



FLIGHT !

*A story of
Mystery, Intrigue, Suspense, and Family
for teens and adults*

By
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NOTE FOR YOUNGER READERS:

There may be some words you're not sure about, so there is a word list with definitions at the end of the book. I hope that adds to your reading pleasure. - Tom

CHAPTER ONE: Transformations

The deaths of young Jason's parents had been a terrible thing. They had raised him well. The deaths of young Jason's parents had been a good thing. They had been bad people fully prepared to do bad things. They had been sleepers, as they are called in spy circles, planted in the United States by a foreign power fourteen years before – two years before Jason was born. While awaiting their instructions to wreak havoc or devastation or steal and provide specialized information of whatever variety, they lived as a typical American Family in Virginia – the Wilsons. His father was a designer of computer programs and his mother a reporter for a well-respected newspaper with national distribution. He was in a position to plant viruses and worms, hack, and worse, and she had access to places and people few average citizens were allowed.

Albert Stanislavsky, born in the US of Eastern European immigrants and recently turned 67, lived in New Jersey where neither his name nor privacy was of any concern to anybody. He was a writer – Mason Jordan, Private Detective, to many thousands of mystery readers. He would soon discover that he was Jason's great uncle twice removed; it made them relatives but barely. Neither knew of the other's existence. Albert had lost his wife earlier in the year. As spring warmed into summer, he was ready for a change in location to a place where he could assume a quiet, more relaxed, responsibility-free, uneventful life, out of the public eye.

He even considered changing his last name to Stanley to further assure his privacy and anonymity.

There was a knock on his apartment door. His grandfather clock had just struck ten and Albert looked through the small peep hole hoping that perhaps a pizza was being mis-delivered. It had happened before. That evening he had written right through the supper hour and would happily shell out twenty bucks for whatever variety it might be – well, not anchovy. The man had *some* self-respect. Two men in dark suits stood their shoulder to shoulder as if intentionally establishing a barrier to the world. Albert addressed them through the door.

“Yes. Who are you and what do you want?”

It was neither unpleasant nor encouraging. He turned the deadbolt, which he noticed had been carelessly left unlocked.

The taller of the two held up a credential wallet – badge on the left, picture ID on the right. Through that contraption of tiny plastic lenses, clouded through the years, he made out the letters FBI on the badge. He saw that Mr. Kaputova’s door across the hall was cracked. ‘At least there will be a witness if they accost me,’ Albert told himself.

He opened the door, chain still in place.

“May I see that up close, please?”

It was less a question and more a requirement. It was handed through the opening and seemed authentic, although what’s authentic in this day of gadgets and technology that can copy and recreate anything? Albert was a trusting soul. He released the chain, opened the door, and the two men entered. He returned the wallet, which in turn was returned to the man’s inside coat pocket.

“So?” the old man asked.

“Albert Stanislavsky, I am agent Baxter and this is agent Young. We are here to inform you that you appear to be the only living relative of Jason Wilson – in reality Jason Kiev. His parents were recently killed in a car accident. He is twelve, extremely bright, confused, and angry.”

“Twelve, I understand. Bright is usually good. Preteens are always confused. Tell me more about the angry.”

The agents exchanged the slightest suggestion of a smile as Albert shared a further question.

“And how am I incorporated into all this? I have no knowledge of such relatives. Kiev?”

“May we close the door and sit? There is a great deal you need to know.”

“Certainly. The couch. Recliner’s mine.”

Agent Baxter continued as they took seats.

“It isn’t a story you will read in the paper or see on the nightly news. In the interest of national security, we must ask you not to reveal what we are about to tell you. Your vetting suggests you can be trusted in the old-fashioned sense of the word – not the usual result of such an investigation these days.”

“You’ve vetted me? Now *I’m* the one who is confused.”

“The boy’s parents were spies, sleepers if you know the term.”

Albert nodded. He had incorporated the concept into several of his books.

“As our agents were closing in to arrest them, they got in their car and started to drive away – just the two of them leaving Jason in the house. We suspect the bomb that killed them was placed in their car by agents of their own country. Although the boy knew nothing about his parents’ activities or allegiances, the procedure of their nation’s current regime does not involve leaving any possible loose ends behind – however remote. The boy’s life is in the most serious danger. He must receive a new identity, a new place to live, and the finest parental figure possible.”

“Right up to that final stipulation it sounded like you were suggesting that the lad come and live with me.”

