue Shadow*?”

The boy shook his head, no.

“Where was he?”

“Not s’posed to say.”

Harry waved a one in front of his face. The boy looked up. Still no response. Harry replaced it with *two* ones.

“At the town sign, west end of Main.”

“Harry added a third bill.”

“About your size, Sir. Blond hair. Cowboy boots. A western shirt. A scar on his forehead over his right –no, *his* left – eye. He talked in like a accent.”

“Accent?” Gary asked. “Like we do, Yankee talk?”

“No, like a foreigner. Can’t tell them apart, those foreigners.”

“Car?”

“Black. Shiny – clean. Dark windows so I couldn’t see inside.”

“License plate?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean notice anything about it?”

“Said something like Emripper State on it. Had numbers.”

“Could that have been *Empire* State?”

“Sure could have. I was more interested in the fat man in the back seat in the dark glasses and suit. Really scary looking. I just wanted to get out of there.”

“How did you see the man through the tinted window?”

“He rolled it down when he handed me the envelope and this ten-dollar bill.”

The boy pulled the bill from his front pocket. He had rolled it up into a tight cylinder. Gary threw a quick glance at Harry as he continued talking to the boy.

“Will you trade me that old ten for a brand new ten?”

“Okay, I guess.”

He handed it over and Harry provided a crisp, new one.

“Thanks for all your help, *Jack*,” Gary said.

The boy offered a broad grin.

“I’m *Billy*. *Jack*’s my dad.”

The boy left. Gary figured he had enough information to find him if that would be necessary.

"I had forgotten how clever you were – well, not really, of course. Just indicating what an amazing job you did with the boy. How did you know his dad was Jack?"

"I had no idea. That was a happy coincidence, I guess. I just said Jack so he'd correct me, giving his real name."

"You figure the fat man's prints will be on the rolled up ten, right?"

Gary nodded. He had been holding it between his thumb and index finger, end to end, so as to not smudge any prints remaining after Billy – not Jack – had handled it. He figured Billy's much smaller prints would be on top of any others to distinguish him from the one who sent the letter.

They moved behind the checkout counter and Gary opened the sealed, white, legal size envelope. There were no marks of any kind on the outside. He was again careful not to smudge any prints that might remain. It contained one sheet with a hand printed message.

WHATS THE DEAL? NO CAKE AND CANDLE TUNE ON TABLE. NEED IT IN LOCK THING OF PACIFIC. TRY AGAIN TONIGHT. SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES.

"It's clearly written in some sort of spur of the moment code," Gary said. "I'm not delighted by the last two words, in case you are wondering."

"I guess we can assume it is connected in some way with the break in," Harry said.

"I assume so. You suppose this shop has been used as some sort of 'hand off' place in the past."

"Hand off?"

"Passing on something illegal like between spies – messages or contraband? (stolen items)"

"I think you are still too close to the spies in our immediate past, son. But the rest could make sense – this shop having been used in some way as an in between place for passing on some sort of illicit (illegal) merchandise or information."

"I suppose. Let's look at the code or whatever. I suppose the first phrase – *What's the deal?* – is fairly straight forward. It is berating (scolding) us for somehow messing up.

The 'cake and candle tune' part seems to refer to the Happy Birthday Song. What about the 'on table' part?"

"I imagine whatever it's referring to was expected to be on a table in here. There are three. I'd bet on the smallest, round one over there that usually only holds one or two items."

"That makes sense. The next part seems really strange: need it in lock thing of pacific. Hmm?"

"Well, name some lock things," Harry said.

"Tumblers, opening, key, screws, bolt . . ."

"I think you found it. First, though, very simply what about Pacific?"

"Calm, quiet?"

"A thing like *lock* is a thing not a state of affairs."

"Oh, Pacific *Ocean*?"

"And oceans are often called . . ."

"Seas?"

"Lock thing of sea?" Harry asked, clearly already there and encouraging Gary to catch up.

"Ah. If lock thing is *key*, then it could be the song on the music box needs to be written in the key of C – no sharps or flats. The Happy Birthday song in the key of C. That's getting quite specific."

"The final two phrases seem pretty straight forward," Harry said.

"I'd say," Gary agreed with an extended nod. "If we don't have whatever it is he expects here tonight when they return, we get our throats slit."

"A bit dramatic, but that is certainly the essence (basic meaning) of the message."

"It seems doubtful we will have *it* here – clearly a music box that plays the Happy Birthday Song in the key of C. So, we need a pretty foolproof plan. Got one, son?"

"Maybe. According to the invoices, you didn't open the last order that came in yesterday morning."

"I didn't. You're right. It slipped my mind entirely. We were busy during the delivery and I just slid it under the cash register and never got back to it."

Harry bent down and procured (obtained) it. It was small – eight by ten by four inches – a box wrapped in heavy brown paper. Return address was, Westville, KB, 59505.

Gary pointed that out.

“KB? There is no state abbreviated KB in the United States. Let me look up that Zip Code.”

Gary and his phone soon had a verdict.

“A place in Germany – *Bad Sassendorf*. Population about 13,000 people, but the KB makes no sense.”

“Maybe none of it was *supposed* to make any sense,” Harry said. It might have been somebody’s attempt at providing a meaningless address. They may have just made up the zip code figuring it was someplace here in the United States. It gives no city name in the return address.”

Gary babbled on:

“On the other hand, if the package contains a music box, Germany makes and exports lots and lots of them. I imaging three fourths of what we have here were made in either Germany or Switzerland. If I remember right, *Bad* in German, when used in front of a place name means *spa* – like a sauna or maybe better, like a health resort, like Hot Springs, Arkansas. That probably leads us nowhere.”

“Other than to support my contention it is a false lead,” Harry went on. “How likely is it that a health resort would be a manufacturing center for music boxes?”

“I see your point. Still, I may check it out later. There is one thing, the postmark is New York, City, USA.”

“I’m going to assume that is a dead end for now. We don’t have to speculate (guess) about what’s inside, you know. Let’s see what’s *really* in there.”

Gary carefully cut the paper with his pocket knife and opened the cardboard box. There were two items, each wrapped in layer upon layer of bubble wrap. They each took one of them and worked to get through the many strands of cellophane tape.

“I got a music box,” Gary announced watching Harry finish.

“Here, too. Let’s see what song yours plays.”

Neither of them recognized it although it was very pleasant and tuneful. Harry handed his – which was much larger – to Gary, who wound it and slid the lever to start it.

“Ah Ha!” he began. “Happy Birthday.”

He jiggled his head back and forth in time with the

music.

I have no idea if that's in the key of 'C' however."

"Nor do I. Considering the circumstances, I will assume it is. The note demands it and it suddenly shows up. You notice how large it is?"

"Yes, I noticed that, too. It's like a silver-colored carriage from King Arthur days of old. Not really delicate – the wheels don't turn and the doors don't open, for example, like would be the case in really expensive ones. There is a fancy dressed girl or woman sitting on the rear seat inside. I see no packing slip or invoice."

"Stand back and take a look at it, Jas . . . Gary."

They shared a smile at Harry's mess up.

"And look for what?"

"Proportions (shape)."

"I think I see. The carriage is too tall to be a good replica - too tall from the bottom up to the door. Hmm?"

For no reason, other than he was Gary, he stuck a finger inside the window on the coach and touched the woman's head. It swiveled at his touch. Nothing else happened. He pushed the head in the opposite direction. Something DID happen!

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CHAPTER TWO

Things Begin To Take Shape

The music box began playing a second 'tune'.

"What in the holiest of Moses is that?" Gary said.

"Nothing I recall, if you are referring to the tune. In fact, it is so unmelodic it surely can't really be a song at all, can it?"

"That's what I meant. Hmm?"

"If not a song and if hidden, what then?"

"Ah," Gary came back. "You're thinking a code. But what? How?"

Harry took out his wallet again and handed Gary a hundred-dollar bill.

"So, now my questions are suddenly worth fifty bucks a piece. I think I can formulate a few more."

"Nice try, but no. Go down to the Dulcimer Shop. I saw a really inexpensive keyboard – piano kind of keyboard – in there last week. Buy it. Then I have a project for you." [A dulcimer is a small, long-narrow, wooden, stringed, folk instrument that some think has a sound similar to a bagpipe.]

Gary took off on the run down the alley figuring most of the shops back doors would be open before they opened out front. And anyway, the owner's daughter of that shop sometimes sat back there reading. She was on his list of people he wanted to meet – REALLY wanted to meet. It would have been one good thing about riding the school bus up to Mountain Home rather than being home schooled – he could try and sit beside her and talk.

She wasn't there. He knocked and then went on in. All the shop keepers knew Gary on sight and had immediately

grown to like him.

“Grampa says he saw a cheap musical keyboard in here. We need one for a few days – like a school project I guess you could say. That must be it – the \$49.99 variety with three octaves. In sort of a hurry – like a deadline to meet.”

“If you just need it a few days go ahead and borrow it. Sell very few of them anyway. It’s mostly just dulcimers from here.”

“Really? Thanks. I’ll be glad to leave a deposit.”

“Scoot. Get back to your project. By the way Julie talks about you sometimes.”

The man winked.

“Really. Good or bad?”

Gary had a way of getting right to the point.

“You probably need to talk to her and find out.”

“I think about *her* sometimes.”

He could have kicked himself for saying such a dumb thing to a girl’s father so he hurried out the back door.

Gary took his time going back to their shop thinking about what had just happened.

‘Hmm. A girl’s father makes it seem like his daughter might like me. Goes out of his way, in fact, to tell me. I thought the fathers of all 13-year-old girls hated all 13 year old boys.’

He entered and explained to Harry what had happened – about the loan of the keyboard not Julie, although most likely he would mention that at some point.

“I think I know what you you’re thinking about the code, Grampa. If it *is* a code, it is a *musical* code so I need to translate the sounds – the notes from that awful song – into their note names.”

“It’s not an easy task, I know, so it may take a bit of trial and error to find the notes.”

“Gotcha! I do this while you finish getting things ready for the day?”

It had been a question that didn’t require a response.

“I noticed when we were listening to it, that the tune used four kinds of notes: eighth notes, quarter notes, half notes and whole notes.”

[The reader does not have to be a musician or

understand this, but for those who want to, each kind of note lasts a different amount of time. Music lines are divided into spaces called bars. In this example, each bar will have four counts in it. So, one bar needs 8 eighth notes to fill it, 4 quarter notes to fill it; 2 half notes to fill it; or one whole note to fill it. Just leave it to Gary and Harry to change all this into a code that will make sense to you.]

Gary continued:

“I got to thinking that with only seven notes in one octave (a range of seven notes labeled A, B, C, D, E, F and G) that’s not nearly enough for one note to represent each of the 26 letters of the alphabet. But, with those four sizes of notes, so to speak, that takes it to 28 (4 kinds of notes times the 7 notes in an octave). I guess we’ll see. Let me translate what we have and start from there. I also want to take a look inside that music box and find the second mechanism – the one that plays what we assume is the coded message.

There was a narrow loft at the rear of the store. It was open to the room below and they used it as an office and to store extra merchandise. He made his way up the steep set of steps and set up shop at the desk. Gary had a good ear for music and he and Harry had become very good playing the dulcimers while they were in Punkin’ Hollar. He got to work. Harry soon had the front door open ready for business. Monday’s were slow days. Saturdays were the busiest. From where Gary sat at the desk he could look down onto the main room. If it got busy he would go down and help.

The decoding turned to be a very difficult and time consuming task. He would play one note on the music box and then match it with a note on the key board where he could determine exactly which note it was – A through G – and write them all down in order. He used ‘e’ to designate an eighth note, ‘q’ for quarter note, ‘h’ for half note and ‘w’ for whole note. So, for example an ‘E’ that was held for two counts would be a half note and he would write down h-E – a half note on tone E. One can see it was a huge undertaking. For each letter, he had to start the music box all over and listen until he got to the next note.

He didn’t complete that part until noon. Then, the notes of the ‘song’ had to be decoded to see what it all meant.

“Got the boring part finished, Grampa. I’m famished and my fingers and hands and legs are cramped.”

“Our messenger boy brought another note. You may have seen him come in.”

“No, I didn’t. Another threat?”

“I doubt it. Didn’t open it. Addressed to Gary Thomas and the envelope smells quite nice.”

“What? I don’t get it. Bad guys who use perfume?”

He was soon down the stairs into the mostly empty shop. Harry pointed it out where it lay beside the register. Gary went behind the counter to examine it. He wondered why the bad guys were singling him out. (Sometimes boys are stupid!)

“He opened it. Oh! It’s from Julie. Perfume. *Now* I get it.”

“Is she threatening to do you in?” Harry asked with a smile.

“Not at all. She invited me for a picnic lunch in the park – five minutes ago. What do you think?”

“I think at your typical speed and the fact there is no head wind that you’ll be there by 12:08. Go! Have a good time.”

Gary finger combed his hair, smelled his armpits, and sped off down the street.

The picnic took an hour. Relating all about it later to Harry, took two. Once that had run its course, Harry tried to direct the lad’s energies to other things.

“It seems quite important that we get that code *decoded*. Somebody is expecting to pick up the new music box tonight.”

“I was thinking about that,” Gary said hopping up to sit on the counter while they talked. “Music boxes make music when the pins sticking out on a rotating cylinder pluck tuned metal strips of varying lengths – the longer those strips are, the lower the sound – the shorter, the higher – like strings in a piano. Since we have no idea what’s in the message, but since we figure it can’t be good, what do you think of *this* idea? We open up the music box and find the mechanism that plays the coddled ‘tune’. Then, we move say every third pin up or down a few slots to change the tone – the note. That is

bound to ruin the message, right?"

"I'd say so. Yes. Quite inventive and it will appear there was an error at the other end since the local bad guys have no idea that we are on to them. Yes. A remarkable idea. Do you think you can accomplish that before closing time?"

"I'll try. Depends how difficult it is to open, and pull and reset the pins."

Gary jumped down and started toward the stairs.

"Oh, I learned why this town is called *Blue Shadow*. During the Civil War, there was a hard-fought battle here – southern army to the south of the creek and the northern to the north. It supposedly took place out near our cabin, in fact. It began in the early hours of the morning and raged on through until dawn. When the sun came up the next morning, there was so much gun smoke in the air that the sun cast the trees and buildings and such as long *blue* shadows across the ground."

"Interesting. Which side won?"

"I forgot to ask. I love listening to Julie talk – so soft and pleasing. I guess I got caught up in that instead of the story. I'll remember to ask on Saturday. We're going to hike the trail on the hill east of town – if you can think of no objection."

"No objection as long as your homework for the week is finished."

Gary play-acted a snit – crossing his arms, putting on a pout, and stomping toward the steps.

"Parents! You can't live with them and you can't live without them!"

They exchanged a chuckle as he climbed to the loft.

Customers came and went as the slow morning moved into an even slower afternoon. It was one of those weeks when they were glad that, in addition to their income from the store, there were also the royalties Harry earned from the Mystery novels he wrote. Anyway, Harry was a wealthy man who really didn't need to earn more money. Everything they cleared from the *Clocks and Box Shop* went into Gary's college fund.

A half hour after he had retreated to the loft Gary let out

a loud, “Bingo, Grampa. Bingo! Got the box open. Very cleverly disguised – the way to take it apart, I mean.”

“The pins?” Harry called up as a question.

“They are moveable if that’s your question. You think every third one?”

“How many pins – that is how many notes does it play in the entire song?”

“Let me count . . . very short; just 32 in all.”

“My suggestion is to move them more randomly than every third one – like third, then fifth, then second, then fourth and so on. Averaging it out to about three sounds good.”

“You get an A+ for that, Grampa. Don’t give the bad guys a pattern to figure out so they can determine which letters are for real and which are fakes. I think your old gray matter (brain) may have some miles left in it after all.”

Harry wadded a piece of paper and threw it up at him. Not expecting that, Gary didn’t duck. Not ducking, Gary got bopped smack dab on the nose. There were no customers in the shop, although neither of them were sure it wouldn’t have happened anyway. They were becoming known as a very interesting pair in the few months since they had arrived. Neither one ever pretended to be anything other than what he was, a good person with a big heart and a love for the ridiculous (silly).

“Okay, then,” Harry began getting back to the suddenly serious side of their lives. “You change the pin locations, you put the box back together, and you see if you can make anything from the message in code. Then you’ll put the box on the small table, turn on the security cameras, turn the night light on, and we’ll go home.”

“It seems like there is a disproportionate (lopsided) amount of ME in your suggestion.”

“Always go with the best you got, I say.”

“So, you’re saying loading me down with an inordinate (excessive) amount of work is your way of complimenting me.”

“I’m glad we have an understanding about that.”

They exchanged smiles across the room.

“We got a really good thing between us, don’t we, Grampa?”

“We do, indeed. Now, shut up and get back to work.”

That not only brought chuckles it brought tear drenching (soaking) laughter.

By five o'clock they were ready to leave.

"Home cookin' or Hanks cookin' this evening?" Harry asked.

"I used up a whole lot of brain protein today so I'm thinking a big juicy hillbilly steak is probably necessary," Gary came back.

"So be it!"

Conversation always moved easily between them. Harry was tickled that the boy still had another hour of reflections on the one hour picnic – that would be three hours of explanation to the actual one in the park. He was always interested and fascinated by what his grandson had to say – to say and wonder and ask and postulate (guess).

Once home, Gary put in an hour finishing his school work while Harry put in some time at the computer – Chapter Seven in his new book, *'Mason Jordan and the Ghost of Emily LaFlure'*.

By 7:30 they had gathered at the kitchen table to begin working on the musical code.

"Do you suppose we will receive more music boxes carrying coded messages?" Gary asked.

"Practically speaking, I think we can assume there have been some before this one. I suppose we will need to wait and see. I must say I'm surprised our friends at the CIA are not aware of this."

"Sometimes you're no fun, Grampa. I want us to mindlessly speculate about things we can never possibly figure out ahead of time and you want us to be practical. I just don't understand how we manage to get along so well."

Smiles across the table.

"So, here's what I have figured out so far," Gary began.

He produced several sheets of paper on which he had jotted down things. Harry slid his chair closer around the edge of the table so he had a better view. Gary reviewed his system for his grampa.

"The upper-case letters refer to the notes in an octave: A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. The lower-case letters refer to the type of note it was on the music box: 'e' is for eighth note, 'q' is

for quarter note, 'h' is for half note, and 'w' is for whole note. So, for example the combination 'h-G' means a half note tuned to the sound 'G'. Got it?"

"Got it. I like the system."

"Good. Here's the sequence of the 38 notes, then, as they occurred, in order, on the music box."

q-E h-D e-F h-E h-D h-D q-D q-E e-G q-D
e-F h-D h-E w-D
e-E q-D h-E w-D w-F e-G q-B e-D e-G h-G
e-F e-A w-B e-E
h-G e-G h-B q-D e-E q-D w-B w-A h-F h-B

"We are assuming each one of those stands for a letter of the alphabet and if we crack the code we should be able to read a meaningful message. I went back and rechecked each note three times because I knew once I moved those pegs around there could be no more checking."

"Wise. Efficient. Effective."

"And, I hope, accurate," Gary added with a sigh.

"In some ways, this is probably like a cryptogram, a substitution code where one letter in the code stands for another letter – like Z in the code really stands for B. If K also stood for O and P stood for Y then decoding it (ZKO) would become BOY."

"The problem here is that we don't know where words stop and start like in a cryptogram – no spaces," Gary pointed out. "That really complicates things."

"Yes, it does, unless one of the notes represents a space between words. I guess we'll see."

"I'll bet the CIA's computer would crack this in ten seconds," Gary said.

"Probably right, but that would be the easy way. We have two great brains so let's give it a try first. No reason to rile up the CIA until we have something to show them."

"I figured that. I already did some preliminary stuff. There are only 17 different notes used in the code, meaning the 32-letter message is made up of only 17 different letters. Seven of them are only used once and five of them only twice."

"I wish we had that box here. There might be some

clue on it," Harry said.

"Would photographs help?"

"You thought to take pictures? Genius."

"Not really. I was thinking about Julie. I took some pictures of her and when I pulled one up on my phone to look at it, it hit me to take some of the box."

"Young love! I knew it was good for something," Harry said.

"That sounded like a put down – about boy/girl couples at my age."

"That was certainly not my intention. You said it best I think back in Punkin' Hollar. Something like young people's first boy/girl relationships are important for two reasons. First, they are lots of fun. And second, they provide important practice for later relationships. Wasn't that you who said that?"

"It was. Yes."

"My comment was intended to emphasize another great byproduct of the experience. In this case a reminder to take pictures. Can you pull them up?"

"Of course, I can. I think you mean *will* I pull them up, *please*."

It was all in fun and he placed the phone between them on the table so they could look at them together.

"That's interesting," Gary said. "It's a picture of the very bottom. Looks like maybe a serial number or something. Tiny. Can't make it big enough to read. Shall I enlarge it on the computer?"

"Yes. Do you think you can keep it clear enough to read?"

"Now who's asking premature (too early) questions, when, if we just wait a minute we'll have an actual answer?"

"You got me. I'll fold my hands and wait patiently now."

Gary broke a grin as he moved to the computer and got to work. Harry watched over his shoulder as he transferred the data.

"There we come," Gary said. "Whatever it is has been stamped or etched right into the metal. Let's see. Bigger. Bigger. Look like letters. One more time, bigger. Got it. Fuzzy but I can read it. Not sure what we got."

“Read it with your young eyes, son. Here copy it onto paper.”

“*Joe . . . cal/s*. I suppose that could be some sort of product designation (label).”

“Hmm?”

“Hmm?”

Harry tried thinking about it out loud.

“Three dots or periods separating the first set of letters from the second set. Sometimes dot – periods – are used to mean something is missing or time is passing. I use them both ways in my books.”

Gary broke a smile.

“It would be hilarious to print a big thick book with one word at the beginning and then fill all the pages with dots until at the end there is one final word. That way the reader would really have to use his imagination.”

Harry's belly jiggled as he laughed along with Gary.

“If the author was getting paid by the word I think he'd lose money on one like that.”

Gary became serious.

“If that is what the dots mean then something belongs between the *Joe* and *cal/s*, right?”

“Right.”

More' hmms'.”

“Notice how the J is upper case and all the others are lower case,” Harry said having no idea where to go with it.

“Capitals start sentences and proper names,” Gary said trying his grampa's approach of just thinking out loud.

“That might put the J-o-e at the beginning of a sentence and the c-a-l-s at the end,” Harry said rearranging their thoughts just a bit.

“And that would account for seven, of the thirty-two letters, if we would fit those words into it with *Joe* at the front and *cal/s* at the end.”

“And, it would provide us with seven of the letters in the code,” Harry pointed out. “Let's try that. Back to the table. Make 32 hash marks across the sheet of paper – one for each letter in the code – and write the letters we have under the first three – J-o-e – and the last four – c-a-l-s.”

connected to the remote night vision security cameras at the shop. They stood and went to Harry's computer. Gary sat and plunked a few keys to bring up the picture. He described the obvious.

“One man. Black jump suit. Ski mask and gloves. How did he get in through that new fortress we had installed as a door? Do you think the carpenter is his accomplice (co-worker)?”

///

CHAPTER THREE

Boodely Boop!”

“One man. Black jump suit. Ski mask and gloves,” Gary said. “How did he get in through that new fortress we had installed as a door? Do you think the carpenter is his accomplice (co-worker)?”]

Harry answered.

“It seems one of the owners intentionally left it unlocked.”

“Ah! Pretty smart, Grampa. The door isn’t ruined again and the bad guy thinks we are cooperating – probably because he assumes his note scared us into cooperating. I see now where I get my sneakiness – genetics.”