“Almost. *Live* with you, yes. Come *here* to live with you, no. It will entail new identities for both of you. A new area of the country. A new way of life.”

“I have never been a parent, you know. My wife and I couldn’t have children.”

“But you have always had kids in your life.”

The agent read from his notes.

“Boys Club, children’s hospital, sports, camping, tutoring, respite foster care.”

“I’m retirement age. I’d be seventy-five plus by the time he’d be ready to leave home. My life is sitting at a computer. I

spend ten or twelve hours every day writing.”

“Yes. *Mason Jordan*. We both enjoy your books.”

“How could I continue writing if you whisk me off to some remote village in Appalachia? I need access to my editor. There are book signings, interviews; my life is public.”

“It has all been arranged for. Third party mail forwarding – snail and email. Clandestine transportation when necessary. And, frankly, from that youthful picture you use on book jackets, nobody is going to recognize you at sixty-seven. We do suggest you grow a beard.”

Albert chuckled and nodded.

“I keep telling the publisher to update that. He says an old man is not a convincing front for an action hero such as *Mason Jordan: Private Investigator*.”

“Perhaps a good thing as it turns out,” agent Young said.

“You speak as if this were a done deal. I didn’t hear myself agreeing to anything, or don’t I have a choice.”

Agent Young spoke.

“Of course, you have a choice. The odds at the office are 99 to 1 that you *will* agree to the arrangement. Our people, whose business it is to know you inside out, aren’t prone to make errors in such matters or believe me we wouldn’t be here.”

Albert stood and began moving about the room, touching this and that.

“I have been thinking about making some changes in my life. So far as I recall, however, none of that involved adding an angry, almost teenager, into the mix. I tire at the thought. Better put, the very idea fully and completely exhausts me!!! That’s with three exclamation marks says the writer for emphasis.”

“I bet Mason Jordan is up to it,” Baxter said looking at Young. It seemed to have been delivered sincerely, with no suggestion of humor.

“Mason may still be roaming the streets and romancing the women at one a.m. but old Al, here, is usually tucked in by nine.”

Silence. Albert continued to pace, head down, finger to his lips, deep in thought.

“A bright boy, you say?”

“Top one half of one percent of the population on

intelligence tests.”

More pacing”

“You are absolutely sure he is my great whatever, whatever, nephew?”

“Absolutely. I have papers here that show it.”

Baxter reached for his briefcase.

Albert waved that off.

“Does the lad have any say in this? I mean if he hates me is there a plan B for him?”

“No plan “B”. This is it, for better or for worse, and all those similar clichés.”

“It’s the one about ‘til death do we part’ that draws my immediate attention. Does the youngster now understand about his parents, what they were, and the danger he faces?”

“He does.”

Albert paced some more then offered: “Having a youngster around would certainly be stimulating.” It had been more thinking aloud than attempting to communicate. “You know his interests?”

“Ask him and he says in order they are: reading, writing stories, collecting rocks, art, and computers. Follow him for a few hours and you’d have to move girls to the top of the list.”

“A budding geologist, I’m up for. One of my passions as well. Puberty at twelve I’m not so up to date on. My hormones moaned their last years ago.”

He picked up a pad from the coffee table and made a note, explaining: “That was a pretty good line. If I don’t write them down immediately they’re as good as gone and never see the dark of ink in any of my pieces.”

When finished, he dropped the pad to the table. His thoughts returned to the boy.

“Being as bright as he is and with his array of interests he’s probably one of the few twelve year olds who knows the difference between a geode and diode. Although I guess diodes are ancient history now, aren’t they? Replaced by chips and such. Ah! Try this. In the coming years, *silicone* in its various *forms* will certainly play a significant role for a pubescent, computer savvy, geologist. I gotta jot that down as well. May never use this stuff but when I reread it later, it reassures me that my brain is still at least a few blocks away

from the neural graveyard.”

Both men shook their heads, clearly intrigued by the old man’s carrying on. Baxter spoke.

“I will restate *your* opening remark to us. *So?*”

“You mean you need my decision this moment?”

Baxter stood and motioned Albert to the window. He pulled back the curtain.

“In the car. Down there. A kid frightened out of his gourd. During the past forty-eight hours, he’s been in planes, trains, cars and buses. He’s been dragged and pushed and shushed through a very serious game of hide-from-the-bad-guys. He knows the score. Life as he knew it is gone – parents, home, neighborhood, friends. Family as he knew it was bogus – his parents weren’t even married, just agents doing what was necessary to get their jobs done. What lies ahead for him represents a terrifying unknown.”