“Interesting genetics since technically we are not related.”

“I refuse to let a little thing like actual facts interfere with my contention (suggestion). Look. He went right to the little table.”

“But, he picked up the wrong box first. The only way he must have of identifying it is by the fact it plays the Happy Birthday Song. He turned it on. He turned it off and set it back down. There, he picked up the right one and turned it on. He put it up to his ear and nodded and put it in his pocket. He’s leaving.”

“Pretty efficient. In. Out. Boodely Boop!” Gary said.

“Boodely Boop?”

“Yes. In case you didn’t catch the meaning from

context, it means, “Pretty efficient. In. out.”

“Notice what he did before he picked up the first box?” Harry asked.

“Breathed, looked, moved, swallowed, lived – I have no idea what you’re going for.”

“He took off his bulky gloves so he could work the slide switch that turns on the music.”

“Double, Ah! We got his prints on that first box he left behind and probably the back-door knob since he put his gloves in his pocket and didn’t put them back on before leaving. Shall we go into town and get those prints?”

“They will be there in the morning. Can you make a few still pictures from that video so we have a good description of his height, build, and so on?”

“I assume that’s rhetorical (self-answering) since you *know* I can. Can you imagine how frustrated he was the night he had to search every one of the six dozen music boxes we have in there? You know what would be funny would be to have all six dozen play the Happy Birthday Song. I guess that really wouldn’t work because if the first one he picked up played it, he’d assume it was the right one, take it, and leave.”

“The idea is still quite humorous,” Harry said. “Can’t you just hear 75 of them all playing the same song, but each at a different place in the sequence!”

“Actually, that song seems very popular on music boxes,” Gary said. “I imagine that’s why the directions say that it must be on the small table – so it won’t be confused with others that play the same song. Being so popular, I’m amazed none of the others played it the first night.”

“And, it raises questions about the former owner or somebody who worked for him,” Harry said.

Gary pointed to the screen as he switched to the outside camera.

“Notice that our alley camera showed no vehicle back there. He took off walking west down the alley and I think we saw him removing his mask before he got out of sight. We can go back and check. That city security camera at the west end of the alley might get us a full face shot of the guy.”

“Good thought. Shall we get back to the code or turn in for the night?” Harry asked.

“How about just a little more time on the code. I think we are making good progress. Where were we?”

“Here,” Harry said pointing to the sheet of paper as they sat again at the table.

//////////
Joe oon aneo in a e icals

“At the end – a word ending in ‘icals’ – opticals, theatricals – Let me look up the rhyming dictionary on line. . . . Diddley Wopers – there are hundreds, Grampa. Most of them long, however, so that may help. The letter T seems to frequently come before the I in those words. Shall I pencil that in?”

“Sure. Looks like only one of those letters, however. Oh, oh. The eighth letter is the same as the first. We missed it. Let me add that in, too.”

//////////
Joe oon janeo in a e ticals

“That gives us, janeo.”

“Or, it gives use Jane O ___ I N . . . ,” Harry said.

“I see. Seems like an odd place for a name unless what’s in between Joe and Jane is a middle name.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm.”

Harry spoke.

“Notice the fourth letter comes before the letter O and the thirteenth letter comes after the letter O and they are both the same letter according to the code.”

“I see.”

Gary began running the alphabet to see if any letter seemed to fit in both places.

“B makes Boon and then OB later. . . . K makes Koon and then OK later. That makes the most sense so far. I’ll pencil them in.”

//////////
Joe koon janeok ink a a e ticals

“So, we have ‘Joe Koon Jane ok’, which could be the first four words and the OK could be part of what follows. Not sure they make sense,” Harry said.

“Could, if it was a man’s name – Joe Koon – from Jane, Oklahoma – OK,” Gary said.

“So, it could. Get after that blank before ink.”

“Fink, link, mink, pink, rink, sink, wink.”

“Removing those that don’t make sense here, we have link, and maybe pink or rink,” Harry said.

“We missed another one, Grampa. The eighth letter in from the end is the same as the forth from last – C. Let me add that.

//////////
Joe koon janeok ink a ace ticals

“Good catch, son. Just six letters left and the one before ink and after ink are the same.”

“We still have that infrequently used vowel, U, we haven’t Used.”

Gary giggled still thinking it was humorous.

“Try it in all the blanks and see if anything happens,” Harry suggested.

“Won’t work between the K and I – kui – I don’t think so. Can’t say in the next two sets of blanks. What about eUt?”

“With *that* you may have solved it, Gary. Fill in the blanks here: __ a __aceuticals.”

Gary loved a good challenge; he looked at it straight on. He put his chin on the table and looked at it from a strange angle. He turned his head slightly and looked at it out of the corners of his eyes. He was about to stand on his hands from the seat of his chair when it hit him – “PHARMACEUTICALS!” [Medicines and legal drugs you get from the pharmacy.]

“And filling in the only remaining blank with the P you just supplied, we have . . .”

He waited for Gary’s drum roll, fingers to the edge of the table.

“Joe Koon. Jane, OK. Pink Pharmaceuticals.”

“Let’s look it all up.”

Gary moved to his laptop.

“First, is there a Jane Oklahoma? . . . Yup, a tiny place. Is there a company called Pink Pharmaceuticals? . . . Yes, and, (it was worth a pause for another drum roll) it is located in Jane, Oklahoma. Are we good or are we good!”

It required a short dance – moves Harry was sure he’d never seen before.

“So, what do we do with the information?” Gary asked at last.

“I suppose try to figure out what it might mean. If it is an ad for the drug company it’s a very odd way to spread the news, I’d say.”

“Oh, that’s right. We really don’t know what it means. Hmm?”

“Okay. What *do* we know?” Harry asked.

“Well, we know information has been prepared to pass along in a very secret manner about Joe Koon, at Pink Pharmaceuticals in Jane, Oklahoma. We have no idea why, but I think we can assume it’s not an invitation to his surprise birthday party – more likely to his earthly demise (death) party.”

“That is my feeling about it also,” Harry said. “We know from what little contact we’ve had that the player who has entered our lives is not a nice man. Men who are not nice can be expected to do not nice things to other people.”

“But since I changed the pins in the music box, whoever the bad guy is, he didn’t get the proper message. As far as that message is concerned there is no Joe Koon, no reference to Jane, Oklahoma, or Pink Pharmaceuticals.”

“We have to wonder how he will react when the message is nothing but gibberish (nonsense) – contact the source in Europe or try to find out if we know anything.

“I vote for *not us* if I get a vote.”

“That makes two for our side,” Harry said. “Since we didn’t try to block his access after we got his note and since he must know we are new to the shop, we just may come out looking innocent in it all.”

“Should we tell our handler, anyway?” Gary asked.

“I’m quite sure he knows of both the break-in and

tonight's visit. If he thought we were in danger, he'd alert us."

"You have a lot of faith in him."

"Up to now he and his agency have done a pretty fair job for us, wouldn't you say?"

"I guess."

"If you would feel better we can put a note together for him and put it in the mailbox at the post office."

"I've been wondering about that. Couldn't we just wait in hiding and watch for who comes to check that box every day and find out who he is."

"I assume he has permission to remove it from the back of the box, out of sight."

"Oh! Smart. You were way ahead of me on that one. I think I'd like for us to write that note. Tomorrow. I'm tired."

"I am as well. See you in the morning."

* * *

They had breakfast at home. It allowed them privacy in which to construct the note to their handler about their recent experiences. Gary wrote it out by hand as they ate. He made it a good deal more detailed than Harry would have, but the boy was the one who needed to pass on the information. He sealed it in an envelope, which he addressed to: Raphael, In care of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Blue Shadow, Arkansas. He thought it was hilarious.

Again, they walked to town. At the back door of the shop, Harry entered – careful not to smudge any fingerprints laid down the night before – and Gary ran on to the post office with the envelope containing the note. He lingered a bit behind the Dulcimer Shop hoping the young lady of his dreams might be there or see him through the window. She wasn't and apparently didn't.

Back at the shop, Gary powdered the door knobs, found good fresh prints, and took pictures of them from several angles. The night before, when Harry had left the door open, he had taken the precaution of wiping the knob clean.

Inside, Gary had things to say – big surprise!

"Got a clear set of prints, Grampa. I'm glad we sent the note. On the way back, it came to me that maybe that Joe

Koon guy is going to be killed by a hit man and the way the hit man gets his jobs is by the coded messages on our music boxes.”

“Yes. Big Bad hitmen are known to spend so much time with delicate little Music Boxes.”

“That does conjure up a very funny image, doesn’t it?”

He giggled.

“I also wondered if Joe’s apparent employment at a drug company might have something to do with drug trafficking. Maybe we stumbled into a world of international mobsters, hit men and drug dealers. That’s scary.”

“And maybe our handler is just testing us to see how we would react to such a problem.”

“Now THAT *never* entered my mind. You think? Really?”

“Actually, no. Just trying to counterbalance your runaway imagination.”

“Thank you, then. Consider it counterbalanced.”

“You’re welcome, then. And I will.”

Gary often did his school work up in the office/loft. When things got busy down below he would go help. About mid-morning he made his way down the steps – uncharacteristically quietly. Harry noticed and moved to the rear of the shop to meet him. Gary whispered.

“The man in the green shirt and cowboy boots. He has been turning over every music box in a systematic fashion – not missing a single one. Me and my runaway imagination were thinking he might be checking the serial numbers stamped into them on the under sides. Maybe he’s looking for another one with the ‘joe . . . cal’s’ imprint. Maybe he’s the one who came and got the one we messed up and thinks there may be a second one in here.”

“I won’t say those aren’t real possibilities. Are you making a suggestion of some kind?”

“Hmm. I wasn’t, but an idea did just come to mind. How about if I go to the police station and see what they have on the alley camera that we said might have a shot of the burglar’s face?”

“I have no objection – probably a fine idea even. I assume you brought the stills you took off the security feed

from last night.”

“Of course.”

He procured (got) them from his backpack and left through the alley.

Harry approached the man.

“May I help you with anything?” he asked offering a broad smile.

“Just looking. Wife’s birthday coming up. Just passing through. Saw the sign. She’s a nut for stuff like this.”

“Well, we certainly have to count on that sort of nut in order to survive. Any particular tune you’re looking for?”

“Well, I suppose, Happy Birthday, would be appropriate.”

“I’m the new owner here. I’ve ordered several with that tune, but none have come in yet. I could take a name or phone number and contact you with the information if you like.”

“No. I’m really just looking, like I said. Got almost two months so I got time.”

“Fine. You know where we are if you decide we can help.”

Harry moved on to another customer. Cowboy Boots left. Twenty minutes later Gary returned. The shop was empty.

“That alley cam got a full face shot just after he pulled off the mask. Chief Pepper said he was going to contact you later this morning about the two breaking and entering footages they got from the alley cameras. Said it was a snafu (glitch, delay) there in the department not to have gotten to us yesterday. He apologizes, but now we have two chances to find that face. He let me copy the two sections of the videos that we need.”

“Copied?”

Gary pulled a flash drive from his rear jeans pocket.

“Never leave home without one.”

He offered a smile. Harry patted him on his back and scooted him on up the steps. Harry had one more thing to say.

“I suppose we should . . .”

Gary interrupted”

“. . . should run through this morning’s tape of the shop, find the section of Cowboy Boots man, see if we have a good face shot and print it off.”

“Yes, that’s what I was thinking.”

A customer entered and Harry went to help her. Ten minutes later she had left with an expensive clock. Once she was gone Gary called down.

“Six hundred dollars in one sale! Looks like another steak dinner tonight.”

He went back down stairs. There were twelve steps. He seldom used more than seven – often just five.

“Got the pictures. All the same guy. No doubt. Pepper – the police chief – said he would run the face through the law enforcement database if we wanted him to. It almost seemed he knew things about us nobody should know. Think he might be our handler?”

“Who knows? I was going to vote for it to be a certain thirteen-year-old girl who seems to want to spend time with you.”

“That would be fantastic. You were just kidding, of course.”

“About the ‘handler’ part, yes. About the ‘wanting to spend time with you part, no. She stopped in while you were gone. I mentioned to her that you wanted to take her to lunch at Hanks this noon. She said she’d meet you there at eleven.”

“She said that? *You* said that? You’re the sneakiest Grandpa I’ve ever had. Thank you. What time is it? Glad I waited until this morning to shower. I really need to buy a comb.”

Harry handed him a twenty-dollar bill.

“Lunch and comb money. By the way, what do you think of Pepper’s idea about the face recognition search?”

“I already told him yes, but to wait to see if we had a better shot from this morning. I think we do. I’ll run it down to him on my way to lunch. Did I tell you that you are the best Grampa ever?”

“Something like that. It’s 10:46. Be gone!”

Harry smiled and chuckled a few minutes later as he watched the boy pacing the sidewalk across the street in front of the restaurant. He must have checked his breath, armpits

and combed his hair a half dozen times in five minutes. She arrived. He moved to meet her half way across the street. She offered him her hand. He took it. Harry was just happy he hadn't tried to shake it instead. Sometimes boys that age weren't sure how to react to girls. That was just fine. As Gary had said, thirteen was an important time to learn and perfect (master) the things he'd need to know about later on.

Gary re-entered the shop at 12:01.

"She had to be back at noon. She's home schooled, too. I didn't know that. We thought maybe sometimes we could study together."

"I thought that's what you were doing?" Harry said with a big smile.

"Grampa!!! Not that kind of studying. I'm serious here."

"I think studying together would be fine so long as what you are studying pertains (relates) to your school work."

"Sometimes you're no fun at all!"

He offered a smile.

Gary's phone rang. He answered and immediately handed it to Harry.

"It's Pepper. For you."

"Hello. This is Harry Thomas. Thanks for all the attention you're giving our little problem."

"You're more than welcome. We got a hit on the face – Wilbur Comfort, a bad guy with a rap sheet many pages long. No outstanding warrants at this time, however. We can bring him in to question him about the break in if you want."

"Let's let it go, at least for a while. If we can leave it at that I'll appreciate it."

"Certainly. Just be alert. Like I said, he seems to have no redeeming (good) qualities."

Gary had been listening with his ear up against the phone and spoke as Harry hung up and handed the phone back.

"Why not lay the letter of the law to the man, Grampa?"

"I have the feeling he's just the tip of the iceberg, son – the messenger boy for some bigger and badder organization."

"We just got over dealing with a big bad organization back in Punkin' Hollar. You sure you really want to get involved with another one?"

“It seems to me you are the one who has been the most interested up to now.”

Gary grinned.

“I suppose I have. We can’t overlook a good mystery, can we? Another of those genetic things, I’m thinking.”

It was worth a chuckle between them.

“Speaking of being Cracker Jack (the best) crime stoppers,” Gary said, “did you notice anything about Cowboy Boot man’s boots today?”

“I did. Red sand deposits in the seam between the sole and the body of the boots. The alleys here in Blue Shadow are covered in that red sand/gravel mix. Another indicator he was the one here last night. Not conclusive, but a possibility for sure.”

“Or,” Gary added, “it may provide clues about where he stays – lots of red rock around this territory.”

The afternoon was slow, again. Five fifteen found them at the Ozarks Pizzeria. That sounded better than steak to Harry and Gary put up no argument. Grampa heard more about Julie – and was happy to. As he listened he was impressed about the traits she had that Gary admired – smart, inquisitive, compassionate, liked to volunteer, loved little children and old people. The list seemed to be a duplicate of Gary’s traits. Only once did he mention she was nice looking. She was nice looking – not beautiful; Gary’s infatuation (having a crush) with her had not clouded his appraisal (judgment) of looks, the way it often does with young men. Grampa was pleased inner goodness outranked surface beautiful for the boy.

On the way home, they stopped at the Post Office at Gary’s insistence. He hoped their handler had responded. He wasn’t disappointed.

“I suppose we should wait until we get home to read it,” He said.

“I think you’re right. I’ll race you.”

“What. Really.”

“One stipulation (rule), son: you have to run backwards.”

“I’ll still cream you.”

The race lasted about two minutes until Harry pulled

up, puffing. Gary had been right – he creamed him. Harry was *still* puffing when they entered the kitchen a few minutes later. Smiles and chuckles wouldn't stop.

With the lights on, they sat next to each other at the table. Gary read the note.

"We were aware the shop had been some part of a messaging system by an international gun for hire organization, but have been fully unable to figure it out. The previous owner was a plant by that organization from Central Europe. We knew the connection on that end, but could never get beyond your shop. I must admit when the agency was discussing the problem your names were brought up by your contact back in Punkin' Hollar."

Gary stopped and looked up.

"That has to be Mike. Seems we're famous at the CIA. How about that?"

He turned back to the letter.

"We have had eyes – real and electronic – on you every moment of every day. You were never in any danger. You two amaze me, well, us – there have been seven of us here watching over you. We have Comfort in custody and he's singing like a Jenny Wren. It will be the end of their use of your shop. For your information, the name you deciphered – Koon – was the vice president of a pharmaceutical company who had betrayed a drug ring. They had put out the hit on him. You saved his life by hours, probably. We'll down size the number of eyes here and turn off the cameras unless you say otherwise by tomorrow noon. Hope you can just relax and have a great life here in *Blue Shadow*. By the way, Gary, it's said you have managed to turn the head of all the boys' dream girl here in town – Julie, I believe is her name. I may ask you for suggestions once my divorce is final."

"Well, that was not at all what I expected to be hearing, son."

"Me either. *All* the boys *want* her. Did you hear that?"

Harry chuckled. *He* was referring to the crime, the danger, the hit man, the drug dealers, the CIA attention and such.

Gary went to the refrigerator.

"Pop?"

“No, I’m ‘*Grampa*’. How many times do I have to remind you of that?”

Gary smiled and brought him the only kind he ever drank, diet Pepsi.

“Do you have any idea how you came by your absurd sense of humor, *Grampa*?”

“You would have had to know my parents. They were what I have heard you refer to as ‘Wacko Birds’. Therein lays the answer.”

“I wish I’d have known them. I have lots of questions about you as boy that I’d really like to have asked them.”

“You know I’ll answer you the best I can.”

“It would have been more fun humiliating you in front of them.”

“You better watch it, kid. You know I’m not too old to . . . well, yes I probably am, actually.”

They chuckled, held a long hug and then went to their rooms.

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CHAPTER FOUR

A Dead Guy? Well, Sort Of!

In November and December, the shops were not open on Sunday so the two of them had a free day. Gary moved his special day with Julie from Saturday to Sunday – afternoon – one until four as determined by her parents. It was still early morning. Harry was lingering at the kitchen table draining the coffee pot while reading the paper. Gary decided to take the time to do some exploring he had intended to do ever since they arrived. The ceiling in his room was only seven and a half feet high, an easy reach while standing on a chair. The ceiling was made of eight-inch-wide wooden boards, each piece having a decorative groove along one edge. There were similar grooves running across those boards dividing the ceiling into squares, making an attractive looking expanse. From the first time he laid back on his bed, something about it had caught his eye. A section of the ceiling in the center of the room seemed to be just a bit out of place – off center. The lines made by the boards didn't match up exactly. He suspected it was an opening into the large attic up above, but had been constructed in such a way to keep it disguised.

Earlier he had learned from the Post Mistress – also the town's historian – that their cabin – the section where the bedrooms were – had been built before the Civil War in 1840. The kitchen/sitting room had been added in the early 1900s and the entire cabin had been modernized with electricity and plumbing in the 1950s.

He pulled his desk chair to a spot directly under the odd

section of the ceiling. He found it was easy to reach from there, but push as he would, it didn't budge. Well, it did give a centimeter or so telling him it was not a part of the main ceiling. He got down and stood back to look it over in more detail. One of Harry's, *'Mason Jordan'*, mystery books came to mind. It was set in an old mansion with secret panels and such. They opened by pressing on or turning one thing or another. He looked the walls up and down searching for some such thing. He tried pushing and pulling on the trim around the windows and the door – even the rods that held the long, red drapes.

He remembered that when they first arrived, he had wanted to move the big old bed from where it was to a spot under the window. The bed would not move – it was affixed to the floor. He hadn't thought much about it again until that moment.

'Part of the bed, maybe,' he thought.

He began examining everything on the bed that looked like it could be turned or pulled, pushed or twisted. It had bulky, heavy legs at all four corners with ornate (fancy) feet, carved to look like bear claws. It had a high wooden headboard with a crown-like carving sitting in the middle on top. He crawled up on his bed and began examining that. It sat up against the east wall. With virtually no effort at all, the crown swung down toward him as if on a hinge. There was noise above him – that little section in the ceiling swung down, also on a set of hinges. He got the flashlight from his dresser, remounted the chair and lit the area above him. His eyes were just high enough so he could see across the attic floor. On tiptoes, he could look around the area. He laid the flashlight up inside and pulled himself into the attic. He had to smile as he pictured his Grampa trying to make that same move.

The attic was floored. The steep roof allowed good headroom so men could stand up easily across most of it. He searched the west wall, the north wall, the east wall, the – oh, oh!

"Grampa!" he called down through the opening. "Bring the ladder. I got a surprise up here."

Harry arrived immediately without the ladder, not

having understood the cryptic (incomplete) message.

“What?”

“You need to see what’s up here and you’ll need the step ladder to make the climb.”

A few minutes later Harry was peeking up over the floor into the attic using his own flashlight. Gary focused his light on the southeast corner. Harry followed his lead.

“My. My. What do we have here?” he said climbing the rest of the way and joining Gary.

“Never expected to find the skeleton of a Union (northern) Soldier up here, I’ll tell you that.”

“I hadn’t noticed the blue uniform and USA on the right shoulder. Union for sure. Feet still in his boots and his hat still on his head. Let’s see, the Civil War was over in 1865, right?”

“Right.”

“So, that makes this guy something like 180 years old depending on his age when he died. I wonder how he died? Maybe at that *Battle of Little Red River* Julie told me about.”

Harry moved closer and knelt down to examine the remains – only clothing and bones. Gary followed.

“What do you see, son?”

“A dead guy!”

“Granted, it’s a dead guy. But look for more specific things.”

“Ok. Spider webs fill his eye sockets. He’s leaning back at an odd angle, like half lying down and half propped up against the corner.”

“Center, left side of his coat,” Harry said pointing.

“Oh, a little hole. A bullet you think?”

“Could well be. Get some pictures before we disturb anything. Need more light?”

“This will be plenty. You hold the flashlights and I’ll use the flash.”

He snapped half a dozen shots – various angles – close ups and full length.

“Let’s see if we can loosen the jacket,” Harry said. “The buttons will probably fall off –rotten thread, I imagine.”

Surprisingly, only one did. The others slipped through the button holes without any problem. Harry pulled the coat open. He pointed to the little hole in the shirt at the same

place – the black stain of dried blood surrounding it. The shirt was a pullover and between the two of them they carefully raised it up to what would have been the armpits.

“A broken rib,” Gary pointed out.

“And, right at the place the ball from the bullet would have hit it according to the holes we found in the jacket and shirt. This man received a near miss to his heart. Put it all together, Gary.”

“Well, a Yankee soldier – a private from the single stripe on his coat – got hit in the upper chest during a battle, somehow made his way up here – probably to hide – sat back against the corner and later died probably of the wound although it could have also been from lack of water and food. He seems extremely thin.”

He laughed himself into hysterics (happy fits), thinking his ‘thin’ remark about a Skelton was very funny.

Harry chuckled and spoke.

“I think there is something inside his shirt pocket – his right one – to our left.”

“Looks like a small sized yellow pad.”

“I sincerely doubt if they had yellow pads back in the 1860s, Gary.”

Gary shrugged and grinned. It hadn’t been intended as a joke, but he’d be glad to take credit for one, if that’s how it played out. It didn’t.

“I think your slenderer fingers have a better chance of removing it without damaging anything than mine.”

Gary went to work all quite carefully. He had soon slipped it out and handed it to Harry.

“A small, long, narrow book with a pencil slipped down between the cover and the spine. It’ll probably be brittle after all those years,” Gary said. “We’ll need to be very careful when we open it.”

“Good thinking. I’ll slip it into my shirt pocket for safe keeping. That ball that broke his rib may be here somewhere. If it was lodged in his flesh or internal organs it would have fallen free as the body dried up.”

“Yuck! Grampa. That’s awful.”

“You mean it’s awful to think about what happens to a body under these circumstances?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

“You want us to just leave, then?”

“No. I want to look. I just don’t want your play by play commentary.”

“A deal.”

Before they left they had found the iron ball, a large, iron belt buckle, a few coins in his pants pocket, a knife in a sheath at his right ankle, a powder pouch and a fabric sack containing a few iron balls, which were the bullets of that day. Wrapped in a piece of blood stained silk was a section of pliable leather.

As they were preparing to leave they stepped back and looked over the scene one last time.

“Something odd about that boot heel,” Gary said, moving back to kneel and examine it.

That time, Harry followed. Gary had been correct. The bottom covering of the heel had separated from the rest of it. He snapped picture.

“The heel is hollow and there is something up inside there. Folded paper I think.”

“Can you keep it in tact (all in one piece) while you remove it?”

“Let’s see. Maybe if I use the small blade on my pocket knife I can ease it out. Why a hollow heel, do you think?”

“It was a common way for spies to carry secret messages during the Civil War.”

“If everybody knew it was a common way, it doesn’t seem like a very smart way to carry a secret message.”

“I can’t argue with your logic, son, although I imagine if you didn’t know who the spy was it would be impossible to examine all the heels on all the boots that were a part of an army.”

Gary nodded.

“There, got it. Your shirt pocket, too?”

“I suppose so.”

Harry pulled his pocket open wider and Gary made his deposit.

“I’m thinking paper that old will crack at every fold when we try to open it,” Harry said.

“When we get down stairs I can Google about working

with old paper documents. I'll bet there are ways of doing it that won't destroy it."

"Interesting. You think of Google, first. I think of Google, last."

"There has always been Google for me, Grampa – unlike for you. It was founded way back on September 4th, 1998 you know."

"Of course, I don't know and I can't imagine how you could possibly know that."

Gary giggled.

"I just Googled for the information about Google so I could impress you."

"Mission successful," Harry said while Gary bent over in a major laugh attack, obviously more humorous to him than his grandfather.

Downstairs they stayed in Gary's room so he could easily use his laptop – far more powerful than Harry's old dinosaur of a desk top that he used for his writing. He searched the web for several minutes.

"Here's the best idea, I think. We still got a humidifier, don't we?"

"Yes. A warm water, steam humidifier."

"Okay, we add a quart of water and then lots of something called oil of cloves. We arrange a small tent from the opening in the humidifier – like a towel, I suppose. We put the book and paper inside the tent so when the oil gets hot, the oil vapors seep into the paper with the steam. After several hours, it says the paper should be pliable. What do you think?"

"Is the source of that information reputable? Not everything on the internet is, you know."

"Let me look here at the bottom. Library of Congress."

"I'll accept that as a trustworthy source. We don't have any clove oil. Call the drug store and see if they have any. Probably get two or three ounces."

A few moments later Gary had the answer.

"They got it. Seems expensive. Google says it's mostly used to ease toothaches."

"That's right. When I was a little boy it was the universal treatment for tooth aches – well, that and pulling the

tooth. We'd swish salt water around in our mouth first to kill as many bacteria as possible and then apply the oil with a cotton swab on the tooth and the surrounding gum. Also, used it for earaches."

"Did it work?"

"Almost always."

"What do you mean, almost always?"

"I mean it worked unless it didn't."

"That's no answer, you know."

"Time for you to shut up, you know."

The exchange garnered (brought out) smiles.

By eleven o'clock both the book and the piece of folded paper had been treated.

"That clove oil really smells great," Gary said making it a point to sniff the air several times.

Harry nodded as he worked to open the book. It was much more pliable than before, but he decided to stand it up with pages spread open so the fumes of the oil could have more complete access to the paper and the spine. He added a little more water and more oil and put it back under the towel tent they had built on the table.

Gary had already begun the process of carefully unfolding the piece of paper, which had absorbed the fumes more completely than the more compact book. It didn't crack and, unexpectedly, it even lay relatively flat against the table.

"It seems to be a letter between two generals – from General Earl Van Dorn to General Thomas Hindman. Those northern or southern Generals?"

"Google them. If memory serves me right they are southern. If that's correct, it puts an interesting twist on things – a secret message between two Confederate Generals being carried in the heel of a private in the United States Army."

"Think our guy was a Confederate Spy wearing a Union Uniform?"

"That's an interesting idea. See if we can make out the message."

Gary began to read. It had been written in pencil so hadn't run and was probably better preserved than ink would have been. Still, it had faded some.

Honorable General Thomas Hindman, CSA

With the completion of the railroad into Little Rock, supplies will now flow year-round from and to the railroad and the White River connection. Expect a Negro supply force to arrive in late April, 1862. Make no engagements with enemy until after supplies arrive. I may be able to send additional troops. Scouts suggest a Yankee force heading south from central Missouri under General Sam Curtis toward northwest Arkansas, where you are located.

Most cordially yours,

General Earl Van Dorn, CSA

[CSA referred to the Confederate States of America – the south.]

“Sounds important,” Gary said. “Since it was never delivered I wonder what effect it might have had on the war.”

“That sounds like a great American History assignment you have just given yourself.”

“Yeah. This will be soooooo cool. Can I tell Julie?”

“I guess I’m not the one to say. Something to think about, however. We don’t really know what we have, here, yet. Maybe see what she knows about the battle that took place here on this river and any other things about the Civil War in North West Arkansas.”

“Makes sense. Not very romantic, but it makes sense. Maybe this afternoon while I’m with her you can take time to see what the book has to say.”

“Just try to keep me from it, young man.”

“Well, I could try to tempt you into coming along. She has a very attractive grandmother.”

“Really?”

“Of course not, well, I guess I really don’t know. I was just pulling your leg. I can find out if you want me to.”

Harry repeatedly raised his eyebrows as if playing at saying, yes, without really saying, yes. They would see what they would see. It was the first-time Harry had heard the lad use the word, ‘romantic’ in relation to him and a girl. It surprised him. The boy was clearly becoming a young man. He knew that, of course, and noted to himself that he needed to make sure he treated him accordingly.

They had corned beef hash, toast, and fruit salad for lunch. Soon after that, Gary left for town and his time – perhaps, *romantic* time – with Julie. Harry turned off the humidifier and began looking through the book. Like Gary had mentioned, the cabin had taken on a fine aroma. The two additional hours in the tent had made the spine much more pliable and the pages suppler (flexible). The book was a diary or journal kept by a 17-year-old soldier – the one whose remains had been living with them all very quietly in the attic. Harry spent several hours going through it, amazed at the beautiful handwriting and the eloquent (moving) way in which the boy used his ample (large) vocabulary to relate his feelings and the experiences he had witnessed.

At 4:10 Gary came trotting into the kitchen.

“Grampa! Got lots of stuff.”

Harry turned in his swivel, recliner and looked across the room into the kitchen area hoping to get some idea of what the boy meant.

“I stopped and got us burgers and fries and fried pies and ice cream sundaes at Tiny Tim’s. We hiked all over the place. I’m famished. Let me put the ice cream in the freezer. The rest should still be hot. Timed myself. From the café to our door – two minutes’ flat. Ten bucks. You can’t beat that.”

Smiles as Harry moved to meet him. Gary began emptying the bags. Harry tore sections off the roll of paper towels to double as plates and napkins.

“I’m dehydrated so I’m having water,” Gary said. “Same for you?”

“That will be fine.”

Gary often made unilateral (one-sided) decisions like that when he was certain he was fully correct about something.

“I got stuff about the battles and the area around here. You get anything from the book?”

“I did. It’s the young man’s journal. His name was Private Perry Miller from a farm near a town named Pontiac, Illinois. He had finished training just a month before he was wounded. He had fought in what I believe was the battle that took place west of Blue Shadow – between there and here. He refers to it as the battle at Little Red River. Apparently the

two forces came upon each other unexpectedly. The way he tells it, there weren't many men involved – maybe a hundred or so on each side. The locals may have augmented (grew) its importance as they retold it down through the years. I can't even find it listed as a Civil War battle. Anyway, he wrote that they – the Union Company – lost a third of their men and he figured the Rebs, as he called them, lost many more. It began sometime after midnight. The Union apparently took the Confederate soldiers by surprise. By sun up the Confederate troops seemed to have pulled back. His company was moving west to meet up with a large force coming from the north under the command of General Curtis. They were also keeping their eyes out for a Confederate stash of gold and currency rumored to be in that – this – area. After the battle, they started west, planning to make camp on a ridge, mid-morning. His captain left him and two others behind for burial duty. They worked until the sun was up above the hill to the east.

Back when he was given his uniform, upon enlisting in Illinois, they were out of boots so he was forced to continue wearing his high-top farm shoes. They were pretty worn out. That night after the battle, he came upon a dead Confederate soldier with brand new boots that fit him perfectly. He took them. So, apparently, *that* Confederate soldier was the one originally carrying the message to General Hindman who was defeated at Pea Ridge after moving to attack the US force coming south.

“So, if Hindman had gotten the message and would have waited like the message told him to do, that battle might have gone the other way.”

“That's the way it looks from what we have here to piece together, at least.”

“Julie told me about the battles at Pea Ridge and Cane Hill. There was another one in the same general area I can't remember. War is just terrible, you know.”

“You'll get no argument from me. Let me finish his story – his life, really. He made several final entries. One soon after he and the other two began burying the dead. Let me find it here. It is intriguing.

February 25th. Middle of the night. On the Little Red

River, ARK: My first encounter with the enemy. In my fantasies, I had pictured them as old men and convinced myself it would not be unchristian to kill them because they had made mature judgements to come north and kill us. But most of them were kids like us. After I fired my rifle across the water the first time I puked. I wanted to run away. I hadn't come here to kill other kids.

After the battle, two other new recruits and I were given grave detail. It was horrible. The smoke from the battle hung over the area like a thick, blue, fog that obscured (blocked) my vision beyond two rods (30 feet). It continued to make it difficult to breath. I did get a new pair of boots I salvaged from a Reb. They fit perfectly and should take me many hundreds of miles on down the road. That soldier had a silk cloth hanging out of his rear pocket. I had lost my neckerchief so thought I would see if it would serve my purposes. In it was wrapped a piece of tanned leather and on it had been executed (drawn) a map and several words. I guess in the smoke my eyes had blurred because it took me a few moments before I could make out the figures on the skin. In fact, at first glance I believed it was blank. The best I can surmise is that it documents the location of the Reb stash of gold and perhaps additional funds and supplies we had been told to look for. It pictures a cabin on a creek the best I can tell. There are the words 'subterranean' (underground) and 'entrance' and a 'G' on toward the left side of the creek. I will turn it over to my Captain when we meet up with our force later this morning.

"One of the final entries pulls things together for us.

As we were finishing up our detail and making ready to leave the area, shots rang out from the Reb side of the water. My companions were killed instantly. I have been hit in the chest. I will seek shelter and ascertain (determine) how serious my wound may be.

"Then in nearly illegible handwriting he adds:"

In attic of a cabin that was obviously recently used as a Reb headquarters. I can't stop my bleeding."

"What a story, Grampa. Is that all that's in it?"

"No. That's just the final page of probably thirty or forty. The first entry was made the day he left the family farm in

Illinois and left on foot for the recruiting and training station to the south at Springfield.”

“I want to read that.”

“I want you to read it. Contains a lot of important things to think about.”

“So?” Gary said beginning to clean up the table. “What do you think about the map? We didn’t find it.”

“Maybe not, maybe yes,” Harry said.

“I don’t get your meaning. I can finish your fries if you need me to.”

“I really do need you to. Thanks.”

They exchanged smiles and Harry offered an explanation of his cryptic (incomplete) answer.

“Did you notice anything odd in his last entry?”

“That the cabin had been a Confederate headquarters? We didn’t find any evidence of that.”

“I assume that was downstairs and has been gone for a 150 year.”

“Hmm. Oh, yes, I did notice it while you were reading and then got distracted by licking the salt out of my fry container.”

“Nothing like full disclosure of the commonplace. Salt raises your blood pressure, you know.”

“Yes, I do. Figured it’s important to have blood pressure. Lose it and you end up like our soldier boy – what was his name, again?”

“Perry – Perry Miller.”

“Later on, maybe we need to put up like a head stone for him outside. Something like, ‘Here lies Private Perry Miller, 17, died in the Battle of the Little Red River, February 24th, 1862.’”

“I think that would be most appropriate.”

“Maybe we could do a search for his ancestors and let them know we found him. Oh, no. He died at 17. He didn’t have the chance to have children, did he? War! I hate it! It sounds like maybe a hundred more young men died on both sides before *they* could have children, either. What a waste. One of them might have had a child who would have grown up to be president of the United States or might have invented the doodly boop processer.”

“The what?”

“Yes. *That’s* the question. No telling what wonderful thing he might have invented – a cure for Alzheimer’s maybe.”

“One piece of unsolicited (not requested) advice for you if I may, young man.”

“Of course, you may, *old* man.”

“Learn from man’s mistakes in the past and don’t repeat them – don’t let them destroy you. Live in the present and plan for a wonder-filled tomorrow for you and the future generations.”

“Is that Harry Thomas or is that a quote from somebody else.”

“It came from Harry, but I am sure it has been expressed thousands of times by thoughtful men of good will down through the centuries.

“Seems like nobody ever took it very seriously, you know – still wars, starving people, uncontrolled illness.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

The 'Invisible' Map

"But the piece of leather is blank on both sides, Grampa. That's a major disappointment."

"I believe that may present more of a mystery than a disappointment, my boy."

"I don't understand."

"Think with me on this. With what would you mark a piece of leather?"

"Probably ink. Doubt if pencil lead would even stick."

"That was my take, also. Now, what happens when ink is applied to a porous surface like well-tanned leather?"

"Well, clearly some would stick to the surface and I suppose some would sink into the leather itself."

"Again, my thinking. How likely is that to just disappear even after all these years? Even his pencil work is still on the pages of paper he wrote on in his journal."

"Not very likely, I suppose. Hmm?"

"Hmm, indeed," Harry said.

Presently Gary added a thought.

"We think we have established that the Confederate soldier was a carrier of secret messages. Maybe he was carrying another secret message. The map. On the leather. And, Perry, picked it up, all unplanned."

"That is certainly plausible (possible). Does it take us anywhere?"

They moved to the sitting area at the south side of the big room to the west. Gary broke out the Mountain Dew and

the Diet Pepsi. He preferred to stretch out on the blue couch under the windows. Harry liked the matching blue recliner across the braided rug and low table from the couch. They were looking forward to winter evenings there in front of the leaping flames in the stone fireplace on the west wall. During conversation, Gary typically turned onto his side so he was facing his grandfather.

Clouds began blowing in from the southwest – usually the sign of a major thunderstorm even at that time of year. They both enjoyed storms – the power, the sounds, the brightening of the sky by the bolts of lightning. The cabin had proved to be completely weather tight fending off both rain and wind with ease. The strongest of the winds usually sailed high overhead since the cabin was in a valley between two tall hills – mountains as they were called there in the Ozarks. They took only casual note of the change in the weather and got back to work.

“So, looking at the piece of leather as a mystery rather than a disappointment, what does it give us?” Gary asked.

“One question comes to mind – two actually; how did the markings come to disappear and is there some way to get them back?”

“Good way of moving on from disappointment,” Gary said. “If it was on paper I’d have to wonder about the use of invisible ink – you know, write in lemon juice using a toothpick as a pen. Let it dry. It becomes invisible until you hold the page over a flame. But I doubt that’s the case with leather.”

“I wondered the same sort of thing. Putting it on leather makes me think somebody was going for permanent rather than temporary – what do you think?”

“Much of the time *I think* Julie is the nicest girl I’ve ever known and that her hands are very soft and . . .”

He couldn’t continue for giggling, knowing that was not what Harry had been referring to.

“Please, continue fantasizing. I have lots of time.”

“I can get serious. Here’s an idea. We could google invisible writing on leather.”

“It’s worth a shot, I suppose. I’m constantly amazed at the things one can goog and actually get a useful response. Maybe add something about smoke to your search.”

Smoke? Interesting. Give me a minute.”

Harry became quiet, wondering whether or not one person could really give another person a *minute*. Another long, hmmm.

“You are more brilliant than you can possibly realize, Grampa. Listen to this. A mixture of potash and sulfur, mixed in clear oil has been used for centuries to write invisible messages on well-tanned leather, and to make it reappear the material just has to be subjected to smoke.”

“It sheds a new light on one of Perry’s passages,” Harry said, “the part about not being able to see anything on the leather when he first unwrapped it, but then he thought something about his eyes adjusting to the smoke eventually allowed him to see it. Actually, it was most likely the piece of leather adjusting to the smoke that made the marks visible.”

“Let’s try. I’ll build a small fire in the fireplace. What makes smoke?”

“Relatively green wood and dried leaves release a good deal of white smoke.”

Gary left and was back within a few minutes clutching a load of twigs and leaves to his chest. The wind had done a job on his hair. A few minutes later he had brushed the hair out of his eyes and had a smoky fire going. Harry handed him the piece of leather. Gary passed it through the smoke a number of times on one side and then turned it over and repeated the process.

“You see this, Grampa? It’s working. I wonder how long things will stay visible on it.”

“Long enough for you get pictures, I’m sure.”

“Good thinking – again. I was going to draw it all out on paper. You’re on fire this evening.”

He lay it on the stone hearth and got several shots of both sides. The little fire had soon died out.

“Our first fire. That was nice. We need to start having one every evening now that’s it started to cool off when the sun goes down.”

“Good idea. I think there will be a saw and axe involved first however. You’ve noticed the small stack of logs behind the cabin, I’m sure.”

“Be a great work out. Girls like boys with muscles.

Julie said that's one of the things she likes about me."

"That you are a boy?"

Gary grinned.

"Well, yes, but you know what I mean."

Harry returned the smile.

"Let's get the best of those pictures printed out on my printer."

They moved to Harry's room and it had soon been accomplished. Gary laid them side by side on the desk – front and back.

"So, what do we have here?" he asked.

"Absolutely nothing on one side and a diagram like a map on the other – just like Perry described in his journal. And the two words with arrows running from them – *Subterranean*, with two arrows pointing to each end of something like a river – I suppose what Perry called a creek. There must be a mistake because the arrow from the word 'entrance' points right at the cabin – this cabin I'm hoping. Then here's the 'G' at the end of the river – er, creek – that he mentioned.

"First things first. That river as you call it is labeled as being subterranean, underground. That's not likely to be a river. But what might be underground?"

"You mean a mine or a cave?"

"You got better?" Harry asked.

"No. That would seem to mean there is an entrance to a cave or mine in some cabin and that there is gold in it – I suppose that's what the G stands for. Perry called it gold."

"Get the magnifying glass, Son. I think I notice other things my old eyes can't make out."

Gary handed the magnifier to his grampa and tried to look through it as well – something that never works, two people and one magnifying glass.

"Here, and here, and here, along the line that indicates one side of the cave or tunnel. See. There are short gaps – not continuous lines."

"A bad ink job, maybe?" Gary asked.

"On an important piece of classified information?"

"Probably not. I see what you mean. How about door openings like I've seen on house plans?"

“Close, I’m thinking. How about the openings into side tunnels?”

“Makes good sense. No need to draw those in since they play no part in things.”

They nodded into each other’s faces. Grampa continued.

“Then the line of words across the top: ‘*May you find the holey entrance*’.”

“Holey entrance?” Gary said as a question. “Like a gateway to Heaven?”

“If that’s what we have here we are suddenly multi-zillionaires,” Harry joked. “Obviously, the words have some other meaning.”

“Maybe the ‘hole’ refers to the tunnel,” Gary said just wandering through his random thoughts.

“I doubt if we can understand that one at this point.”

“Okay. Move on then.”

Harry pointed again.

“Well, clear down here in the right corner,” Harry said. “Looks like a line about a half inch long with marks above it. Take the magnifying glass and see if your young eyes can make it out.”

“I see what you saw. I’m pretty sure those letters are the letters Rd. Would that mean road or maybe red for Red River?”

“What are often placed in one corner of a map,” Harry asked.

“The legend – like how many miles to an inch or something. Symbols for little towns and big cities. . . .”

“That’s plenty, I suspect. Rd. is the abbreviation for *rod*, that measurement from the old days we ran into earlier – about fifteen feet.”

“An important addition. Look.” He took out the ruler. “If that’s so, this cabin is the exact size of the one on the map – before the extra room was added. It makes the tunnel or whatever that runs into it about 200 feet long and maybe five wide – wider back where the G is.”

“There is one problem with our theory, son; we know of no opening to any cave or mine around here close.”

“Not just *around* here, *under* the cabin. Like you said,

this was an important document of some kind so it would have been drawn precisely (accurately).”

“What you say makes sense,” Harry said. “But, if that is true it would indicate the tunnel would have to run into a basement, wouldn’t it? We have no basement.”

“Correction. We don’t know of a basement. Maybe it had an outside door of some kind on the west and when the big room was added over there it got covered up.”

“If the door had been out in the open wouldn’t people have entered it and probably found the gold? Try this on for size. The original cabin was built over the opening to the cave on purpose in order to hide it – who knows why. Then later, the Confederate army took over the cabin to use as a headquarters for a time and, discovering the cave, converted it into a ‘safe’ of sorts to store gold to be used to fund the war.”

“I like that. I can see the old writer in you there – no offence intended by ‘old’. Moving on, if the cave became a ‘safe’, its entrance would have been hidden for sure.”

“What purpose would be served in the first place, however, by building a cabin over a long narrow cave that extends north from the creek toward a long, high hill?”

“Make a good hideout for bad guys – bank robbers and such,” Gary said, just spinning possibilities. “How far do you estimate it is back to the base of that hill to the north of our cabin?”

“Thirty yards, perhaps.”

“That’s 150 feet. The tunnel is 200 according to the map. It would end under the hill quite a way. Shall we go out and look around the foundation? Still have an hour or so of daylight.”

“If this place is built *over* the cave then my bet is the entrance is right here inside and that would have to be in the bedroom section since that was the original cabin built decades before the war.”

“I’d think when they put in the bathroom in 1950 the workmen would have found the cave if it is really underneath,” Gary said.

“Why are there two steps up to the bathroom off the hall?” Harry said, prompting Gary to think it out.

“For the pipes and such, I suppose. Oh, you’re thinking

they didn't have to look below the original floor. To make the remodel easy they did all the plumbing on top of it and then added the floor we have now fifteen inches or so above the old one."

"The joists that hold up the floor are probably ten inch square timbers. They wouldn't have wanted to cut through those babies during the remodel."

"I see. Still, it leaves us with no opening."

"Look around this bedroom," Harry said. "See any possibilities for a trap door?"

There were several braided rugs, which Gary rolled up along the west side of the room. The floor was wide planking held in place with half inch wooden pegs. The boards fit so closely together, Harry figured they were tongue and groove pieces. Somebody had gone to a good deal of expense way back then. It was clearly a precious place to someone, but why would that have been? Bank robbers would not take such care and, how would they get their horses down into the cave.

After fifteen minutes, they paused in the search.

"There are no grooves going across the planks like there would have to be if there were a trapdoor," Gary said. "That's how it is in my ceiling."