Albert sighed the sigh of all sighs, his eyes remaining fixed on the car below.

“Terrifying for him. Absolutely intriguing for me. The first order of business will be to teach him how to make scary into fascinating. You have my undivided attention. You’re the boss. What’s first?”

“You say good-bye to this place. Tonight, you may bring what will fit into a brief case. Clothes and other necessities will be provided. Everything here will be removed before morning light and will eventually follow you. A story will be spread explaining your hasty departure. We figure telling Mr. Kaputova across the hall should get that quickly disseminated. Your lease and other local commitments will be handled. You seem to have very few close friends, but such as they are, they too will be given a plausible, happy for you, cover story. We have a deal, then?”

“*Deal* makes it seem so cold and impersonal when we are really speaking about a young boy’s life.”

Baxter waited for a response that affirmed Albert’s commitment.

Albert nodded.

“Of course.”

“Agent Young and I will leave, now. You follow in ten minutes. Enter the waiting car through the right rear door. We will

follow in a black SUV. Lora France is attending to Jason. She is an agency social worker and the best there is at her job – handling suddenly displaced kids. The driver is Buck, another agent. With him up front is agent Dixon. You will be safe.”

“I haven’t had such an adrenalin rush in years, gentlemen – maybe never. Well, there was my wedding night.”

Once again, the men shook their heads and smiled.

They left.

Kaputova watched.

With the door closed – and locked – Albert turned and looked around. He would change into street worthy clothes and put on shoes. Earlier in the day he had, as part of his weekly routine, captured on a flash drive the important current data from his computer. He inserted a floppy disk and downloaded the up to the minute version of the manuscript on which he was working. It interested him how little of what was left there in his rooms seemed all that important. He slipped a picture of his wife from its frame and placed that in the briefcase. He added two of his books, which he thought a twelve-year-old might enjoy. Then there were the yellow pads and mechanical pencils, a pocket dictionary and thesaurus, his address book, several dozen floppy disks which contained important, if years old, notes, a handful of CDs – some used some not – the list of passwords without which his navigation of the web and access to bank accounts would come to an immediate halt, aspirin and Tums, his blood pressure cuff, a sleeve of jerky and a package of Oreos.

He removed the disk, donned his well-worn, white, canvas, hat with the red, white, and blue band, and moved to the door. He felt no urgency or nostalgia about viewing the place again so he opened the door, left the apartment and locked it behind him. Surely the FBI had ways of getting in to retrieve his belongings.

He noticed an unexpected bounce in his step – one that had been missing recently. Through the absolute horror of the situation his spirits seemed somehow raised. He chose not to contemplate the comfortable and familiar, which he was leaving behind. He chose not to contemplate the huge responsibility that sat awaiting him in the car down on the street. He would play things by ear. That’s how he wrote – no outlines or voluminous notes. He just sat down and began writing. His characters played out the story for him. He saw

no reason to change any of that. He always enjoyed getting to know his new characters. He anticipated meeting Jason with that same enthusiasm.

“Is this courage or foolishness that I’m experiencing?” he asked himself out loud as he chose to descend the single flight of stairs rather than using the waiting elevator. “Courage *and* an unshakable belief in myself is how I shall characterize it.”

He left the building and approached the car. A young face was peering out at him from behind the glass. It seemed to float there against the darkness of the interior. Albert bent down and peered back offering a smile, a cocked head, and a thumbs up. He was playing it by ear. He lingered several moments to give the child a chance to look him over and begin the transition. He opened the door. The boy slid to the center. The social worker occupied the opposite door seat. Once the door was closed Albert turned to the others and spoke.

“Hi, folks – Jason, Lora. I’m Albert.”

He reached his hand and they shook.

“How you know her name?” Jason asked.

“Oh. Didn’t they tell you? I know everything.”

The boy raised his eyebrows and crossed his arms, his eyes set straight ahead.

“Just what every kid dreams about – a parent who knows everything.”

It had been mostly sarcastic but was also clearly an opening volley designed to quickly gather important information about the old guy suddenly sitting next to him. Albert sat his case on his lap and opened it.

“Salt or sugar?” he asked turning his head toward the boy.

“What?”

“I figure a young man your age is bound to be hungry. I got jerky if you’re craving salt and cookies if it’s sweets.”