"You said your trap door opened when you pulled on part of the head board of your bed. Anything in here like that – something that could be pushed or pulled or turned?"

They looked around. There had been no furniture in the cabin prior to the time they arrived and furnished it – except for Gary's heavy old bed and the kitchen cupboards.

"Zilch, I'd say," came Gary's final evaluation. "I even pressed on knot holes in the log walls."

"I agree with the Zilch. Let's take a look in your room. If you need to move anything before I enter go ahead."

Gary smiled.

"Just don't look under the mattress and we'll be cool."

Since the bed didn't move, Gary had three long, narrow rugs – one on each side of the bed and one across the east side near the door. They rolled them up and began another search. Gary bellied under the bed with a flashlight and went over it inch by inch. He was about to give up when he noticed

something. He backed out.

“Come and look at the bottom of the front leg on the south side. They all have claw-looking feet at the bottom of the legs. Look at the floor around this one. What do you see?”

They grinned. That was usually grampa’s question.

Gary lit the darkened area with the light from his phone.

“I declare, son, are you sure there’s not an app for that gadget that will cook supper for us.”

“I will look into it – after *you* look into this.”

“You are referring to the circular scratches around the claw at the bottom of the leg. Do any of the others have similar marks?”

He was sure they didn’t, but to be sure he took time to examine the floor around each leg.

“Nope.”

“You have an idea about what it means?” Harry asked.

“That the claw turns and when it does it scratches the floor. I doubt if the feet on a 150-year-old bed are going to move themselves. Shall I see if I can turn it?”

“Let me stand back out of the light. Okay. Go for it.”

“Hard to move, but I’m getting it. It only turns in the direction of the scratches. There. All the way back against the wall.”

Before he had finished his description of what he was doing, the foot of the bed close to the door began rising. Slender, round, wooden posts pushed up through holes in the floor under the two legs. When the rail at the foot of the bed touched the ceiling, it stopped and just sat there looking like the open mouth of a baby robin awaiting a big juicy worm from its hard-working mother. The part of the floor that the bed was sitting on – was attached to – raised with it offering an opening in the floor four feet wide and five feet long back toward the east wall.

Harry had gone to get a flashlight and returned, flooding the area below the floor.

“Steps. Stone steps,” Gary said. “One, two, three, four – there must be two dozen of them. They go down a *long* way – maybe eighteen feet. They gradually curve to the north – toward the hill. I just knew this had to be the cabin. Get excited with me, Grampa! This is really something!”

"It *is* really something, for sure, but if I got excited every time you got excited I'd soon be in my grave."

"Shall we go down?"

"Of course, we will go down. One of us is named Gary and not a team of horses will keep him from exploring it. I have three suggestions, first. . ."

He held up one finger. Gary always giggled.

". . . we need to write a note saying where we are, in case anything goes wrong and leave it on the kitchen table. Second, I suggest we prop the step ladder in under the bottom of the bed so it cannot be lowered and trap us underground. Third, get light jackets. I expect it will be quite chilly down there."

"Right. I think the earth stays at a constant temperature of something like 57 degrees Fahrenheit."

Five minutes later they were ready to descend the steps. Gary brought two kerosene lanterns from the kitchen closet – auxiliary (additional) sources of light they had picked up for those times when the electricity failed. He figured – rightly so – that the search might drain the batteries in the flashlights.

"Who goes first?" Gary asked as they stood at the edge of the opening.

Humorously, he had already moved behind Harry and was peeking out from under his arm.

"Why don't I go first and clear away the spider webs," Harry said.

It was a weak excuse, but they both knew the reason so it didn't really matter. It appeared the steps were carved out of solid rock that was there naturally – likely part of the underlying layer of stone through which the cave wandered, assuming there really was a cave or tunnel or whatever and not just a pit full of snapping, hungry, alligators. That had been Harry's amusing thought, but he figured better than to share it with Gary who already seemed uneasy.

When they reached the bottom, they found themselves facing directly north. Gary held the print of the map and humorously gave directions: "Straight ahead," as if there were any other way to go. It was a natural cave with moderately damp walls, ceiling and floor. The tunnel was generally round,

even the floor, which really was not flat. Gary noted it looked like limestone, which was soft and soluble, so often contained caves. Northwest Arkansas was largely built on limestone. The tunnel varied in height and width from six to ten feet.

“Here is that first opening in the cave wall from the map, Harry said. “See it on your sheet. Does it seem to be at about the right spot?”

“Yes. Off to the right. Let’s take a quick look in it.”

Harry stopped at the entrance and let Gary enter. It was actually larger – taller and wider – than the one they had been following.

“What’s all that?” Gary asked pointing.

Harry saw what Gary had seen and entered holding his lantern high to maximize its light.

“I think it’s pretty clear, don’t you, son?”

“But why would there be bunk beds down here. Made of rotting 2 X 4s, three tiers high. Solid wood bottoms. If there were mattresses they are long gone.”

He moved twenty feet on into the cave.

“They are all along the south wall. Must be two dozen in all. You think it is like a bunker where soldiers lived? Guards for the gold, maybe.”

“That is certainly one possibility.”

Gary understood that meant Grampa really didn’t agree, but was wasn’t yet willing to say what he was thinking. Gary remained quiet. Such information came out only when Harry was ready to reveal it.

“How far can you see?” Harry asked.

“Let me get out the big flashlight and see what that beam will show.”

He searched with it for several minutes even moving another twenty feet further in.

“Well, the part we’re in goes north east, it turns straight north not far ahead. Look up here at the ceiling. Something we didn’t see before. A hole right up through the rock – a good foot wide. What do you suppose?”

“Maybe some sort of air supply system,” Harry suggested.

“That makes sense. I can feel air flow up here. The walls are much drier on east of that opening like maybe the

draft is constant – air movement toward the east. Air enters here and exits somewhere else up ahead keeping the tunnel dry.”

“You have a good engineering sense. I agree with you. Mark that hole someway on your sheet and we’ll take a hike someday and see if we can find some sort of inlet up on the surface.”

“Good.”

“Done in here for now?” Harry asked.

“Yeah. I’ll take the lead, now.”

He apparently had received a supplemental (extra) dose of bravery. Harry smiled to himself and fell in behind.

They came to the other off branches, the next one to the west – their right – and the third to the east like the first one. Neither one held anything interesting so, after brief glances inside, they passed them up. Perhaps they would explore them at a later date. Gary ‘smelled’ gold and forged on ahead. The main tunnel gradually veered a bit west in a very gentle arc.

“Well, I didn’t expect this,” Gary said, stopping in his tracks.

Harry stopped right behind him and lifted his lantern.

“There’s a wall of huge stones across the cave,” Gary said.

They lit it as best they could with the lanterns and looked it over.

From my estimate, the big G is maybe ten yards beyond this point,” Gary said. “If this is the door to the safe, I’d say it’s going to be hard to find the combination.”

Harry searched around the sides of the cave where the rocks met them.

“It appears to be neither a collapse of the ceiling nor the natural end of the tunnel. Those are quarried (cut and shaped) from sand stone – see the chisel marks along the surfaces.”

Gary moved to run his fingers over them and nodded.

“So? I suppose you’re going to say I should think of this as another mystery rather than a disappointment.”

“That sure would sound like me, wouldn’t it?”

It was worth a faint smile from the lad.

“Where does *think-of-it-as-a-mystery* man suggest we begin?”

“In the mysteries I write, bad guys follow an MO – a Method of Operation – from job to job. It helps the good guys find them. Let’s consider the MO of the architect of everything we’ve come up against so far.”

“Ah. Excellent. Yes. Well, the trap door in the ceiling had a trigger – the head board. The floor opening into the cave had a trigger – the claw. So, if this conforms to his MO you are thinking if we find the trigger, some of, or all of, this wall of stone will magically move out of our way. I’d hate to get trapped behind it if there isn’t also a trigger back there.”

“I will vote with the young man, formerly of Punkin’ Hollar, on that one.”

“So, we just start pushing and pulling stuff?”

“Unless you have some more systematic approach.”

Gary put his hands on his waist and looked over what stood in their way.

“How about if I start on the left and you on the right and we give each stone heck in every possible way?”

“Not sure I’m up to administering ‘heck’, but I’ll sure try,” Harry said.

“My mother hated it when I said ‘heck’,” Gary said.

He very seldom spoke about his parents. Harry remained silent. Gary continued.

“She said it was just a sneaky way of getting out of being punished for swearing with the word it stood for. My father would wink at me when she said that. It was sure a mixed message the two of them sent me. Where do you stand on *heck*, Grampa?”

“Well, we’ve talked about it. I think people have the right to use whatever words they want to, but they must be willing to take the consequences of those words. If a person swears and other people find it offensive, then that person has risked not being liked – of being shunned by them – his decision you see. In general, societies all have words they loath (hate to hear). When people choose to use them, they must know they run the likelihood of being looked down on and avoided. It has always been interesting to me that all societies *a/so* create substitute words meaning the very same

thing, but which they think are appropriate – acceptable. *Heck* and *dog-gone it* are two such examples in our culture. Human beings are just fascinating.”

“So, it’s not the *meaning* of words, but it is the *words themselves* that are offensive. That is *really* strange – dumb, stupid, idiotic, senseless – I could go on and probably will at some point in the future!”

“Like I said, fascinating!”

“It would be fun to study language usage. Maybe another assignment for the winter months.”

They had begun the pushing and pulling while they talked. Twenty minutes later they met in the center of the wall, relatively pushed and pulled out.

“I sure got nothing,” Gary said.

“Clearly the same for me. Hmm? Let’s see what quality of photographs you can get of all this – close up and from back fifteen or so feet. Make sure to get the crack around the outside where these man-made rocks hit the rock of the tunnel. Then, I suggest we retreat back to the cabin and see if we can reconfigure (think differently about) what we know.”

They turned and began the trek back through the tunnel. As they passed the first side tunnel opening, there was a sudden, sharp sound so loud it hurt their ears.

“You think the tunnel is collapsing, Grampa?”

“What I think is, we better hurry on our way. You run on ahead, now! Git!”

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CHAPTER SIX

No Butter Brickle? Really!

The deafening noise continued to come at unpredictable intervals. Gary was waiting for Harry at the base of the steps when he finally caught up.

“Well, it wasn’t a collapse, at least,” Gary said clearly relieved.

They climbed the steps, moved the ladder, and reset the bed in place.

“That really was a great mini-adventure – down there,” Gary said. “What do you think those noises were?”

At that moment, a clap of thunder and a flash of lightning caught their attention.

“Hmm?”

“Hmm?”

They looked at each other as they moved back to the sitting area in the west room.

“I know what you’re thinking, Grampa.”

“I am always eager to hear what you think I am thinking when you think I’m thinking.”

Smiles.

“You’re thinking like I’m thinking that that sound was somehow caused by the thunder, but you aren’t sure how – 18 feet underground like that.”

“A mind reader – maybe we can make our fortune by having you read people’s thoughts at carnivals and side shows.”

Gary acknowledged the attempt at humor with a quick, weak smile.

“I was right, right?”

He grinned at his use of words.

“You *were* right right. And I do have an idea about *how*.”

“I figured that, as soon as I added that part. Shoot.”

“We already guessed that first offshoot down there had an opening of some sort at the far end – the way the air flow kept the walls dry. I’m guessing that when the sound of the thunder enters that opening, the tunnel’s configuration (shape) somehow works like an amplifier.”

“My ears are still ringing. How about yours?”

Harry put his hand to his ear: “What’s that, Sonny? Speak up.”

They chuckled at his little joke.

“Let’s get those pictures printed off,” Harry said.

Gary left and returned in a few minutes with copies for both of them.

“I printed them in color, thinking that might offer some clue black and white would not. The stones that are in our way are shades of white, brown and tan.

Harry nodded.

The storm raged on. They settled into their favorite spots and studied the sheets.

“See anything?” Gary asked and then immediately revised his question. “Of course, you see *something*. I mean anything that will move those big rocks?”

“Not initially. I am wondering if it may be time to invoke (call on) that line of strange words at the top of the map.”

“*May you find the holey entrance*, you mean?”

“That’s it.”

“Not sure where to go with it,” Gary said.

“Nor am I.”

“You know,” Gary began, sitting up and looking at the sheet, “*holey* doesn’t really refer to godly things – that’s spelled ‘h-o-l-y’. H-o-l-e-y refers to well worn socks – filled with holes – holey.”

“Interesting, something we both overlooked initially – unless it was misspelled on the map. Go with it, son!”

“Well, the tunnel is a hole. Our entrance to part of that hole has been blocked. The map refers us to the G, which lies

just beyond the blockage. I got nothin' more."

"Extending what you said," Harry began, "what we need is a hole – maybe not the kind of hole we are thinking about."

"Okay? But I really don't follow."

"Nor do to I. Shall we form a club?"

Smiles. Harry spoke.

"One thing for us to consider is that whatever the *hole* might be, it may be some distance from the wall of rocks. Oh! If it is a clue about the trigger that sheds a new light on it. Remember, the trigger for the trapdoor in your ceiling was half a room away from it."

"I hadn't yet made the connection between the word, 'hole', and the concept of a trigger. That does take things in a '*whole*' different direction."

He chuckled on for some time.

His reaction caused Harry to chuckle his belly into convulsive (jerky) ripples.

By the time he recovered and picked up his sheet, Gary had an insight.

"We got so caught up in the phrase about the holey entrance we missed this circle right after it."

"We did, indeed. A circle about one inch in diameter with a line under it. Does that represent a hole or a coin or a ball, or . . .? And is it sitting on a what? A line, a floor, a book case shelf?"

"Yeah," Gary said nodding. "I can't make it go anywhere. But, we do seem to be dealing with the concept of a hole, right, so that circle representing a hole makes sense."

"Complication," Harry said. "If the distance scale on the map – ½ inch equals one rod – and, if we apply that to the size of the circle after the phrase, that makes it thirty feet across."

"I don't like that," Gary came back.

"A flaw in my thinking?"

"No. As you stated, it just complicates things. There is nothing in all of this that resembles a thirty-foot circle."

"See it as a . . ."

". . . I know, as a mystery not a disappointment. What else do you have?"

"Absolutely nada, zilch, nichts, nothing."

“Nichts?”

“Nothing in German, I believe.”

Gary nodded.

They sat in silence.

Presently, Gary had a thought.

“Okay. Since a thirty-foot circle seems irrelevant, let’s deal with just the *one inch* we know we have. If we do that, does it help?”

More silence.

“A key hole, perhaps,” Harry said.

“A key hole on a shelf? And, we don’t have a key.”

“What if it’s not circle, but an ‘O’ or a zero?”

“Possibilities. Hmm?”

Harry chuckled.

“If each human is only allotted so many, *hmm*’s, in a lifetime, we may well be reaching the end of our supply.”

It was worth no more than weak – perhaps pained – smiles.

“Maybe the circle is like looking at the tunnel as you stand in it – sort of round – and the line represents a view from above – it lays out in sort of a line.”

Gary sat up and offered a sigh.

“Let’s let it rest and rustle up something to eat. Got a frozen pizza or left over Chinese.”

“That’s a small pizza,” Harry said. “You take it and I’ll work on the sweet and sour whatever.”

They moved to the kitchen and each did what was necessary to make their fare (food) edible. They both opted for orange juice.

“I really don’t like the high pulp kind of juice,” Gary said. “Feels like it’s full of feathers.”

“Pulp has fiber and fiber is good for an old man’s plumbing.”

“Perhaps somewhere along the way you lost track of the fact that I’m not an old man and my plumbing is only 13 years old.”

“Really? Your wisdom keeps fooling me. Make sure we remember to get a container of pulpless next time we shop.”

“Is that even a word – pulpless?”

“Did you understand my meaning?”

“Of course.”

“Then please consider it a word.”

“Yes, *All Knowledgeable One*.”

Gary put his hands together prayerfully and bowed his head – all as a joke. Then he continued a bit off topic.

“Did you mean that – about me being wise?”

“Most certainly – the wisest boy for your age I have ever known and I have known lots and lots.”

“How would you define wisdom?”

“Astute insight.”

“And by astute you mean . . .?”

“Perceptive use of one’s intelligence.”

“Hey. It just gets better and better. Thanks.”

“Thanks?”

“For thinking that.”

“It is more a matter of *recognizing* what is there than just *thinking* it.”

“Like I said. Better and better. I’ll share – pizza I mean; you have plenty of wisdom all by yourself. Sausage. I know that’s your favorite.”

Grampa stabbed a piece of meat with his fork and considered it shared. He held out the little box containing the gooey pork as if also offering to share. Gary put on an awful face and shoulder shudder.

“Just seeing take-out Chinese food gives me the willies – awful smelling broth and worm-like noodles.”

“So much for supper tonight,” Harry said pushing his food away.

He had clearly been kidding since the carton was soon empty and he was at the counter, manufacturing a banana and peanut butter sandwich. (China has peanuts, right?)

“I got an idea, Grampa.”

“That’s hard to believe.”

Smiles.

“Maybe I can find things out about the history of this area on google – Civil War Era stuff. See if there’s any lore about a Confederate gold stash or caves and tunnels. It might give us some clue about the circle and line.”

“Go for it. I need to write checks and pay some bills tonight anyway. We can take up our mystery later.”

While Harry worked at his desk in his room Gary sat back on Grampa's bed with his laptop on his, well, on *top* of his *lap*. He offered things as he came across them.

"One article says there were many minor skirmishes between North and South forces across the state of Arkansas – especially up north – that never made it into the history books. I imagine the *Battle of Blue Shadow* or of *Little Red River* is probably one of them. Now that we have a firsthand account – Perry's journal with the date and all – I think I'll write about it and post it somewhere. If Perry died because of it, history needs to at least know about it."

"I agree that would be a laudable (admirable) undertaking. Let me know if I can help."

The storm continued. They each kept to their tasks. Gary broke the silence, again.

"Here's something interesting. It's a transcript from a trial down in Heber Springs, thirty or so miles south east of here. Dated March of 1868. A man named Percival Jones was accused of murdering another man. They had both been Confederate soldiers. Jones contended that the victim – age 21 – had stolen a map from him while they were fighting in a skirmish on the Little Red River, in 1862. They were both members of a three-man messenger detachment that got caught up in the battle by mistake. The map was drawn on what was referred to as a 'scroll of leather' and was said to be the property of the Jones family. He said it set out the location of his grandfather's gold mine in the north central part of the state. He contended recently when he confronted the man, they fought and the man fell and hit his head. The District Attorney contended the man had his head bashed in – over and over again. The coroner confirmed that. Jones was convicted."

"My. You receive a gold star for your research skills. How in the world were you able to find that?"

"Believe it or not I googled the search terms, *map on leather 1860s*. There were actually several entries. It seems to be another verification that the battle did take place and that the idea of a gold stash of some kind around here did exist. With no natural gold deposits up in this area, I have to wonder if the Jones guy was lying about it. Gold, yes. Mine, probably

not. If there were three of them like Jones said, and Perry died with the map taken from a dead confederate soldier, then Jones picked on the wrong man. As part of the messenger team, Jones may have had some idea it had something to do with gold – just not exactly what.”

“That’s all likely, Gary. I’ll be interested in how you handle that in your story about it.”

“Story? Oh. It could be a story couldn’t it. I was thinking of just an account. Let me think on that.”

“You did so well on that search, perhaps you should goog, *one inch circle on leather map 1862*. Just kidding of course.”

Gary tried just in case. Nothing.

“I did find something that looks like fun, Grampa. A game the boys apparently played at that time in this area. They called it *Sticks and Rings*. Each boy held up a smooth stick eighteen inches long. One slipped a wooden ring on his stick. It looked to be about six inches in diameter from the drawing. He would twirl it around and fling the ring off the stick high in the air toward the other boy who would try to catch it. I could make that. We could play. What do you say?”

“I’m up for it. Might be more fun to play it with a girl, however.”

“You are a genius, Grampa.”

“Well, of course I am, but I try not to brag about it.”

Presently, Harry announced he was finished with the bills and tossed the rubber banded packet of envelopes to Gary along with stamps.

“Make your contribution to the bill paying effort. I’ll go dish up some ice cream. Do we have Butter Brickell? I feel like Butter Brickell.”

What they had was strawberry, but neither of them was heard complaining.

“We’ll need to shop after we close up tomorrow afternoon,” Harry said. “Make your additions to the list before you turn in tonight. I’ll leave it on the kitchen table.”

Gary’s eyes teared up. Harry didn’t understand. He remained silent as they finished the treat across the kitchen table from each other. Gary spoke in lowered tones.

“Do you remember those first few nights in our new apartment in Punkin’ Hollar, just after we had been rescued and give our new identities?”

“Oh, yes, I certainly do. It was an uneasy time.”

“Remember how I’d sneak into your room at night and lay beside you on your bed?”

“Yes, I do remember that.”

“I don’t think I ever thanked you for that. I was so scared and I felt so alone without mom and dad for the first time in my life. Being close with you like that really didn’t make things right, but it did make me feel safe. The feeling *right* about us came a little later. Anyway, when you said ‘turn in’ just now it made me think of that first week we were together. It was the first time I’d heard that expression – back then, I mean. Thanks, you know.”

“I know. And I suppose I never thanked you either.”

“Thanked me for what?”

“For allowing me time to learn how to be with you – how to relate with you. You were very patient with me while I tried to learn how to be a parent.”

“You were a natural, right from the first moment I saw you through the car window that terrible night. I was mad as hell – make that heck, I guess – at the whole world and everybody in it after losing my parents and learning they were really foreign spies. I think it was when you handed me that package of Strawberry twisters and asked if I could open it – saying you could never undo the plastic – that I decided we were going to work out a good life together. That was a really smart thing – immediately including me in your life as an important part of it. I think we’ve done pretty well. We didn’t celebrate our first anniversary together you know.”

“Actually, I *didn’t* think about it. It just seems like we’ve always been together – been a family. We must celebrate. Where can we purchase some strawberry twisters?”

“And *jerky*, remember – sweet or salt – again you gave me a choice right from the start.

Gary managed a big smile and wiped away his tears.

“We are lucky people,” he said. “To have each other, aren’t we?”

“We sure are. The luckiest. I was in need of a new life

and you had been forced into one. I suppose that in a roundabout way we have those awful foreign agents to thank for all this.”

“I had never thought about that, but you’re right. They really had us fooled, didn’t they?”

“I’ll say. Enough of that now or I’ll have nightmares,” Harry said reaching across the table and patting Gary’s hand. “Will you be okay?”

“Sure, but, if you feel a warm body slipping in next to you tonight don’t panic. It’ll just be me – for old time sake, you understand.”

THAT was worth a pair of full out, long lasting, genuine smile and a stand up, lingering hug.

* * *

The following morning found Gary up first, with breakfast almost ready when Harry poked his head into the kitchen.

“Scrambled eggs, fired potatoes, and freshly re-heated butter milk biscuits and homemade, out of a can, white-pepper gravy.”

“Sounds wonderful. Some occasion I’m not aware of?”

“The first meal in a weeklong celebration of our lives together. I have many plans. You can set the table. It’s all about to come together, here. I’ll have milk.”

Like usual, conversation flowed easily, punctuated with smiles, chuckles and full out laughter as they both remembered special times they had created together.

“Night mares?” Harry asked.

“None that I recall. I did dream about playing the stick and ring game. It was on my mind as I was waking up. It got coupled with a memory from when we were down in the cave yesterday – the way dreams just seem to take pot luck and combine whatever memories are wandering around in there. It provided what may be an important thought. About twenty feet past the opening into that first tunnel that went off to our right – the one with the bunks – I remember seeing a long, round, narrow stick. It must have been eight or ten feet long and no more than an inch in diameter. I got to wondering why it would be there. It had clearly been formed into that shape –

perfectly one inch in diameter from end to end. We found hardly anything at all along the main tunnel. Then one part of my brain looked at another part of my brain and said to it, 'If we put what we each have together we may have a solution the kid and old guy might be able to use'."

Harry chuckled at the monologue. It continued.

"Here's the upshot of what came to me. The circle represents a hole and that's important. The line under it really represents a *stick* – the one I saw in the tunnel I'm thinking. All we have to do is find the hole that the stick fits into and maybe we have our trigger. The same sort of MO, like you said. What do you think?"

"I think if it works that way I will think you are a genius – probably a really, really, *lucky* genius. If it doesn't I'll still keep you around."

"Here I thought I was the one keeping *you* around. Clearly, we have an important discussion in our near future, but putting that aside, does it really make sense to you?"

"It does. I missed seeing that long stick down there and I didn't configure the line on the map as a stick. I must say I'm surprised it hasn't rotted away down through all the years."

"I wondered that too and figured maybe it's made out of oak – oak is hard as steel once it's cured (dried). I suppose we'll need to wait until this evening to go take a look, huh?"

"That seems the best plan to me. I just hope by then your pants are still dry."

Gary smiled.

"I do get excited about things, don't I? It is one of the wonderful things I find about myself. I wonder if I would be that way if we hadn't found each other. I was a pretty stoic (emotionless) little boy."

"Gary, my boy, your spirit is indomitable (impossible to subdue or defeat). I am certain that eventually you would have found the remarkable person that you have become."

"I love you, you know, Grampa, even if you do hog the covers."

"Was that wiggly bump behind me, you, last night?"

Harry smiled and continued:

"And I love you even if you make the worst gravy on the face of the Earth."

“Hey! Not me. Somebody named Hines. It said so on the can.”

“I’ll do up the dishes since you did the difficult part, son. We need to get on our way – we talked ourselves out of time.”

“It seems we’ve done our share of that, haven’t we?”

He left to prepare his backpack, find a shirt, and put on his socks and shoes. It was Harry’s turn to wipe away a few tears. The boy was the joy of his life. In the past, he had, on occasion, felt guilty that *his* wonderful life had been built on the tragedy of the boy’s life. He never dwelled on it and he knew it was unreasonable, but it lingered there in some deep dark recess of his mind.

Ten minutes later:

“See, we got here with more than eight seconds to spare, Grampa.”

“I can’t see why I was concerned. A whole eight seconds, you say.”

“MORE than eight seconds is what I actually said.”

While Harry turned on the lights and went to ready the cash register, Gary unlocked the front door and changed the sign to read OPEN.

“Hey. Another envelope taped to the outside of the front door, Grampa.”

What remained of their smiles quickly faded. It sent shivers up both their spines. That was supposed to be over. Gary retrieved it and took it to the counter where Harry was standing. He turned it front side up and broke a big grin.

“I think this may be private, Grampa.”

“What! You’ve been having a secret relationship with a hit man from Germany?”

“No. Silly. It’s to me from Julie. See!”

“Then, I agree it is private. Retreat to the upper quarters and peruse (read) it.”

Gary double-stepped his way up to the loft. Harry heard giggles, but would not inquire. Private was private. He proceeded to start the usual Monday morning dusting. He didn’t mind. It was a mindless activity that allowed him to think about important things. One of those that morning was what a wonderful story could be written about the short life of Private Perry Miller. He had sort of handed that off to Gary and he

wouldn't ask to have it back.

Gary spoke.

"She really liked the time we had together on Sunday afternoon. She hopes we can do it often. She said I am a very special person and is looking forward to getting to know me better. I'm not sure what that means, but then I've found that I seldom know what girls mean. She said her parents liked me, too. Said they thought I was a real gentleman. She likes holding hands with me. She says mine feel rugged, just the way a man's should feel. Should I write her back?"

Well, so much for private stuff, Harry thought to himself. He figured he had just be told everything contained in the letter other than the periods and maybe those little hearts girls that age often use to dot their 'I's'.

"That's entirely up to you. Girls like to hear that kind of thing in person. And you know what, there seems to be an extra twenty in the register this morning. Suppose you could find some way to fix that?"

"What? Oh? Twenty! Yes, I could do that. She is allowed to talk on her phone fifteen minutes a day while she's tending to the store. Let me see if I can arrange something."

It was soon arranged. Another eleven o'clock lunch – that was her usual noon break at the store.

"Won't need the new twenty. Still have ten left from the last one. Girls never eat much. Did you have a girlfriend when you were my age, Grampa?"

"Well, I had a special friend who was a girl. Our parents frowned on us pairing off like that back then. We managed to go places together with groups of kids. We had a good time. What is this about, *girlfriend*?"

"Something I've been thinking about. Like Tabatha back in Punkin' Hollar. I really liked spending time with her."

"Is there a question in there somewhere for me?"

"Not sure. I guess you aren't in charge of whom I come to like, but I'd like to think you would be cool with it if it happened."

"You know I trust your judgment. I will be the coolest."

Harry pretended to shiver and hugged himself as if coming out of a blizzard.

"I knew that. Not sure why it seemed important to get

your feeling on it. Thanks.”

“You are welcome. What are you working on for school work this morning?”

“Your sly way of saying, ‘Now it is time for you to start cracking the books, young man!’ I like that. I plan to get the algebra out of the way first this week. I’m finding math isn’t all that intriguing to me. So, I reward myself with something I enjoy more once I get my math done.”

“Actually, a very astute move. If you need help you know you can always . . . google it.”

Chuckles. Gary knew math was nowhere near the top of Grampa’s list of favorites, either. Perhaps it was more of that genetics thing that couldn’t possibly be, of course.

Gary’s lunch time went *‘exceedingly well’* – his words as he made his report to Harry upon returning to the empty shop.

“We’re going to play dulcimers together sometime. I asked her if there was a band here like the one we had in the Hollar. She said there wasn’t, but thought it was a great idea. She’s going to talk with her dad about it.”

“It’s been a slow morning,” Harry said. “I figure we can close at four, providing there isn’t a customer here at that time. I’m eager to get back down inside that cave and go hole hunting. I, for one, was paying no attention to any holes we may have passed.”

“Me either. What you said was humorous in a ‘Thomas Boys’ – you and me – sort of way. You said go, ‘hole hunting’. Since a hole is a lot of nothing, we are in essence hunting for a nonentity. How will we know when we find it?”

“Yes. And you realize that those two ‘Thomas Boys’ are the only two folks in the state who would find that humorous.”

“State? I was thinking Universe!”

Gary smiled and moved back on topic.

“I’ve been wondering why that stick is so long – if it really has anything to do with a trigger.”

“That crossed my mind as well. One of those ‘we will learn IF we learn it’ things.”

“I even understand that. Scary. We’re like an old married couple who finish each other’s sentences.”

“You mean like, ‘For dinner I’m thinking . . .’”

“. . . of the biggest medium well done steak Hank can get his hands on,” Gary said finishing the sentence just like Harry had intended. “It will be like dinner number *one* of our week of celebrating our anniversary.”

“It will be difficult to explain the *anniversary* thing to anybody, you understand. We must watch where we talk about it.”

“I know. I wanted to tell Julie, but I knew I couldn’t. It’s so hard to have to keep the best thing in my life a secret. I mean, I understand the really best time in your life was your time with your wife and that’s fine.”

“In our society, Gary, we get tricked into thinking things have to be put on a scale from best to worst or happiest to unhappiest or smartest to dumbest. That just isn’t true. For me several things rank at the level of the best things in my life. You are right that the years I was married were absolutely wonderful. My life, now, with you is absolutely wonderful. They can be equal. No competition. Neither one has to be better than the other.”

“You’re right. I guess I do think that way, too. Thanks, again and again and again and again. It seems I’m always saying that and I’m always meaning it.”

They were seated at *Hank’s Hillbilly Café* by 4:05 ready to continue the celebration. They each had a hard time taking their eyes off the other. They were the most important things in the world to each other at that moment – well, those 22-ounce sizzling steaks with baked sweet potatoes and onion rings just might come in a very close second!

CHAPTER SEVEN

They Go For It!

They walked in the cabin door at 5:15.

“I suggest we change clothes before venturing into the subterranean edifice (underground structure),” Harry said putting on big words in an attempt at humor. “I’m going to dress warmer, also. Got chilled.”

“I’ll refill the lanterns,” Gary offered. “I have no idea how much kerosene we burned.”

By half past five the claw at the base of the bed’s leg had been turned, the end of the bed raised, the ladder propped beneath its end, and they were down the steps into the tunnel. That time, Gary took the lead the whole way.

“The long, round piece of wood I spotted was past the first side tunnel, on the floor next to the wall on our right,” Gary said. “It was black, probably intentional to make it hard to spot against the dark colored rock.”

They walked on, both noticing they were moving a good deal faster than they had the day before. They knew where they were going, that time.

“There is it,” Gary said pointing and holding his lantern higher.

He bent down to pick it up.

“It’s not wood like I thought, Grampa. It’s metal – iron probably – and very heavy – strong, I suppose.”

“I guess that answers our question about why it hasn’t rotted away. You take the front, son, and I’ll take the rear. Do you have an idea how to go about constructing a search

pattern for the hole?”

“I suggest we start at the rocks and work our way back since we have no idea how far away it may be.”

“Excellent. Move on, then.”

They came upon the rock pile. Harry lowered his end of the rod to the floor. Gary followed suit.

“I suppose walls, floor and ceiling are all fair game on this hunt,” Gary say.

“I think that makes sense. I see one problem, though. The tunnel is no more than eight feet wide and tall. The rod is ten feet long – longer than the tunnel is wide or high. How will we make it fit *straight* into a hole?”

“Maybe the opening leads to a shaft that is slanted,” Gary said.

“That is an outstanding insight. I guess we need to find the hole first and then figure out how to insert the metal rod. How shall we split up the surfaces?”

“We each work half – center of the ceiling, down the side and back halfway across the floor. I’ll go left and you right. Okay?”

“Good plan. We need to take our time,” Harry added.

“Your way of reminding me to be meticulous (careful). I promise I will.”

They worked in silence as they held up the lanterns and examined his section of the ceiling.

“How much are you surveying, Grampa, about a three-foot strip?”

“Exactly. Then we can repeat it with the next three-foot section.”

It took fifteen minutes to complete each strip. They were on their third section – six to nine feet back from the rocks.

“I may have something here, son. Bring your big flashlight. It will provide a more direct beam.”

He pointed to a spot on the ceiling in a bit less than a foot from the side wall. The flashlight did just what Harry had hoped.

“That’s perfect size, Grampa. Let’s see if the rod fits.”

Harry sat down his lantern.

“You continue to light the hole, son. I can handle the

rod. Notice the marks around the edge of the hole. I think those are marks from a drill of some sort.”

“Makes sense. You got the rod, see if it will fit inside.”

Harry placed one end up to the opening and worked the rod one way and another varying the angle. It was a tedious (slow, tiring) and time consuming activity. He had to stop several times to rest his arms. On the third attempt, he had the rod backed at an angle straight into the tunnel, up close to the wall. The end slipped in a few inches. He began twisting it one way and then another. It continued to move inside.”

“The lower end of the rod is coming to an outcrop at the base of the wall. You may not be able to keep moving ahead.”

“I saw it. Examine it closely.”

“I see. It looks like it has been carved out of a low, natural section of rock and it also has an indentation on top – like a min-bowl about an inch in diameter. You think that’s where this end of rod is supposed to rest?”

“Seems likely. We’ll see in about ten seconds. . . . There. It does fit. Whether that’s how it is supposed to or . . .”

At that moment, a section of the big rock wall swung back into the dark area beyond where they stood. It allowed an opening almost five feet wide and six high. Gary repositioned his flashlight into the new area.

“That was a trigger for sure,” he said. “I’m thinking as long as that rod stands sturdy between the hole in the ceiling and that support by the wall, the rock opening will stay open. You think?”

“It looks that way. Out of caution, however, I will insist that one of us remain out here in case anything goes wrong – the rod somehow gets forced out and falls away. Can’t bet on a trigger on the other side.”

“So, who?”

“Can you work this rod gizmo if you should need to?” Harry asked.

“Yeah. I can do that.”

“Then I will go in first. You stand right at the opening with your lantern and I just bet you will be able to see most everything I see. That satisfactory?”

“The old, ‘protect the women and children first’ adage (saying) I guess. Sure.”

Harry moved through the opening, looking it over carefully. He reported what he saw.

“The door opens with a chain and weight system. Apparently, the rod triggers something in the ceiling that drops the weight and pulls open the door. When the rod is removed the process reverses. The rocks are really just half rocks secured to a wood timber door. Not nearly as heavy and foreboding (frightening and complicated) as it looks from that side.

“I will move on inside a few yards. . . . This area is circular, about fifteen feet in all directions. The walls and ceiling have clearly been chiseled out to make the large room. There are four lanterns hanging from metal arms fastened into the rock walls. I’m sure they are dry of fuel. I will come back out in a minute. You have to see this from in here. Bags of gold and stacks of gold bars. The sacks have all rotted away leaving a huge pile of gold pieces – some raw nuggets and some coins. There are also metal boxes. Let me try to open one before I leave. . . . There are twenty of them each about a foot square with a lid on top. No locks. . . . Got one open. Filled with currency. Let me take a close look to see if it’s US or Confederate. . . . It is United States, believe it or not. There must be five hundred cubic feet of the stuff in here. Somebody could have hired the entire French Army to fight for the Confederacy if this had been found. I’ll come out now and you can come in.”

They traded spots.

“I could have never imagined anything like this. It is spectacular! Are you sure that’s gold – has a greenish tinge to it.”

“I imagine that’s oxidation or mold. You can look that up later. See those bills – the ones I saw were all hundreds.”

“Are they still useable – I mean can they be spent?”

“I imagine so. Another thing for your ‘to look up’ list.”

“Who will get all this?”

“I assume there is an Arkansas Historical Society. We’ll research it. Probably should talk with an attorney first.”

“Can you imagine how many hungry kids this would feed, Grampa?”

It was not the kind of question that required an answer.

“Bring samples – a few coins, a nugget, a hand full of bills.”

Gary returned with the items.

“Now, to see if we can close this thing up,” Harry said.

“I suggest you stand back in case over the years something has gone haywire (wrong) with the mechanism. Did you see how simple that was?”

“Yeah. Ingenious.”

With great care Henry twisted the rod to ease it out of the shallow groove where the bottom rested. Once free, off the back of that rock, it slid out quite easily.

“I have to ask, why did you twist the rod?”

“First, that seemed to help it slide more easily inside the hole. Second, I noticed the end we put in first had been forged into the shape of a chisel or a tab – squared off, blunt and narrow. It made me wonder if perhaps once in place up in there that tab had to fit into a slot of some sort so I kept turning it and I’m pretty sure I felt it slip in that extra inch at the very end. Maybe one more precaution against having somebody like us manage to open it.”

“What do we do with the rod?”

“It seemed to like the spot in which it had been resting for a 150 years. That seem okay to you?”

“Fine. Like it belongs there.”

Before they left the tunnel, Gary wanted to take another look inside that first side tunnel.

“You think if we’d walk to the end we would find an opening?”

“If we did it would have to be small or maybe a series of small openings. If it were very large it would give outsiders access to this main tunnel and the safe at the end.”

“Makes sense. That would account for how the air does move through it from west to east and we postulated (assumed) that’s where the sound of the storm entered the tunnel.”

“We’ll have to make that an adventure for another day. Those openings could be half way up the side of the hill – a well or hole like the one at our end.”

Ten minutes later they were up in the cabin with the bed set back in place.

They removed their jackets – Harry had added an extra sweatshirt, which had kept him warm.

“I’m starved, Grampa. Ice cream?”

“I think there’s about two servings left.”

“That is not really a very accurate statement you know,” Gary said.

“Oh? Enlighten me.”

“You offer no measurement other than the fully indefinite ‘*serving*’. If there were only two teaspoons left, we could each have a teaspoon size serving. You see the problem?”

“I do. Now, how about this. Since I didn’t know for sure how much was left, how could I have given an accurate serving size – teaspoon, cup, bowl full?”

“I love it when we do stuff like this, don’t you?”

“Well, *love* may be stretching it, but we do have fun, don’t we?”

“Sort of like two servings of pleasure, I suppose one could say.”

“I suppose, if one were into discussing things such as servings.”

“Kitchen table or couch and chair?” Gary asked. “I’ll scoop.”

“Couch and chair and bring your laptop.”

As it turned out there were two LARGE servings left and neither of them felt the need to discuss it further.

Sitting at last, Gary spoke.

“I should find out about the Historical Society, right. I was thinking maybe there is a state historical library or museum. I’ll put all that information into a document and send it to your printer so we’ll have hard copy. I’ve been wondering about something else. You know much about the Underground Railroad in this part of the state? I read about it a book called, *Rabbles* – three boys working their way north out of the Civil War Zone in southern Arkansas. It talked a lot about how locals who were against slavery helped move black folks up north and they called the process the Underground Railroad. Underground meant like out of sight and railroad meant a way of moving things, not really a subterranean train.”

“I know some things. I’m sure you can find a great deal

of information. What are you thinking?”

“This cabin was built well before the Confederacy and the Civil War so I’m thinking that secret passage into the tunnel had to have been for some purpose other than a place to put the safe as you call it. I’m thinking the Southerners stumbled onto it and just re-tooled it for that purpose. That came 25 years later. But, the Underground Railroad had been in operation long before the war broke out.”

“You’re thinking this cabin was specially built as part of that movement and the tunnels were used as a place the runaways could hide until it was safe to move on.”

“You say that like you’ve been thinking it, too. Those bunks in that side tunnel, huh?”

“I think we both put one and one together and came to the same conclusion. I wonder how far back we can trace ownership of this place. It would be fascinating to know who built it.”

“Isn’t there some county agency that deals with deeds to property? I wonder how far back that goes.”

“I have no idea. I’m quite sure there were deeds and deed filings back then, however. Maybe the Post Mistress can set us in some direction. You could express our interest in the history of this area – the town, the settlers and so on. You’re much better at spreading around that sort of baloney than I am.”

Gary grinned. He knew it was the truth.

“Maybe I can take some time tomorrow to go and visit her. We need to check the Post Office box anyway. I still don’t have that into my daily routine. It’s probably important that we do that every day. Sometimes I think we are letting ourselves feel too safe here.”

“You’d rather we would live our lives in fear?”

“Oh, no. Not fear. Realistic caution, maybe.”

“Then let’s work it into your daily routine – say about a half hour after the Dulcimer shop opens every morning.”

“You are sneaky. I wish we could have been kids together.”

“And here I thought that’s what we were doing.”

“You know what I mean. Anyway, I like your schedule idea. Nine thirty every morning the shops are open. Oh, oh.”

“There’s an ‘oh, oh’ about it?”

“No. No. I just brought up the weather channel app and it looks like we are in for a very early winter storm tomorrow night. Could be snow. Could be sleet. Most likely both. I’ll need to get wood chopped in case we lose electricity. Remember I said the first day here we should have gas not electricity for heat.”

“I do remember that. I think we need to have that guy we see in town with the truck bring us a load of fireplace wood. Not enough time or energy between now and then to chop enough wood.”

“We learned a good lesson. I need to keep working at the wood pile a little along throughout the year.”

“A great way to look at it. I think the name on the truck is Purdy. See if he has a website and order in a pickup truck load if he does.”

“Grampa. Everybody in the universe but you and me has a website. I’m sure he has one and I agree we need to get Butter Brickle next time.”

Harry chuckled at the unexpected combination of ideas.

“My publisher has a website for my Mason Jordan Mysteries. May I can count that, since putting *my* face out there just might blow our cover?”

Again, it was a question that didn’t require an answer (called *rhetorical* questions).

“Here he is – Ed Purdy, split firewood by the load. Credit card or cash?”

“Cash. Have him come by the store. He’ll see where the old pile was.”

“We better double up on supplies – expand the grocery list. Anything else we need? How’s the kerosene supply?”

“Got plenty of that,” Gary said. “And remember we have a kerosene heater also. In the shed out back, in case we need it.”

“I don’t suppose you have ever smelled one of them working have you. Stinks up a place for a month after you stop using it. I say bedrolls by the fireplace before that.”

“It’s such a shame you don’t have an opinion when it comes to kerosene heaters.”

“Surely you noticed the foul smell the lanterns gave off

in the confined space down in the tunnel.”

“I did. I have not disagreed with you. My goodness. Your emotion attached to that seems to rank right up there with prejudice, homelessness and government neglect of the sick and hungry. We could put some of that gold to good use in those ways, you know.”

“It crossed my mind, but this stash of wealth really belongs to the State I think – a part of Arkansas history. Like I said, we need to speak with an attorney. Is there one in Blue Shadow?”

“Well, let’s just take look here. It’s hard to imagine how you did things back before computers and the web.”

“Libraries and phone books, son. Libraries and phone books.”

“Here. Only one listed. Mary Mumford. Her office is in her home on West Hillbilly Street. Can’t be far from our shop.”

“Get her phone number and I’ll call her in the morning.”

“So now you’re asking me to set you up with women. Not sure our handler would approve.”

“You be careful who you set me up with or you might find yourself with a new grandmother.”

Harry expected a chuckle. Instead, Gary grew silent. His face unexpectedly grew expressionless.

“What is it, son?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

“*Something*, I guess. Seems you are suddenly bothered about something.”

Gary looked directly into his grampa’s face.

“I never thought about it before. Having me around may be keeping you from finding somebody and getting married again. You know I’d never want that.”

Harry stood up and moved to sit beside Gary on the couch. He reached out his big arm and drew him close, tipping their heads together.

“You must never, ever, think that way. You and I have a wonderful life together. You do understand that in a few years you will be making your own way in the world. There will be serious relationships for you with girls and eventually you will find that special one you want to share your life with. By that time I’ll still be the best catch around for some attractive

septuagenarian (person in his or her 70s) lady. You haven't forgotten that I was seeing a lady back in Punkin' Hollar. We enjoyed our time together, but that's all it was, enjoyable time together. And, you and I being a family didn't interfere with that did it? Maybe such a person will come along again. If it does, we will work it out. Nothing has more of a priority in my life than you and your happiness. You just put that out of your head now. Settled?"

Gary offered a nod and smile – not huge, but sincere.

"Thank you. Just promise you won't elope (run away to get married)!"

THAT produced both a major smile and hold his stomach laughter.

* * *

The next morning, they became quite efficient. Breakfast was out of the way by seven. The load of wood arrived at 7:10. They arrived at the shop shortly before eight. Harry made an appointment with the attorney – Mary Mumford. At 9:25 Gary poked his head inside the dulcimer shop and said hello to Julie and her father – the father first, of course. By 9:40 he had the ear of the Post Mistress – Marge, she didn't offer a last name. She had a file on the history of the town and the surrounding area. It was five inches thick and she said Gary and Harry were welcome to come there and work through its contents any time they wanted.

"Any problem if we take photos of things in it that are of interest to us?"

"Goodness no. Have at it. What's your interest, if I can ask?"

"Well, Grampa is a history buff and being homeschooled I'm looking for a really interesting history project. We both find the lore we've been hearing about the area quite fascinating."

"You could talk yourself out of jail still handcuffed and under armed guard couldn't you young man."

He offered his wonderful grin.

"Things like that *have* been said about me. What I said was all true in case you're questioning my voracity."

"Big word for Blue Shadow. You'd be better served

sayin' 'honesty' around here. Have you found friends yet?"

"Julie Dulcimer, I mean Julie Hampton – her parents own the Dulcimer Shop."