Jason looked him in the face for a long moment figuring a response that would neither approve of the approach nor discredit it.

“Either or?” he asked.

“Not necessarily. I’m a salt with sugar guy myself. Pizza *has* to have soda if it’s going to work.”

Jason offered a quick smile. Albert offered him the jerky

while he removed the Oreos and closed the briefcase.

"I've never mastered opening these newfangled plastic wrappers," Albert said, exaggerating the difficulty he was having with the cookies.

A second smile appeared.

"Canines. Use your canines like this."

Jason soon had the jerky package to the corner of his mouth and was successfully breaching the plastic barrier with his teeth. Albert watched, suggesting intense interest. He put the cookie package to his mouth.

"Your teeth won't fall out if you do that, will they, Sir?"

"All these pearlies are my own, son. If they come out we will have a really serious problem on our hands."

He paused, leaned slightly forward, and looked across at Lora.

"I assume the FBI has dentists."

It garnered a third smile. That one stuck around. Jason made an initial move to offer the jerky to Albert but then hesitated and swung it in Lora's direction – the 'women first' part of his upbringing, Albert assumed. 'Positive' he thought.

"I'm not much for Jerky," she said, "but thanks for the offer."

It was immediately shifted back to Albert who meticulously extracted a single slice. He offered the cookies across Jason to Lora who took one with a smile and nod. He then hesitated in front of Jason who accepted the entire package as his own. He covertly eyed Albert for his response. Albert ignored the ploy.

"So, Lora, do you and your young men friends get out this way often?"

Jason broke into full out laughter, looking back and forth between them. It was tension driven and needed to happen. Albert pretended to be taken aback.

"What's the matter? Aren't you two dating?"

More laughter. There were even chuckles from the front seat. Things calmed down and Jason tore off a piece of jerky with his teeth. Albert continued.

"Well that got me nowhere. Tell me this, then. Which Disney Chanel Starlet are you dating this week?"

Without missing a beat and with eyes that suddenly came to

life, Jason returned:

“Nick Jonas.”

His laughter that followed required him to slip off his seat and onto his knees. After a moment, he looked up at Albert and then over at Lora, addressing her all quite seriously.

“Can he be my grandfather instead of my uncle? I mean its all fiction anyway and he seems like he’d make a much better grandfather.”

“I’ll see what I can do and, for what it’s worth, I agree with you.”

He re-sat himself and turned back to Albert.

“That be okay – you be my grandfather?”

“I will consider it an honor to be your grandfather. Until we can find some better way of sealing it, I think we should at least shake again, don’t you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

They shook.

“About the *Sir* thing,” Albert said. “Do you think my grandson would call me, Sir?”

“It’s how I was raised by my . . . John and Mary.”

His voice saddened and his enthusiastic posture faded. He scooted back in the seat.

“Well, from what I’ve seen so far I’d be inclined to say they did a great job raising you. But from here on out it’s going to be you and me and I’d really rather that you come up with something other than, Sir. Will you work on that?”

“You mean I can call you anything I want to? I can like *name* you?”

“Within reason and appropriate decorum.”

“Decorum?”

“Good manners, politeness, etiquette.”

“You’re a writer Lora told me. You always use big words like that?”

“I have two responses.”

Albert held up one finger.

“A good writer has to use words he is sure his readers will understand, so although I may use big words when I think and talk, I

don't usually do that when I write."

At that point Jason held up two fingers, prompting the second part of the response, clearly eager to hear what else there was.

Albert mimicked him and also held up two.

"Even if I do use big words, I am quite certain you will soon understand every one of them with no problem whatsoever."

Jason nodded and put down his hand.

"I *am* pretty smart. My teachers have all said so. I make A's. I'm not boasting – it's just the fact of the matter."

"I will appreciate hearing whatever other things like that you think I should know."

Again, Jason nodded. He reestablished his more forward position on the seat, noticeably closer to Albert than his previous spot hunkered up against Lora. She raised her eyebrows and nodded for only Albert to see. A transition was in process.

"And it's really Salina Gomez – the Disney Starlet. Last week it was Miley Cyrus. I'm thinking of jumping channels to Miranda Cosgrove on Nick."

"I can see you have lots to teach me, Jason."

The boy smiled and nodded in return.

"Lora told me your wife died last year. I'm sorry, you know?"

"And I am so very sorry that you lost your parents."

He nodded, then hesitated, ready to give the man the ultimate test – both barrels!