"You have good judgment. One of the finest families in the area. They lost a son in the war, you know."

"No, I didn't, actually. I appreciate knowing, however."

"I have two grandsons – fourteen and twelve. I'm thinking they make a sandwich of you."

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand. I'm not yet well versed in Ozarks sayings and such."

She offered her own wonderful smile.

"One on each side of you – age wise. I take you for thirteen."

"Very good judge. Turned a few months ago. Well, thanks for everything. I'm eager to meet your husband."

"Cemetery, east of town."

"Oh. I'm so sorry. It was thoughtless of me saying that not knowing."

"Never you mind. We had a great life. I won the bet."

"The bet? Again, I don't understand."

"Elmer and I had a bet. I said I'd outlive him and he said he'd outlive me. The one who lost that bet, promised to give the other one a trip to Philadelphia."

"Wait. How could the one who passed on first . . . Ah. Absurdity. My Grampa and I flourish on absurdity. Without a good dose every day, we'd both just curl up and die – perhaps not the best example there. Sorry."

"Boy, you are a breath of fresh air. I like you. I need to meet this absurdity loving grampa of yours – the one who is clearly doing such a fine job raising his grandson."

"He is doing that. I agree. It's nice to hear it shows. I will pass on your message, ma'am."

He checked the mail box and left empty handed.

Once again, they were finished for the day a four o'clock. The storm clouds were already gathering in the west. Tulsa reported they had two inches of snow. Although it didn't compare to the snows of the north, two inches in the south was a big deal. They split the list at the grocery store and had their shopping completed in record time. Gary kept track – seven minutes' flat.

“It could have been six if you hadn’t insisted on chatting up the check-out lady, Grampa.”

“And a minute out of your lifetime is such a great loss?”

“It’s the principle of the thing. I was going for a world’s record.”

“I think the woman’s happiness was more important than a record. She seemed sad so I tried to make her feel important – worthwhile.”

“Sorry, then. Can I write it off to youthful something-or-other?”

“You may write it off to anything you please. We should have thought ahead and come in the truck this morning – all these groceries. I’ll take two sacks. You lead the way with the third.”

As it turned out it really wasn’t that difficult.

The wind had picked up and the temperature had fallen into the upper thirties – cold for northwestern Arkansas. They wished they had worn warmer jackets.

Once home, Harry put things away while Gary brought in several dozen pieces of their new wood and stacked it more or less orderly next to the fireplace.

“I’ll go get a basket of kindling before the wetness arrives.”

He was out the door. Harry had removed his jacket and turned on the radio to find the soon-to-be current conditions. They finished their tasks at about the same time.

“A fire now?” Gary asked.

“Your call. It seems chilly in here to me, but I know both how to wear sweaters and turn up the thermometers. You and your perennial bear chest and feet may well get frost bite.”

They exchanged a smile. Regardless of the season, it was Gary’s style to lose his shirt, shoes and sox as soon as he came in from outdoors. He set to laying the fire – kindling on the bottom and three pieces of split oak set pyramid style across the andirons.

“I should have requested some pine in the load. Oak’s hard to ignite even though it burns a really long time and produces a lot of heat.”

He turned to Harry.

“You know, there was something funny about the stack of wood just now.”

“Funny ha ha or funny odd?”

“Funny odd. I’m sure a small portion of the pile is missing.”

“Missing? That *is* odd. Perhaps the rabbits and squirrels needed some to warm their holes.”

“I’m serious.”

“I guess I should be, too. Listen now: turn nonchalantly (casually) and view the south window.”

He turned. He viewed. He saw the bearded face of an old man staring in at him.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

A Face in the Night

The face disappeared as soon as the man behind it realized he had been spotted.

“That was unnerving,” Gary said. “Should we go out and see what it’s all about?”

“My vote is no and that will have to include your vote, this time. You lock the back door. I’ll take care of the front one, here.”

“I got it. A directive from the deepest part of our minds – ‘if it isn’t for sure safe, avoid it to protect yourself until you can gather more definitive information’.”

“Did I tell you that?”

“Nope. Read it in a book about the Deep Mind Deep Mind Mastery – absolutely fascinating. Should be required reading. You?”

“Yes. You been perusing my eBooks again?”

“Of course. At least once a month. I feel the need to keep up with you. You’re welcome to mine, you know – well most of them.”

Youthful giggles.

Mature smiles.

“What do you suppose he was up to – the man at the window? Think he was homeless looking for a place to get in out of the storm. Maybe this used to be his cabin. Maybe he is a mad, serial killer who specializes in grandson and grandfather combinations.”

“Get me the Post Mistress on the phone if you can.”

Gary poked the buttons. She answered.

“Hello.”

“Hello. This is that delightful *sandwich* kid you fell in love with this morning. My Grampa wants to speak with you.”

“Just give me three hours to run out to the beauty parlor first,” she joked.

They shared a laugh. He handed over the phone.

“Mrs. . . . Marge, I guess that’s all I know. Harry Thomas here. Gary says you know everything there is to know about the people and places in and around Blue Shadow. Question: Is there a local – how shall I describe him – old man with a scraggly beard and a red and black hat with earflaps who might be given to peak in the window of our cabin.”

“Grady. Grady Rakes. Ancient. Hermit. Lives high on the hill that rises behind you. Most likely harmless. Inquisitive for a hermit. Must be going on 90. Most folks think he’s touched in the head. He claims he was a soldier in the Civil War, come back to claim his do – nobody understands just what he thinks his ‘do’ may be.”

“Would that have been Union or Confederate?”

“Confederate. You watch your mouth, saying things like *Union* to in these parts – just kidding – mostly. He flies that flag on a post in front of his cabin, complete with raising and lowering ceremonies every morning and night. The place he calls home is really more like a bunker, dug back into the hill – log front with overhanging roof. As far as I know, nobody’s ever seen the inside. Be careful approaching it. He’s been known to take pot shots at nosy folks.”

“Like Gary said, you seem to know it all. Thank you. I’m eager to meet you in person.”

Gary, who had been listening at Harry’s ear, had his own question for her.

“You’re absolutely sure he’s harmless?”

“Unless you’re storming his bunker with a mind to take his flag I’m pretty sure he will leave you alone.”

“Thanks.”

They hung up. Gary spoke.

“Well, that’s good information to have. Maybe he was the one who took firewood. I guess I don’t mind if he needed it. Living alone at 90. Can you imagine that? I’ll never let you

have to live alone, you know.”

“I most certainly do know – by the way, when the time comes, I prefer that you provide three companions – blond, redhead and brunette.”

“That doesn’t sound like you. But for the record, long or short beards?”

He laughed himself onto the floor. He did that often. Harry would have done something about it, but every time he squirmed around like that he dusted part of the floor boards making one fewer places to have to mop.

Gary soon had a nice fire going. It was a well-designed fireplace that pushed the heat out into the room rather than sending most of it up the chimney. Whoever built it was no amateur.

“Speaking of being alone in the cold,” Gary began, “what are we going to do with Perry?”

“One of the questions I have for Mary, the attorney. In light of the storm she asked I call back and do the scheduling after it’s over.”

“Will we be open tomorrow?”

“I guess we’ll wait and see what becomes of the weather.”

It was what Gary figured, but he was one who liked to know things up front. He sat cross-legged in front of the fire poking at it occasionally with the iron poker. Harry could see he was deep in thought. He didn’t interrupt. Quiet time thoughts are usually private. He knew *his* were.

Harry left to work on his book in his room. Gary turned and offered a single nod – an acknowledgement he was aware of the move. He glanced at the window where the face had appeared – just checking.

“Snow,” he said out loud, getting to his feet and moving to look outside.

He called out louder so Harry would be sure to hear.

“Snow’s started, Grampa. It’s really pretty.”

By then, the world outside had darkened. The flakes were reflecting the light from the windows as they twirled and swirled about the deck. The snow fell like soft blankets sometimes so thick it blocked the view of the creek, just below. Bits of ice falling with it, pecked at the windows and

bounced off the logs, looking very much like golden sparks there in the night. He continued watching for some time. Watching snowfall suddenly seemed to be about as good as staring into a fire for thinking time.

Gary had become quite interested in that area of north central Arkansas since it had become their new home. He loved the hills and trees and the creek or the stream or the river – he had not yet been forced to choose. The people were friendly and seemed to accept him with no reservations. Two projects began to evolve in his head. One, was the story of Perry. For that he could rely on the boy's journal, adding background and setting information from what he could learn about the people, culture and society of the time. The second was to investigate the possibility – the likelihood, really – that the cabin and tunnel had been an important part of the Underground Railroad. He hoped there could be a good story about each.

He understood that his grandfather could write better stories about those things than he could, but that didn't matter. A writer had to start somewhere and he had been thinking for some time that was a good field for him to explore. Even back in grade school his teachers said he had a talent for it. He had always enjoyed playing with words and expressing his ideas. He lay back on the couch and cranked up his laptop to get serious about the research.

The wind howled through the night, but not so much as the slightest draft made its way into the cabin. They both slept well.

The following morning Gary slept in. Harry allowed it since there was no way they would be able to open the shop that day. He estimated as much as six inches of snow had fallen with an icy glaze on top. That was a huge snow for the Ozarks. Ice storms often did terrible damage to power lines and vegetation in that part of the county. Apparently, the rapid drop in temperature to below freezing early in the evening had kept the ice from forming on things before it hit the ground. That was good for just about everything except people trying to get from one place to another. Northwest Arkansas came to a sudden halt in such circumstances – schools, businesses, everything. They were not prepared with platoons of

snowplows like the states that regularly fought through blizzards in the north.

The radio stations out of Fayetteville, just to the west, noted dozens of accidents and a few house fires as stoves were overheated in attempts to keep warm. Harry had coffee and a bowl of cereal as he waited for Gary to rejoin the living – the newspaper had not been delivered. He was back in his room writing when the boy wandered in yawning and scratching himself awake.

“Sorry. Guess I overslept. I take it that means we aren’t going into town.”

“Have you looked outside, yet?”

Gary moved to the big window there and pulled back the curtains as if he had forgotten it had snowed.

“Wow! Beautiful. I hope we are snowed in. I always wanted to be snowed in. It always seems like an exciting adventure when I read about it in books.”

“Consider us snowed in, then. Enjoy the adventure!”

“Did the fire live through the night?”

“Plenty of embers sill winking in the ash to get another one going in quick order. I love the aroma of wood smoke. I had cereal earlier.”

“Cereal? On a snowy, pancake morning? Shame on you. Let me go splash some batter around the kitchen. Three or four for you?”

“I think I’ll settle for two if I’m allowed a say in it.”

Gary left for the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later the call rang out.

“Pancakes. Get ‘em while they’re hot.”

Grampa loved that boy so much.

As it turned out he got three, despite his order. Gary settled for six. Apparently, the recipe made nine. There was also bacon – very *crisp*, no-fat-to-be-seen *crisp*, stand-up-on-one-end *crisp*. Gary was doing his part to eliminate cholesterol from his grandfather’s diet.

“Need to put syrup on the next shopping list. By the time we dig our way back to civilization, we’ll surely need more. I was thinking this would be a good day for a game of chess. I realize you’re no good at it, but you do seem to really enjoy it.”

Harry chuckled – honesty to a fault. He was terrible. He *did* enjoy it.

“Chess it will be.”

The first game lasted just ten moves. By the second, Harry was back in the groove and it continued for nearly an hour.

“Finally, Checkmate, Grampa.”

“Tell me, did the game really last this long or did you just prolong it with intentionally bad moves.”

“For me to know and you to . . . I forget the saying.”

“Just as well. Other plans for today?”

“Started doing research on slavery and the Underground Railroad, last night. Pretty interesting stuff. The railroad was very active here in Arkansas. There was no in between – you were either completely for slavery or you were completely against it. I read that such a polarization (complete disagreement) tore the state of Kansas apart. Glad *Arkansawiers* were more sensible about it. It is so hard for me to understand how one man believed he had the right to own another man. I hope to get some insight into that as I continue reading. I really like doing research like this and I blame you for that.”

“You’re welcome. I will enjoy being kept up to date on your findings. And I believe people from Arkansas prefer to be called *Arkansans*.”

“I like my word better, but won’t fight it. It would really be something if I found out this place actually *had* been a part of that system. I wonder where old Grady Rakes stands on the topic – of slavery I mean.”

“It doesn’t sound like he’s the kind to offer conversation – especially to us Yankees.”

“Therein may lay my answer. I hope he stayed warm last night.”

“He’s 90, son. I just imagine that in that amount of time he has learned a thing or two about how to keep warm on chilly nights.”

Gary had gone to the back door and was looking out the window, up the hill wondering where the old man’s dwelling was.

“You gotta see this, grampa.”

Harry got up from the table and went to join him.

“What do you know? That has to be Grady, don’t you think?” Harry said.

“He’s leading a mule directly toward us. Shall we try to talk with him?”

“I think things will be better served if we just stand back so he can’t see us. Let’s see what he’s up to.”

Grady and the mule walked right up to the back porch. Gary looked up at Harry and spoke as they took several steps back into the shadows.

“He must know we go into town weekdays and figures we’re not here. He doesn’t seem at all hesitant.”

“What’s he up to?”

“Watch and learn,” Gary said with a grin. “There is a large gunny sack hanging down on each side of the animal.”

The old man untied the tops of both sacks and removed two other bulging sacks that had been riding inside them. He leaned them up against the side of the cabin beside the door then led his mule back to the pile of wood. He filled each hanging gunny sack with pieces of wood – no more than three fit in each of them. Then, he moved out through the fresh snow, back up the hill following the trail he’d made on the way down.

“Well, that was odd. Can I go see what he left on the porch?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Why not?”

“You are clad only in boxers, young man. You will freeze your future generations off out there. Stand back from the door and let me take a look.”

A minute later he was back inside carrying a sack in each hand. Gary closed the door behind him and took one of the bags. It was heavy. They placed them on the counter beside the sink. Each one was tied with heavy twine – in easy to release bows. Gary soon had one open.

“A sack of apples. There must be three dozen in this one.”

He moved to the second.

“Same here. The old man traded us apples for fire wood. These must include his remittance (payment) for what

he took yesterday – so many. Suppose he has trees and stores them for winter?”

“That would be my guess,” Harry said.

“I sure would like to get to know him,” Gary said.

“I just image he has stories to tell – some of them may even be true.”

Gary picked out a big, red apple, wiped it with a towel, and flipped it to his grandfather.

“Need to test the merchandise, I’m thinking.”

By the time Gary had found one for himself, Harry had already taken a bite.

“Wonderful. Not sure what kind they are. You know?” he asked.

“My best guess is, ‘*apple*’!” Gary said.

“Close enough for me. Maybe an apple pie in our future. What do you say?”

“I like that. We could make two – one for Grady and set it out on the woodpile.”

“What a nice idea, son. You have any idea how to make a pie?”

“None whatsoever, but I bet google knows if you don’t.”

“I watched my wife make them many times – I even cut up apples for her – but have never attempted it myself. I recall it takes twice as many slices as you’d think – they cook down. Print off a recipe and between that and my memories I’ll just bet we can whip up a couple of doozies.”

“You think Butter Brickle will be good on fresh apple pie?”

Harry played at becoming all serious.

“Didn’t I tell you? Butter Brickle is good on anything – pie, cake, ham sandwiches . . .”

He let it trail off waiting for Gary’s grin. He wasn’t disappointed.

Two hours and a very warm kitchen full of dirty dishes later, they had two, double crust apple pies on the counter cooling. Unlike most sensible people, they both liked fruit pie *cold* rather than warm. Gary slid one of them into the refrigerator.

“Unless you have some need of me, son, I think I’ll get back to working on my book. I was writing well, earlier. See if

I can keep that going – at least until you think that pie is the civilized temperature for consumption.”

“I’ll get another small fire going. I know the furnace and cook stove are keeping it plenty warm in here. Just seems like there ought to be a fire on a day like this.”

“Sounds good. I totally agree!”

They each kept busy until nearly one when Gary declared the pie ready.

“I’ll bring it into your room. Milk? I dumped out the rest of the sludge you call coffee.”

“A small glass. Thanks.”

Harry swiveled his chair toward the bed where Gary had perched. They yummed and ooed and ahed through a quarter of a pie each. The Butter Brickle worked just fine.

Gary got serious.

“I’m really going to miss things like this – when I get older and head out on my own – like you mentioned before.”

“So long as we keep wonderful memories we can really never miss things like this.”

Gary nodded. His mouth was full. Of course, even that didn’t necessarily mean he wouldn’t try to speak.

At three o’clock, they had Spam sandwiches with potato chips. So much for Grampa’s cholesterol level!

By bed time they each felt very good about their day – they had accomplished things they had wanted to accomplish.

“I think we will be able to make our way into town tomorrow,” Harry said. “Let’s shoot for mid-morning in the sun. There won’t be customers, but the exercise will be good for us and I’d like to check on the shop to make sure it weathered the storm okay.”

“I probably should check on the Julcimer Shop, too.”

Gary offered an ear-to-ear grin.

“I started to say Julie and then tried to change it to Dulcimer and it came out Julcimer.”

“I think I understood that, and yes, you should do that. Then, we can have a professionally prepared meal at Hank’s if he’s open. If not, it will be a good day to come back to a hearty can of stew with biscuits.”

“If Hank’s isn’t open I will be disappointed, but you won’t. You just refuse to let things disappoint you.”

"I have never found that being disappointed helped make anything better. What happens, happens. I reformulate my plan and move on."

"I hope I can learn to be that way. I tend to let even little things disappoint me."

"If you set your mind to it, I can guarantee you will eventually learn to be that way. Don't be in a great hurry for that to happen. Feeling disappointment, deeply, goes with being young. It will come in time."

Gary nodded. It was something to think about and a relief that he didn't need to be in a hurry about it.

The following morning Gary was up early. By the time Harry entered the kitchen, he had placed Grady's pie in an old pizza container and tied it shut with the twine from one of the apple sacks. He had transferred the apples into boxes and folded the gunny sacks.

"I figured we should give him his sacks back," Gary said turning to watch his grandfather into the room.

"And good morning to you, too!"

"I heard you coming."

Gary smiled and went on to describe what he had done.

"I put the pie in the box and tied it shut so no animals could get in. I printed the word, "GRADY" on a sheet of paper and taped it to the top of the box. We'll lay the bags on the firewood and put the box on top. That sound like a good plan?"

"An excellent plan. You are a very thoughtful and kind person. Those are two of the many parts of you I love so much."

He pulled Gary close to his side and administered a lingering kiss to top of the boy's head. Gary made no move to seek release from it.

Presently, Harry spoke.

"I remember back to early in our relationship I was afraid you wouldn't accept overtures (gestures) of affection from me."

"Boy, were you *wrong*, huh? There really had never been affection in my first home that felt genuine. There were nighttime kisses and occasional hugs – usually in public for

show, I figure, now – but never any quiet snuggling time when I was young.”

“You asking for more snuggle time?”

“You know I’m not. When you pull me close like this it feels like the grown-up version of snuggles.”

At nine, they bundled up and set out for town. The snow was already melting in spots and had long left the tree branches. Snow never lasted long in the Ozarks. With the remaining, slippery snow underfoot it doubled the usual time for the trip. Part of that, of course, had to do with the four dozen snow balls Gary felt required to make and throw at any and all targets that presented themselves. Harry avoided any direct hits.

In town, Julicimer – Julie – was helping her father begin the year-end inventory. With the end of the year just around the corner, that time was upon them. She and her family spent the month of January in Florida, so she would be leaving in a few weeks. They spent half an hour together there inside the shop. Her father tried to make himself scarce, but he was around so there had been no hand holding or arms around each other’s waists. Still, they judged it to have been a very nice time. They both enjoyed conversation and that day, conversation it would be.

It did make Gary wonder; if there was nothing wrong with hand holding and arms around each other’s waists, why should they feel awkward about doing it there in the shop with her father present. He would need to have a talk about that – probably with Grampa, but probably with Julie as well – maybe even her father. Gary was not shy about exploring his concerns and questions.

Back at the *‘Clocks and Box’*, Harry was straightening up the loft. Gary had a very practical bent – never put anything away if you think you might possibly need it with the next month (or three!). Harry didn’t mind. It gave him an excuse to remember his own years as an enthusiastic, impatient young man. It had been a good time in life, although not an easy time. He attended school, he worked twenty hours a week, he suffered a broken leg (‘I’m sure I can climb just a little higher in this tree’), a separated collar bone (‘I think the water in the stream down below this cliff will be deep

enough to dive into'), and, his father had been sidelined for a year due to an automobile accident so, at fourteen, Harry was called upon to assume many of his duties for the family. Still, he looked back on it as a very good time. It had helped him learn the pleasures of being a helpful and dependable person and appreciate his own skills and good health.

The door opened, ringing the bell, which was set to tinkle when people entered. Harry looked down on the shop.

"Cold out there, Grampa," Gary said as he entered. "More snow predicted for later in the day. Julie is fine, by the way. I stopped by Hanks and he's postponing his opening until ten today instead of five. Marge says the mail will be late – maybe here by noon."

"You are expecting mail?"

"No. Just nosy. She sends her regards by the way. She loaned me a book on the runaway slave situation during the decade prior to the war. She made me promise if I lost it I would replace it with you!"

Harry snorted and shook his head. She was a persistent (determined) woman. He recalled that on their thirtieth wedding anniversary his wife had said if she hadn't finally proposed to Harry she'd still be an old maid. Perhaps Harry needed persistent women in his life.

"Julie's grandmother runs the sewing shop at the far east end of the street. The overhang in front has shaded the walk so the snow hasn't melted. I'd like to go shovel it for her before we leave town. This a good time?"

"Yes. Very nice. Need a hand?"

"No. I got it."

"Good, because I need both of mine today. By the way, do you know how to spell the word clutter?"

Gary understood and offered a grin.

"H-A-P-P-I-N-E-S-S!"

He scooted out the front door laughing to himself.

"What a joy," Harry said out loud.

Somewhat humorously, that noon, Hank's special was Hillbilly Stew and biscuits. It came with chocolate cake and ice cream – vanilla – how unoriginal. They each caught a good helping of extra biscuits from Hank as he tossed them across the room. Gary ate three more than he really wanted

just so he could call out, "Biscuit Here!" – as was the custom there – and then make the catch. Hank's aim was not all that accurate so some fielding skill was required. After having missed three in a row – they had been badly overthrown – Gary stood up on his chair and pounded his palm, suggesting a catcher behind the plate. It was good for laughs clear back into the kitchen.

By the time they started the trek back to their cabin, a significant amount of additional snow had melted, running off in tiny, trickling streams it cut as irregular paths along the top of the rocky, red soil. Gary wondered how anything could actually grow in such sterile appearing ground. He figured the seeds they planted in Arkansas must have a tremendous will to live. All that water would turn to ice overnight rendering the footing quite unstable the next morning.

As they approached the back porch, Gary pointed to the woodpile.

"They're gone – the pie and sacks."

Harry pointed to the ground in the shade beside the woodpile. The word, THANKS, had been printed – probably using the end of a stick.

"That's a nice feeling," Gary said.

He gave a glance back up the hill before they entered the cabin, understanding that if he really wanted to he could just follow Grady's tracks and find his bunker.

They left their wet shoes just inside the door and hung their jackets on the hooks inside the closet.

"You have a plan for the remainder of the day?" Harry asked.

"I want to read the book from Marge. I promise I'll take good care of it in order to save you the fate of spending your remaining years stuffed into her book case."

Gary thought it was hilarious. He put another log on the fire and settled in on the couch to read. Harry went into his room and began moving his fingers across the keyboard.

At four, they met in the kitchen and made short work of warmed over pot roast - it was one food that just kept getting better the more often it was reheated.

"How's the book?" Harry asked.

"Fascinating! I may just have to trade you in for it, after

all. I've learned more about slavery in the past five hours than I had in all the rest of my life. I have an idea for that story we've talked about. I think I'll construct it so it presents the same periods in two boys' lives sort of side by side – Perry, sticking pretty much to his real life as he recorded it in his journal, and a slave who is Perry's age. I think I will call him Thomas. I learned that slaves often just had one name. I'll start when they were both young and take them up to the age when Perry died – seventeen. I'll go back and forth between them. Don't have all the details worked out. I'll have to make up the slave boy's life, but with the help of this book I'll be able to do that in a pretty accurate manner I believe."

"What an extraordinary idea and a fantastic way to learn about that era."

"I figure what I write may sound a lot like what you write."

"And why is that – not the *genes* thing again."

It was worth smiles.

"I've read all your books. I've never read so many by one author before – one style. I figure there will necessarily be some spill-over effect."

"Are you postulating (supposing) that as a good or bad thing?"

"Grampa! Things don't have to be good or bad. Don't you listen to yourself? It will just be what it will be. I can't imagine how that could be bad, though."

"I will take that as confirmation that things have been going very well between us all these months."

"I'm glad you understand."

The pie and ice cream prompted talk about another baking session. Where could they get peaches that time of year?

CHAPTER NINE
The Battle of Little Red River
Part One
A story by Gary Thomas

[Note to the younger readers:
This story has several scenes that describe the unpleasant
side of war
and the mistreatment of slaves that might be upsetting,
so you may want to skip chapters 9 and 10 and
get right back to Gary and Grampa in Chapter 11. Or, you
might have a parent read it with you.]

According to the front page in the family Bible, it was at 11:12 on the night of March 9th, 1845, a baby boy was born to a proud and happy set of young parents who lived on a farm just west of Pontiac, Illinois. They named their son Perry. They had every reason to dream big dreams about his future. They would see that he completed grade school and hoped he could attend the new high school being proposed for Pontiac. They would teach him the value of work and model lives of honesty, trustworthiness, compassion and love. His future looked bright.

At ten after five on the morning of March 12, 1845, a baby was born to a proud set of parents – slaves on the Ballard Plantation, in Chicot County in southeastern Arkansas. They named him Thomas, a strong name they thought. In their lore, it meant Hope. They understood they could not promise him a life filled with anything but hard work, sunup to

sunset, and the burn of his Master's whip when he fell short of what the white man wanted from him. They would do what they could to help him from becoming hateful and resentful of his lot in life. His future looked bleak – the best any black baby could expect in the southern United States.

Early on, they each learned the ways of their culture.

Perry was free to pursue whatever way of life his capacities allowed – farming, becoming a merchant, a doctor, a minister, a banker, a teacher. He had many years in which to explore all his possibilities. Perry was a bright boy and enjoyed learning. In 1851, the year he turned six, there were two big events in his life: the first of his three sisters was born and he began school in a one room school house one mile north of the farm. There were ten students all from the same square mile where he lived. Most square miles in Illinois had their own school and teacher to manage the educational needs of the children from all the surrounding, small farms. He walked to and from school in good weather and bad – December and January snows often piled up to well over a foot high which lasted a month or more at a time. Spring was wet with heavy rains and muddy stretches of road that were impossible to pass. Summer sometimes brought tornadoes, and Fall threatened early frosts that nipped at his nose and damaged crops.

There were very few aspects of Perry's life that he didn't see as good and helpful, however. You just lived with some things like the weather. You changed or fixed other things – like learning in school and planting the ground with crops. His parents loved him and the neighbors respected him and treated him well. He had no reason to suspect that his life was not going to be absolutely wonderful.

In 1851 Thomas turned six. His life offered no options. He was owned by Mr. Ballard just like the pigs and cows and chickens were owned by Mr. Ballard. That year he began carrying water to the workers in the field – an important job for sure. His lot would be to turn in a satisfactory day's work – dawn to dusk – six or seven days a week. The other black

people there loved him and took the best care of him possible. Black people were not allowed an education. Some said that was to keep them ignorant and dependent on the plantation owners. Some said it was because 'Negros' were too stupid to learn. Except for some relief during the winter months, his world was hot and humid – the kind that drained the body of water and the soul of hope, and encouraged open sores to invade every bodily crack and crevice.

As a little boy, Thomas had it pretty good – a place to live out of the bad weather, a mother and father who loved him, and people who cared about his welfare. Everybody shared with him from their plates of food. The Negros cared for him because they saw him as a precious human being. The white folks who owned him and determined the nature of his life cared for him so he would one day grow into a strong, obedient, field worker – a cotton worker – plant, hoe, pick, bale and then do it all over again. He had no reason to suspect that his life would ever be any different from those among whom he lived.

When Perry returned to school in October of 1854, after time off during the summer and early fall to help his father work the fields and harvest, he was surprised to find that he had been promoted from second to fourth grade – skipping third because he learned so rapidly and did so well in his studies. He continued to like school – there were many more books available for children in the fourth grade. He particularly liked history and geography. He worked diligently each day. Those who finished all their assignments by two o'clock were allowed to read story books the last hour. That year he started keeping a journal – girls called them diaries. He wrote a few lines in his almost every night. He recorded many of his hopes and dreams for his future. Sometimes he wanted to be a writer and other times a teacher. He was quite sure his life would not be on the farm. That was the year Perry saw his first Negro – a man, pulling a cart for a white man. He marveled at his beautiful skin and had questions for his father about the way the man's hair grew in curls, tightly twisted against his scalp. He figured that would make life a whole lot easier – never having to carry (and try to not lose) a comb.

Combs cost a penny each so he did his best to keep track of his. He was leaning that money was not easy to come by so needed to be used wisely.

1854 was a sad time for Thomas and his mother. His father was sold to another plantation owner so he was taken from them forever. Thomas never heard about him again. At nine he began learning about the planting and care of cotton as well as carrying water. He was bigger and stronger and was expected to carry two jugs at a time. One day, one week, one month followed the other – wake up, eat bread and gravy, go into the fields, eat the stew that was brought out to them (they were given five minutes to eat – ten if they had worked well during the morning), then work until dark, go to their cabins, eat raw fruit, and sleep. On Sundays, the women would dress in colorful dresses – those who had them – and there would be singing and dancing. Thomas liked to listen to the old men talk. They had lots of stories – some about themselves and some tales about how it had been in old days before they had been torn away from their homeland and herded onto ships for the trip to America. Thomas liked those stories because they talked about being free.

All the slaves on the Ballard Plantation agreed that Thomas was the smartest that had come along in a generation. Little good that did the boy. In fact, he found he had to hide that from the white men or they would double up on his workload or treat him badly – black boys were not supposed to be smart, as if the occasional sting of a whip could change that. He knew nothing about money or the country and the states that made it up. He only knew what his masters wanted him to know. He learned early in life that he didn't dare ask questions of the whites or they would lay the whip to his back. By the time he reached age nine, he had never had a shirt or socks or shoes or underwear. He had no possessions to worry about losing.

In 1856 Perry turned eleven and was promoted straight onto the four-year high school that had just opened in Pontiac. It was a five mile walk each way. Perry didn't miss a day. The teachers seemed to love his questions and he continued to do

well. His skill at speaking was noted and he was asked to enter the Two County Oratory (speaking) Contest in May. His humorous, fifteen-minute talk about how he loved being a boy garnered lots of laughs and the greatest amount of applause by far, but the judges gave first prize to a girl who spoke about the place religion should play in young people's lives. (Two of the three judges were ministers.) Win or lose, it truly made no difference to Perry. He got to travel north to Ottawa for the event, a bigger town with graveled streets in the downtown area. The contestants from out of town got to stay overnight with a local family. The one that hosted Perry was wealthier than Perry's family – the boy, who was his age, had five pairs of school trousers and a suit and special shoes for church on Sunday. It was the first-time Perry had been away from home overnight. He had decided it was going to go well, so it did.

That summer he found he was a good deal stronger than the year before and was pleased he could be of more help – making fence, handling hay bales, and things like that. Another sister was born. Perry moved into the attic to make room for the girls on the first floor. He liked the privacy.

In 1856 Thomas turned eleven and moved full time to work with the men in the fields. It was hard work even though he had grown stronger over the winter. The black men who worked the fields were referred to by the whites as, 'Hey Boys'. It had most likely grown out of the combination of calling 'Hey' to get the worker's attention, and the term 'Boy', which was what back men were called by white men. With the new work role, he was moved into the single men's cabin away from his mother for the first time. It had both its good and bad sides. Thomas had learned to put up with the bad side of everything. He donned the universal smile of black people – there to hide their misery and constant terror. Shortly after his move, his mother got sick with 'the fever' and died. It was a sorrowful time – he was alone.

With his extra portion of 'smarts', Thomas had developed a talent for 'doctoring' the other slaves and was allowed to watch the white doctor when he treated white men who were ailing or had been hurt. He learned a lot. The doctor was very kind and sensed the talent, also. That was to

the owner's advantage – to have a black who could tend to the slaves. A sick or wounded slave couldn't work at full efficiency so to keep them well and nurse them back to health quickly was a good thing. The doctor let Thomas ask questions when other whites weren't around. That was where he received a good deal of his knowledge about the world outside of the Plantation. He learned about schools and hospitals and money and voting and making up your own mind about things. He learned there was a vast area up north where black men were free to live and work as they pleased. That idea burned itself into his soul. He would someday live there.

In 1857 Perry turned twelve. In school, he was learning about United States History and government and politics, and followed the rumors there might have to be a war to free the slaves in the south. He hated the idea of war, but the more he learned about slavery the more he let himself believe it might be justified in that case. During much of that year – tenth grade it was called – he considered a career in politics. He spent time with the Mayor and some of the elected county officials. He concluded it would not really be to his liking. One basic requirement seemed to be the ability to stretch the truth to serve one's own purposes. Perry was an honest person. He kept coming back to teaching.

He had a friend at school – Gerald. One morning he arrived for class with bruises on his arms and a black eye.

“What happened?” Perry asked

“Don't want to talk about it,” the friend replied.

Time was short.

“You better be ready to talk about it at noon. You hear me?”

At noon, they usually ate together – sack lunches brought from home. They had a half hour. Gerald didn't show up at their usual spot under an ancient elm tree in the school yard. Perry went looking for him and found him in the stable behind the school where many of the students boarded their horses during the day.

“What's wrong? Where's your lunch?”

“Didn't get one today.”

“Didn't get one. What do you mean?”

"I forgot to feed the chickens last night and dad gave me a beating. Said I couldn't have a lunch the rest of the week."

Perry handed over half his sandwich and cut his apple in two.

Gerald accepted them knowing there would be a ruckus (problem) if he didn't.

"You saying he hit you – your father?"

"For about ten minutes. To teach me a lesson."

"And your mother didn't step in?"

"I get my beatings out behind the barn – out of sight."

"You've had beatings before."

Gerald looked at him, puzzled. Of course. You get them, too, right?"

"Never in my life. I got paddled sometimes when I was a little kid, but never anything like this. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. I wish I could help. Mom will be happy to pack double lunches the rest of the week."

"She must not know about this. You have to promise to keep quiet about it."

"As if everybody in school doesn't already know you were in fight of some kind."

Perry would pledge his parents to secrecy in the matter, but he *would* talk with them about it that evening. He did. He learned parents didn't interfere with how other parents disciplined their children. His mother would gladly fix the extra food, but that was as far as it could go. His father said that his dad had beaten him when he was a boy.

"Did it help you – to get beat on?"

"Mostly, it think, Perry, it has helped *you*."

"I don't understand."

"I learned I would never beat my son."

Perry nodded thoughtfully. It both recognized the truth in the statement and his appreciation of his parent's more moderate and thoughtful approach. He slept very little that night. He couldn't imagine beating on somebody you were supposed to love.

In 1857 Thomas turned twelve and with that a normal, growing interest in girls. One day he was looking at the

owner's daughter from across the lawn, and one of the white hands caught him. Negro men did NOT look at white women. It was a rule – like a law. White people took such an offence very seriously. So it was with Custer – Mr. Ballard's foreman.

Thomas was taken to the huge old whipping tree, his wrists tied together and pulled up above him as he faced the trunk. He had felt the bite of whips many times for minor infractions, but never more than one flick at a time. He knew better than to resist or it would be all the worse. Custer removed the cat-o-nine tails from where it hung on a hook on the tree trunk. It had nine leather thongs fastened to the end of a round, twelve-inch handle. Each thong had been tied into a series of knots along its length – ten or so over eighteen inches. As the thongs were struck against the slave's back, they were also drawn downward so those knots tore at the skin.

"It will be ten today. If there is a next time, expect twenty."

Thomas had been forced to watch men being whipped many times. It was the white men's way of teaching them to stay in line. He knew that after five or six lashes most men passed out from the terrible pain and hung limp. They would be brought around with water thrown into their face and the whipping would continue. He remembered a conversation with one of the older slaves after he had witnessed a particularly vicious beating.

"I just wanted to take that nine-tails away from Custer and beat him lifeless," Thomas had said to the old man."

"Do that and you'll be hung by your neck and your mother and your best friend will be hung before ya so ya have ta watch. We all git the nine-tails sometime. My advice ta ya is that when that time comes fer you, scream all-out at every strike. It helps ease the pain and makes the whities feel good about it – knowin' they done hurt ya somethin' terrible. Hold in your screamin' and they'll double it right then and there. We all understand. Nothin' unmanly about it. Jist how it need to be played."

Thomas prepared to receive the ten strikes. After one he screamed. He screamed after two and after three and after four. He passed out from the pain. Sometime later he was

awakened – soaking wet – and took the rest. Custer left. That was the signal the other blacks could take him down and attend to his wounds. It wasn't often a boy his age received ten. It wasn't often a boy his age was careless enough to get caught staring at a white girl.

He was required to work the fields the next day even though he could hardly walk. The others doubled down and helped do his jobs, but they had to be careful. If they were caught doing it they'd find the nine-tails ripping into their own flesh.

That night at head-count, Perry was missing. A search party was sent to find him. He was lying unconscious in the field. He hadn't been able to make it back to the cabins. Two weeks later he was sold to a Plantation Owner named Percy. He was from Mississippi and owned several huge farms in Arkansas. While there, he continued helping the sick and injured. Having that skill had earned Ballard an extra hundred dollars for him.

In 1859 Perry turned fourteen. There was a girl he liked – Mary Lou. Sometimes they ate lunch together. For a community to have a four-year high school was a rarity in those days. By the beginning of the 12th grade there were only five students in his class. Farmers needed their boys by that age, and town boys were enrolled as apprentices (trainees) or in some other way were trained in a craft rather than continuing with book learning. Perry graduated number one in his class. Doctor Burk, the only physician in the area, talked with Perry about learning medicine and becoming a doctor. In that day, although physicians were respected and generally had the most education of anybody nearby, the profession was looked down upon and the income was quite low. If war came, physicians would be expected to serve in the military, caring for the wounded. It was not the life Perry saw for himself. He was still young – very young to have graduated from high school. Most jobs for which he was qualified required him to be older.

He stayed on the farm spending what time he could reading and writing and learning wonderful new things. He and Mary Lou continued to see each other at church and

sometimes Sunday afternoons. Boys and girls weren't expected to get serious about one another until they were seventeen. Most married by the time they were twenty. Perry was not ready to be tied down to a family. He hoped to travel and see, firsthand, the many wonders of the country about which he had read.

One day while in town picking up feed for the livestock at the Feed Store, he waited around and listened to the older men who gathered there. They were talking politics and other things. He decided that old men gossiped worse than women. He didn't mention that to them. The possibility of war was on everyone's mind. Most of the men were anti-slavery (against it). Several thought it was best not to go into the south and mess with it – just let them be the way they had always been.

"Slaves really have it pretty good, you know," one said. "They get everything they need provided for them – food, clothes, a place to live and work. I think the talk about them being unhappy is blown out of proportion."

"But it ain't right for one man to own other men."

"I think it's really more like a cooperative arrangement. The Plantations share the wealth – the food and such."

"I don't believe a word you're saying," another man offered. "They are treated horribly."

"I don't think it's worth killing off our young men to free a handful of Negros. Where would they go? They don't know how to take care of themselves. All they know is how to pick cotton and do what they're told to do. They'd all end up beggars and criminals. And, they'd all run up here expecting us to treat them like equals. It'd be a terrible thing, I'm telling you."

Perry had to make a comment.

"We have schools for white kids. Couldn't we have schools to teach the Negros what they need to know so they could make their way and fit in?"

One man answered for all of them."

"One thing we all know – proslavery or antislavery – Negros are inferior to whites in intelligence. School's out of the question."

All the men offered their agreement – if not with words at least with nods. Perry wondered if they were right about

that. He had read that in Africa they had lived in highly developed societies with laws and courts and thriving cities and area officials much like there in Illinois. He would investigate it further before trying to go up against a bunch of old men who knew what they wanted to believe and were determined not to let anything like actual facts change their minds. Perry could not understand how or why anybody would choose to remain ignorant, (uninformed) if facts were available. He figured it meant they were obviously lazy – not willing to make the effort to learn the truth.

In 1859 Thomas turned fourteen. He wondered where the sun went at night and why winters were cooler than summers. He wondered what the United States was, he'd overheard white men use the term. He understood what war was, but didn't understand why there might be one soon. A new slave arrived – Dorm. Word was, he had come from up north – near a place called Little Rock (still in Arkansas). Thomas figured he should know things about life in other places so he made a point to stay close to him in the evening and listen – even ask questions sometimes.

"Tell me about Little Rock."

"Only been there twice. A big city with a river runnin' clean through the center of it. Rich people. Cargo comes in from all over the world in big boats."

"Are black people free there?"

"Not there. I'll tell ya though. Slave owners in cities is nicer to us than Plantation owners is."

"Why did you come back here, then?"

"Didn't come 'cause I wanted to – ran away, got caught, sold."

"Where does a black man have to go to be free?"

"Clear up into Illinois and Wisconsin and even better up into Canada – I think that's another country or a territory or something. Clear up where it's cold all year 'round."

"I wonder if cold is better than hot," Thomas asked, not expecting an answer. How does a slave get up there to freedom?"

"There is somethin' called the Underground Railroad."

"I don't understand one thing that you just said,"

Thomas said.

"I don't know the words either. That's jist its name. It's like a long line a white people who hates slavery as much as we do. They like pass slaves from one a them ta the other. It all has ta stay secret. It's agin the laws. They gets caught helpin' us and they goes ta jail or worse. Some got lynched (hung) by mobs a white men, I hear."

"They must hold very strong beliefs to risk their own freedom or their lives."

The man nodded.

That night Thomas had many new things to consider. He even allowed a glimmer of hope to remain deep inside him – something that didn't happen often in the sorrowful lives of slaves.

He wondered many things. Would it be better for a group of slaves to try and escape all at once or go one at a time? He understood the punishment for trying to escape was often to be hung. He also understood that if an escape was successful, the Master often picked out two or three slaves at random and hung them. The idea was to put fear into them – if they escaped then they understood they would be the reason some of their friends or family members would be killed.

Thomas knew which way north was. Suddenly, it became his favorite direction – cold or not. He figured too cold couldn't be worse than too hot.

CHAPTER TEN
The Battle of Little Red River:
Part two

In 1860 Perry turned sixteen. At Christmas time the teacher at the local grade school – the one Perry had attended – fell ill and had to resign. The school board came to Perry and pleaded with him to take over, at least until they could find a full-time replacement. He agreed provided they allowed him to spend twenty dollars on some new books. He knew he was in the driver's seat so milked it for all it was worth. They also agreed to raise the salary from \$5.70 to \$5.75 a week. (If he had been a woman doing the same job he would have only been paid \$3.50 a week.)

He found he loved to teach. He had 11 students from six to twelve years old – eight girls and three boys. Most rural fathers weren't high on sending boys to school past the 4th grade – read, write and do numbers up to division and basic fractions – that was sufficient. One conversation made the point.

"I hear you been talking up staying in school past the fourth year," Mr. Langly said as he met Perry leaving the school building one afternoon.

"I like for my students to understand what their options are."

"Well, my son will take over my farm – that's the only option I want him to learn about."

"I certainly didn't mean to upset you. Knowing you and your wife I believe you are the kind who want the very best for you children. I'm not implying you don't have a wonderful life

on the farm, but I have to ask, as a child didn't you have some dreams other than being a farmer."

"All kids have dreams – always unrealistic. We know what we got to hand on to him. Try for something else and there are no guarantees."

"Okay then. I will not mention additional education in his presence any more. I can't be responsible for the dreams he comes up with on his own, you understand."

"You really think Georgie is smart enough for more school?"

"I certainly do. You have seen his report cards – all B's and C's – those are all average or better grades."

"Let me think on it, then."

They shook hands and the man left.

Most country school teachers were young, single, women who had only graduated from 8th grade. His additional education made Perry an outstanding teacher, plus, he had a natural gift. He loved to learn and he found ways to help his students come to love it as well. He figured that was the most important thing he could pass on to them.

Since his position lent some degree of respect, he was able to court (date) Mary Lou at a younger age than most, without getting glares from passers by. They enjoyed summer picnics and winter rides in the sleigh pulled by Bobby Boy – Perry's horse since he was ten. It soon became the general opinion among those who gossiped about such things that Perry and Mary Lou would be married by the time they turned eighteen. Even Perry and Mary Lou spoke of the possibility sometimes. Love changed a young man's goals in a hurry.

As the war between the north and the south seemed more and more inevitable (likely), Perry found himself torn between abhorring (hating) war and abhorring slavery. If war came, he would have to make a decision, join up or pay a man to take his place. He had saved seven hundred dollars and that was the going rate to 'buy' a replacement. It was an honorable way to avoid military service in those days, but was usually reserved for the wealthy who lived in the north-eastern states. He had hoped to use that money as his nest egg when he was married. With that much he could purchase a small

house in town, buy a carriage, and furnish a house with furniture. The board of the high school had approached him about becoming the history and geography teacher. It offered an extra ten cents a week.

He didn't want to be unpatriotic. It was a difficult decision. He had seen very few Negroes and had never talked with one. He cringed when he saw them being mistreated – even the so called free Negroes there in Illinois often got spit upon as they passed along the sidewalks. They were in constant danger of being captured and taken back into the south to, again, work as slaves. That was even legal according to the Congress of the United States and Perry thought it was a terrible law (The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850).

Sometimes he remembered a conversation with an older man – a friend of the family. Perry had been six or seven.

“But I don't want us to kill the pig,” Perry said.

“That's why you grew him – to make food for you to eat this winter.”

“What kind of food?”

“Ham and bacon and pork chops.”

“Those things come from dead pigs?”

“That's right.”

“Yuck. I'll never eat any of that again. Doesn't it hurt the pig to be killed?”

“Pigs is too dumb to know if it hurts or not. You don't have to worry about that.”

But Perry did worry about it. He had been near-by when his grandmother died. He had to admit she didn't seem to be in any pain. It made him feel some better but, understanding Perry was a sensitive young man, his father never insisted that he be part of killing the pigs or cows.

He and his father went hunting for rabbit, squirrel and pheasant. He didn't seem to see hunting in the same way he did slaughtering the larger animals. In fact, he had won marksmanship ribbons at the County Fair every year from the time he turned twelve. He talked with Mary Lou about the problem.

“I don't even know if I could pull the trigger if my rifle was aimed at another man – even an enemy soldier. The idea

of killing another human being makes me sick to my stomach. One minute he would be alive. Then I'd pull my trigger and he'd be dead, because of me. It all just seems so terrible to me."

"What if your choice was between letting that soldier kill you or you killing him?"

"Don't think I haven't thought about it. I suppose I'd shoot. I know I would if he was about to shoot you or any member of my family."

"I agree it's terrible. But if an army from the south invades us here in Illinois, it seems to me we have to defend ourselves – not just give up our nation to them. It is like they made the decision to risk getting killed when they decided to invade us. That wasn't your decision."

"More likely it was the decision of a bunch of old men in court houses willing to send other parents' sons out to be slaughtered."

They had many discussions. It seemed to be a problem for which Perry might never be able to find the right answer.

Thomas turned 16 in 1860. He had made a huge decision. He was going to run away. He leaned as much as he could about things that seemed like they would be important – keep to the land or go for the Mississippi River, where would there be food he could easily come by to sustain himself, where were the retrievers – bands of men who went out looking for runaways, how far was it too Illinois, how long would such a trip take? There were many more things. He spent several months gathering such information. From what he could tell, slaves that had runaway in the past were caught because they had no plan past leaving the plantation. He would have a plan.

The day came when he was convinced he had all the information he was going to be able to gather as long as he remained there on the Plantation. He would not tell anybody about his plan. He did his best to bury his feelings about his friends who might be harmed because of his escape. He told himself he wasn't intentionally hurting anybody. It wasn't a good argument so he buried it deeply and didn't think of it

again.

Most had left from the fields when they tried to escape thinking it was best to be able to see where they were going – during daylight. That also gave the owners more hours of light in which to search for them. Thomas decided to leave right after head-count in the evening. The sun would be sitting on the horizon so he would have the advantage of some lingering light for several hours – those hours before he would even be missed – before search parties would be sent looking for him at dawn.

Instead of heading directly north – a mistake made by most of those who had tried before him – he would head west. The land was flat and he could put many miles between him and the plantation before daylight. Once it was found he was missing, word would be sent to the surrounding slave owners and they would all join in the hunt. He had learned where the plantations were to the west and although had no way of knowing their exact locations, he thought he knew well enough to figure it out so he could avoid them as he went along.

As dusk came upon the plantation, he slipped past the cabins and the whipping tree and into the fields to the south west. They had few guards overnight. By and large, slaves were not so dumb as to try and run. (Oh, yeah!)

Thomas was strong and had great endurance so picked up his pace to a fairly good trot. He figured he could keep that up for many hours. He avoided the roads and open areas everywhere he could. He figured it was midnight when he allowed himself a few minutes to rest beside a stream. He drank and submerged himself in the water to cool down. No more than fifteen minutes later was back to a steady trot. He had been told that some thirty miles to the west there was a good-sized stream that flowed north into a river flowing south west from higher country. Although there were towns along it, its banks were described as being wide and flat with clumps of trees and occasional mounds of dirt. That seemed like ideal travelling territory – and hiding territory if that became necessary.

He came upon the stream, crossed it, and headed generally north along its west bank. Luck was shining on him. He came upon a beautiful horse that was friendly and willing

to allow him to ride bareback. The two of them moved along the stream at an easy gallop – set by the horse who seemed to enjoy the activity. After several hours, the horse insisted on crossing the stream.

“Probably where he lives,” Thomas said out loud, if just to himself.

He dismounted and let the animal go thinking it would be difficult to keep him headed in a direction he didn’t want to go. It had given Thomas a chance to rest and he felt refreshed as he once again set out on foot. While on the horse, he figured he had quadrupled the distance he could have traveled on foot.

By the time the sun began lighting the sky he figured he had put fifty or maybe even sixty miles between him and the plantation. He was tired and needed to sleep. That had been his plan – travel at night and sleep during the day. He began looking for an out of the way place to spend the day. Earlier in the month he had traded his white pants for black – the other man got the better deal and was pleased. Thomas knew between his black skin and those black pants he was more likely to be able to hide himself.

He smiled thinking: ‘finally, something really good about being a black man’.

After several days of sleeping by day and traveling by night, he came upon a large, wide, river. It would be the Arkansas and flowed clear across the state – northwest to southeast. His plan was to follow it northwest to Little Rock. It was north of that city that Dorm said the folks would be found that were helpful to escaped slaves. He had been warned about avoiding the docks because that’s where blacks on the run often thought they could find passage to the north. Bands of retrievers roamed the docks day and night.

On day five of his travels he came upon a camp – fifteen or so men around a fire early in the evening. They were neither white in appearance nor black. They had wide noses and beautiful, long, black hair. He had heard about that kind – Indians. He had been told to avoid them. They came into Arkansas from the Indian Territory (later Oklahoma) in search of runaway slaves. They sold them in western Arkansas and just across the border into their Territory. The stories he had

heard about them were downright scary. He was hungry and thought if they were about to turn in for the night he might enter the camp and find food.

Thomas watched them from what he figured was a safe distance. It had NOT been a safe distance and he soon found himself tied to a tree; his hope for freedom had been dashed.

In 1861 Perry turned 17 and with that made the decision that with the coming of the war he needed to step up and support two of his basic beliefs: defend his homeland and work to see that no man would ever again be allowed to own another man in his United States of America. The day after Christmas he said goodbye to his family, friends and Mary Lou and traveled south to Springfield, Illinois where he enlisted. An older, family friend had offered advice to him.

“When you go to enlist wear clothes you don’t need. Once in uniform you’ll never see your civilian duds again. Keep your belt with you if it’s a good one. Military belts are no good. Once in, never volunteer for anything. If your name becomes known to the officers they’re likely to call it whenever they need something. Stay inconspicuous (in the background) and you’ll do just fine. Take good care of your rifle and practice loading it every chance you get. Loading faster than the enemy can save your life.”

Before he left he placed his savings in his mother’s care and told her if she needed it before he returned she should use it. Besides the clothes he wore, he only took three items with him: the few coins he had in his pocket, the hunting knife in a scabbard (sheath) secured to his ankle, and his journal. The journal was tall and narrow and fairly thick – 8 X 5 X 1 ½ inches. It had, perhaps, twenty blank pages left toward the back. He slipped a new pencil inside the spine cover and carried it in his shirt pocket. He hoped to continue making an entry every day.

Having been a farm boy all his life Perry was strong and used to long days of hard work. Still, training camp was challenging and lasted for a month. That was more than most recruits received, but the Springfield Military Center was known to produce the very best soldiers. He felt lucky he was being so well trained. The officer in charge of something called

'combat readiness' worked on the assumption that fresh soldiers needed to be eased into battle situations, so he formed them into companies with a few seasoned soldiers and sent them south to find and take on small bands of Confederate soldiers that had been separated from their main force. Perry saw the wisdom in it – short lived skirmishes that would provide experiences every soldier should have during full scale battles.

He followed all of his old friend's advice and remained just one of the guys, keeping as far away from officers as he dared. His company began with 150 men – 130 recruits and 20 battle hardened veterans. The older men offered good support and on the trail training. The mission of his company was to move south through central Missouri – mostly by train to a staging area north of a tiny town named West Plains. South of that sat the center of the northern border of the state of Arkansas. That was their destination. They would work the area between the northern and western state lines venturing as deep as 75 miles to the south. It was a huge area, but other similarly formed companies were already there or would soon be bound for there. He had overheard two officers talking about having been told to keep a look out for a huge stash of money and gold that was to be shipped south to the Confederate Capital. *That* was not to be allowed. It had apparently been stolen from banks and trains by Confederate agents, mostly in Missouri and Kansas.

The first night into Arkansas – February 20th – they bivouacked (camped) east of Mountain Home, continuing south the next morning. The hills became high, covered with a variety of closely growing trees and thickets of bramble bushes. It was impossible to walk twenty yards without encountering a snake – copperheads he was told – Diamond shaped heads – poisonous. At the center in Springfield they had run out of boots while he was being issued his supplies, so he was glad he had worn his heavy leather, high top, work shoes. The soles, however, were made to match the rich black Illinois soil, not the sharp rocks of the Ozarks Mountains. The soles of his feet felt every step.

On the night of the 24th, scouts brought word they had located a rag tag company of perhaps 100, battle weary, Reb

Soldiers ten miles to the south – over a high hill and on the south bank of a small river. They were camped there and looked to be dug in for at least a short stay. Attacking them from the higher ground of the hill, and with the river as a barricade to any ground-based counter attack from them, their commander felt confident of success. They arrived well after midnight with a full moon and were directed to spread out across the crest of the hill in two rows. The lower row would move as close to the river as possible without being seen – 100 yards of belly crawling was involved at the end. They would be the main force. Those twenty-five or so left on the hill spread out down the slope and took positions from which they could fire down on the camp. Perry was assigned to the lower group.

At three a.m., the order was given to attack. Most of Perry's group remained bellied down and began firing – at first not really seeing any targets. Loading a rifle while lying on one's side was cumbersome (awkward). Perry's platoon brought up the rear and he arrived near the river some ten minutes after the battle had begun. The Confederate soldiers were at a disadvantage – most had been asleep, worn out from a previous battle and the long march to the river. Many were walking wounded.

Perry raised up and knelt on one knee. The air was still and the smoke from both sides hung in the air. He knew his job. He hated his job. He was there to kill enemy soldiers. His stomach churned at the reality that finally he was there, needing to do what he had come to do – defeat the enemy and free the slaves. He aimed at something moving across the river. Through the haze, it was indistinct. He pulled the trigger, but turned away before knowing if he had hit whatever it was. He fell to both knees and threw up. He was not alone in that. It had probably been one of the reasons for that mission – to get over those sorts of feelings. He reloaded many times and he fired many times. He carried two dozen metal balls and most of them had been used. He found himself having to wipe away tears, but he continued doing his job. It was a terrible experience.

By the time the sky began to brighten in the east, gunfire from across the river had stopped. The Union soldiers

that had survived stood and tried to peer south through the thick haze. There was no surrender, but scouts came back with word that the dozen or so of them who remained, were headed back south. The Union officers decided not to pursue them.

It was then that they first recognized it: as the sun topped the horizon, it cast long, deep shadows of the hills and trees. Due to the lingering smoky haze from the battle those shadows took on a deep blue color. Soon after, to commemorate the battle, the town of Red River changed its name to Blue Shadow.

The Union soldiers sat and rested – they had missed one entire night's sleep. The men from the hill came and joined them. The headcount told the story: 100 left. 50 had been killed. Perry was assigned to burial detail which meant digging a large shallow hole, dragging the bodies into it and covering it over again. Armies knew how to be armies – they came prepared with a wagon load of pick axes and shovels just for that purpose. A dozen pitched in to dig the hole before the company moved off to the west along the river. Three, including Perry, remained behind to complete the job.

The body of one of the Confederate soldiers that had made it across the river lay at the water's edge. Perry eyed his new boots. They looked to be a good fit. He took them. There was a piece of pink silk cloth hanging from a pocket. He removed it to use as a neckerchief only to find it held a piece of well-tanned leather. At first glance it looked to be plain on both sides. After just a minute however, markings appeared – lines and several words. He didn't take time to examine it, rewrapping it and stuffing it inside his shirt for safe keeping.

The three of them were standing, leaning on the long handles of their shovels looking south across the water when three shots rang out from the other side of the river. The other two fell to the ground, dead. Perry was hit below his left shoulder, well down into his chest. He fell to his knees knowing he needed to take cover. He stood, bent over in pain and ran west, soon coming upon a log cabin. He pushed on the door. It opened. There were tables with chairs and maps tacked to the walls. One large bed sat near the far wall. It

took no genius to figure it had been a Confederate Field Office abandoned not long before – there was still coffee in tin cups.

He needed more of a hiding place than that. A small trapdoor in the ceiling hung open, down into the room. Several crates sat beneath it. He arranged them so he could climb up through the opening. He was able to kick the crates away before pulling himself into the attic – that, he hoped, would make it less likely any remaining Rebs would know somebody was up there. He crawled to the southeast corner of the attic and laid back. He tore one side of his shirt away and tried to plug the bullet hole and stop the bleeding. By then he had lost a great deal of blood. He knew what lay ahead for him and took out his journal to write while he still could. He only managed a few lines about the battle.

He heard noises down below. Somebody had entered the cabin. He had not been able to close the trapdoor and had left his rifle on the river bank when he had been hit, so all he could do was lay there and wait.

The year 1861 had been a difficult one for Thomas although he had learned more about the world away from the plantation in those few months than he had in his entire life up to that point.

The Indians kept him with them for nearly a month as they gradually moved northwest, back toward their home territory. In Fort Smith, a city on the river at the state border, they sold Thomas to a man who made wagons. With the war, his business was growing almost daily. Thomas learned the trade quickly. He was never treated like a slave and Wally, the wagon maker, told him as far as he was concerned he was a free man. He asked him to stay and earn enough honest wages to repay him the \$300 he had paid for him. Thomas agreed. Thomas was a man of his word.

Wally's wife taught him the first things about reading and writing. Thomas was an excellent student and always expressed his appreciation for the lessons.

One day in early December, Wally came to him with an envelope.

"This contains your statement of freedom from me. It won't do much for you down here, but when you get up north it

will prove your status. There is also what wages you have earned above and beyond the three hundred. Not much. I know you are eager to be on your way. I have arranged for an escort to a safe house – part of what some people call the Underground Railroad. I wish you all the luck in the world. You are a fine young man. Be careful and don't trust folks lightly."

Thomas was overwhelmed by the man's compassionate gesture. He left that night and was set up in a room under a barn across the river near the settlement known as Mulberry. During the next two and a half weeks he was moved east, by night, eventually not far from the small settlement known as Red River. It was a shallow cave high up on a sizeable hill. He had been given instructions to wait until dawn and then descent the hill and follow the river to a log cabin on the north bank. Inside the door he would find lanterns and matches. He was to enter and go to the bed. He was given instructions about moving a claw shaped foot on that bed, which would lead him into a tunnel where he would join others going north. There, he would receive further instructions.

He heard the battle raging over a period of several hours and then watched a long column of soldiers walking west along the bank. Once they had passed he very carefully worked his way to the cabin. He entered and looked around to make sure he was alone. In the process, he saw the open trapdoor in the ceiling. He was curious and restacked the crates so he could climb up and manage a look. Raising a lantern over his head he saw a soldier in the corner. He was breathing with great difficulty. It seemed an effort for the young man to hold his eyes open.

"Are you wounded?" he asked.

"The soldier nodded."

"Let me get water from down stairs."

He found a cask of water and several pieces of dried bread and was soon back kneeling beside the young man.

"I'm Thomas."

"I'm Perry."

Thomas opened Perry's jacket and pulled back his bloody shirt. He understood the situation. He gave Perry

several sips of water and wet a pink rag he found there and wiped the boy's face.

Perry offered a weak smile and reached out. Thomas took his hand and held it between his.

"I'm dying so you can be free."

"I know. Thank you. I love you for it. All of us do."

Perry closed his eyes and his arm dropped.

* * *

Thomas sat with Perry for several hours as he allowed himself to read the journal. He needed to know about that boy – that man. When he finished, he skipped several pages at the end, Thomas added a few final lines to the journal.

My name is Thomas. I am a runaway slave making my way north to freedom in Illinois. I was with Perry at the end. I thanked him for his sacrifice and did what I could to ease his pain during his last moments. I will find his family in Illinois and share with them about that brief time.

Thomas returned the journal to Perry's pocket where he felt it belonged and re-buttoned his jacket, returning to him some degree of dignity in the end.

He had noticed earlier that the heel on Perry's right boot had come apart. He found a many-times folded piece of paper. It was a message to a confederate general over in Northwest Arkansas, telling him to delay his attack at Pea Ridge until supplies and reinforcements arrived. Thomas wondered how that had worked out – the general not having received the message. Later he would learn the general launched his attack early and was defeated. It was a strange feeling knowing that he had held in his hand the message that might have changed the course of history.

He heard soldiers outside and hurried himself downstairs and into the tunnel. He took care to close the little door into the attic.

The following day he and four other runaways were placed under the floorboards in the back of a large wagon carrying bales of cotton and they began their journey north to Cairo, Illinois to be free at last. Perry's first mission was to make his way on north to a farm just east of Pontiac, Ill. He met Perry's loved ones and related the entries in his journal

and spoke of their final moments together. He wished he had taken the little book so he could have presented it to his family, but at the time it seemed right to leave all those precious thoughts he had recorded right there with him. They were all he had left. The family understood.

Thomas went on to have his own successful wagon building business in the area. Finding that once he became a free man he needed a last name there was no question what it would be. He displayed it proudly over the door to his shop: THOMAS PERRY'S WAGONS AND CARRIAGES.

Righting terrible wrongs often requires unselfish sacrifices. War is always terrible, even for the victor.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

What a Fine Way to End a Story

“So, Grampa, what did you think of my story? I liked it. I know it had sad parts, but I tried to make it the way life really was back then. I didn’t think it would be honest to make it seem less terrible than it really was.”

“Back then *and* right now. Life is always a balance between good things and not such good things – hopefully waaaaay overbalanced in the direction of good things. I believe you have already learned that lesson about the good and the bad from your own life.

“As to the story, I think it is fantastic. I would not change a single word. It was a stroke of generous how you took the tiny passage that the slave entered at the end of the journal and created a major character that so fully embodied the horrendous lot of the Black Man during that period. You should consider asking Mage if she would like to read it.”

“And Julie – or do you think there are too many sad and scary parts?”

“Talk with her about it first and explain those things so she can decide. I’m sure you will work it out.”

“So, you haven’t told me yet what you found out from the attorney about Perry and the gold and currency.”

“It all is really very simple. Perry is ours to take care of if we want to – otherwise it will be up to the county. I suggest we arrange burial in the local cemetery. You may design the headstone. We should let the people in town understand his story and invite them to the burial. A few may come.”

“I’d like to be in charge of all that; is that okay. By

writing about him, I've come to feel like he is my friend. I'll run all my ideas by you of course."

"I think that is a fine idea."

"Now, what about the treasure?" Gary asked.

"Mary, the attorney, had a surveyor look over the description of our land and asked him to determine if, hypothetically speaking, there were caves underneath it, if they would legally be ours. Using our final – 'hypothetical' – measurements all the way to the 'safe' room, he says that area is definitely ours by at least ten yards. I didn't realize how far back onto the hill our property goes – nearly half way up this side."

"So, what does that mean? Is the treasure ours?"

"We have what are called 'Mineral and Subterranean Rights'. It seems everything down there is ours to do with as we see fit. We need to do some long hard thinking about that."

"Off the top of my head I say we consider supplying samples of the gold and the currency to the State Historical Society and let them do with it what they think is right. Then, how about using the rest to start feeding all the hungry kids there must be here in this state?"

"I get the idea most of your *long and hard thinking* has already been done."

Gary grinned and nodded, immediately growing serious.

"It's kept me awake at night, if you want the real story. Fill hungry tummies regardless of what color they are on the outside. I'm thinking both Perry and Thomas would approve of that. We do that all anonymously, of course. Like I read in one of your books, people who like to take the credit for their charitable work seem to be doing it so people will think they are great people. That really isn't charity; it's just selfishness. Those who do it without recognition are the ones who do it for the right reason."

"Did I write that? Really?"

"You know you did. It's how we have done it since we have been together and I'm sure it was how you and your wife did it. An anonymous gift is like the most fantastic secret ever."

Harry just offered a smile.

“We will need to look into just how we go about doing all that.”

“And by WE you mean ME.”

“You are such a bright boy. And, that reminds me, the State Achievement Test for home schooled students comes up the third week in December. You are ready, I assume.”

“A piece of cake. Which reminds me, we haven’t had lunch and it’s one o’clock. We are getting spoiled during the snow storm. Tomorrow we have to go back on our regular schedule at the shop. Really, I’m looking forward it.”

“You say you are looking forward to *her*?”

“Well. What can I say?”

“I feel like spaghetti. I know I destroy the kitchen making it, but I promise to help clean up.”

“That sounds delicious. May I help?”

“I can handle it. Time for your nap.”

“I didn’t know I took naps.”

“Be that way, then. Clean out the toilet, I don’t care.”

“Call me when the spaget’s ready. I’ll be in my room napping.”

* * *

Harry spoke to the owner/editor of the small, local newspaper – *The Blue Shadow Gazette* – and arranged for her to run Gary’s story in four parts so the whole community would understand the story behind the upcoming burial of Private Perry Miller. She asked permission to send it to some friend, one of whom was an editor for the largest paper in the state. Gary agreed.

Gary had pulled some strings of his own. Julie’s father was a veteran; so was Hank at the café. They agreed to arrange for a Military Color Guard. The burial was scheduled for a Sunday morning so whatever shop owners wanted to attend, could – the shops being closed that day. Perry’s remains had been entrusted to a Funeral Director up in Mountain Home. Harry and Gary were to meet him at the Cemetery at nine o’clock on the morning of the burial. The ceremony was set for ten.

By the time the two arrived in town that Sunday morning, the street was parked full of cars on both sides and

way on past the cemetery into the country.

“What’s going on?” Gary asked as they walked east on Main toward the cemetery.

“I have the idea it has to do with the ceremony and I also have the idea our editor friend did more than just send out your story to other papers. She must have given the date and time of the burial service. People are coming from all over the state.”

“And Illinois,” Gary said pointing to the license plate on the rear of a large bus.

The bottom line is this:

More than two thousand people gathered there that day to pay tribute to a fallen soldier boy – Union or Confederate made no difference.

There were five military color guard units from across the state and one very special unit from Pontiac, Illinois. Afterwards one of the members of that unit approached Gary. He held out his very black hand for a shake.

“My name is Jerome Perry. The Thomas you worked into your wonderful story was my great, great grandfather. What you wrote is a remarkable tribute to the man – to both men – and I wanted to thank you in person.”

Gary nodded, for once in his life finding nothing to say. Harry offered his hand and managed a response.

“Thank you for coming. And, by the way, that story was written by a remarkable young man. I’m proud to call him family.”

He reached out and pulled Gary close.

There is just a bit more for your story, Gary, Jerome said. The way it has been handed down from generation to generation in my family is that Thomas was able to start his business – actually a leather and harness shop – with that seven hundred dollars Perry had left with his mother for safe keeping. They would not allow him to repay them but suggested that when he could, he help some other worth young person start a business for himself. That tradition has been going on for three generations now.”

To that, Gary was able to respond:

“I’m quite sure Perry would have been very pleased, sir – very pleased.”

It was after two by the time most of the cars were finally gone. Unexpectedly, a bond had formed among those who had come together that day in that rural cemetery, and they felt the need to linger and talk and share stories and ideas.

As they walked home, Grampa had made conversation.

“Grady was there standing at the rear of the gathering. Did you see him?”

“I did. I was surprised – it being for a Yankee soldier, like it was.”

“It seems, his Confederate Flag notwithstanding, he has moved on along with the others.”

“I looked up the loss of life on both sides in that war,” Gary said. “The Confederacy lost nearly 300,000 men and boys, and the Union about 360,000. If anything can be fascinating about such a terrible event, about half of those died, not in battle, but due to illness. Apparently, the conditions were dreadful and what medicine there was seldom made it to the field hospitals to actually benefit the soldiers.”

* * *

Early in January Gary received the results of his State Achievement Test. He ranked in the upper one percent of students his age. (So did Julie, by the way.)

Things went well at the shop and they hired a person to spell them two days a week so they could explore the area (and bake apple pies – Grady kept them well supplied – even peaches in season.)

Gary and Julie settled into a comfortable relationship and Harry had been seen spending a good deal of time in and around the Post Office.

They relaxed. It seemed they really had left the bad guys from *Punkin’ Hollar* behind them. They had every reason to believe *Blue Shadow* would be their long-term home (But then, that’s what they had thought about *Punkin’ Hollar*!)

THE END

(for now, at least!)