"I'm a bastard, you know."

"And I'm a Unitarian!"

It was not the response the boy expected and it raised the slightest smile. Albert had not meant to demean the boy's comment because he realized its importance at that moment in the developing relationship.

"Seriously, Jason, I've been told about your parentage, but I hope you understand that you only ever have to be a bastard in *one* sense of that word."

Jason's brow furrowed and he remained quiet, waiting to hear more.

Albert raised one finger. The action brought a quick but

short lived smile to the boy's face.

“*Bastard*. The child of an unmarried mother.”

He held up two fingers.

“*Bastard*. A terrible human being who does uncaring and hurtful things to others. You have no control over the first, therefore it is absolutely no reflection on you or your worth as a person. That's strictly a parent thing. Never, *ever*, forget that. The second case is, of course, completely your responsibility and if you fit that fully unsavory category as well, then shame on you.”

“Wow! That's pretty good, Grampa. I *am* the first of those, and I guess I'll learn to live with it, but I will *never be* the second.”

“No parent, uncle, or grandparent could ever ask more than that.”

You're okay, you know that, Grampa?”

“Yes, I do. I have liked myself for almost every hour of my life. I wish the very same for you.”

“Thank you. I do, too – wish it for myself, I mean. You'll help me, won't you!”

It was in no way offered as a question.

“Of course. And I can guarantee you that any boy who finds himself dating Gomez, Cyrus, and Cosgrove in the same month will need *all* the help he can get.”

Both heads in the front seat nodded. Lora relaxed. Jason smiled up into Albert's face then leaned his head against his new person's shoulder. Tears flowed. He closed his eyes and was immediately asleep. Jason's were not the only tears to flow in that car as it sped on into the daunting dark of night.

Flight had begun.

CHAPTER TWO: New Surroundings

“I’ve never ridden in a private jet, before. Have you?” Jason said directing the low-key comment at Albert – Grampa – as the boy continued to look out the window into the dark night sky.

“Several times. Never at my own expense, I can tell you that for sure.”

“Do you know how to tell that we’re above the clouds?”

“How’s that?” Albert asked moving closer to the widow, clearly interested in what the boy had to say.

“You can see the stars. Couldn’t see them back on the ground at that little airport.”

“Good powers of observation.”

“Mom, er. . . Mary used to say it was one of my qualities that would help me become a good artist or writer. You believe that?”

“I certainly do. Right at the top of the list.”

Silence followed.

Albert and Jason were sitting beside each other in swivel chairs near the center of the plane. They were turned toward the small, round, windows to the left. Lora occupied a recliner at the rear, sleeping. Agents Baxter, Young, and the one called Buck played cards at a table near the front. There would have been room

for perhaps half a dozen more there in the long, narrow, white paneled, blue carpeted, cabin.

Jason turned his chair toward Albert.

“Do you know where we are going? I think I will feel better when I know that.”

“There is probably an answer in this big brown envelope Agent Baxter gave me. He said we needed to study its contents. You ready for that?”

“No, but let’s get on with it. What’s it about?”

“We’ll only know that when we get inside. You want to open it?”

“Okay. All right if I tear it?”

“No law against it, but if you do as little damage as possible we can put whatever is in it back inside for safe keeping.”

Jason nodded suggesting that made sense and appreciating that the decision had been left up to him. He wasn’t used to that. He went about the task all quite seriously and in a particularly careful manner for a twelve-year-old male. Albert kept his amusement to himself. Jason removed the dozen or so sheets.

“This one says ‘RELOCATION’ at the top. Can we read that first?”

“Go for it. You read or I read?” Albert asked.

“I’m a great reader. I’ll do it.”

Albert nodded and folded his hands across his lap.

“RE: The relocation of client A – age 67 – and client B – age 12.”

He paused and looked up.

“I guess that makes you A and me B. We can remember that because it could be A for Albert and B for boy. Okay?”

“Fine. A good suggestion.”

Again, the old man smiled inside.

Boy continued.

“Relocation site: The village of Punkin Hollar in north central Wisconsin. Population 2,356.

Economy: Largely based on year-round tourist business. Fishing, boating, camping in summer. Skiing and winter sports in winter. Four, large and popular special seasonal events called

carnivals. Dozens of hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts. Resort cabins in the surrounding hills and near the lakes. Draws well over 500,000 visitors each year.

Residence: 661 Pine Street, second floor.

Business: New Proprietors of the Punkin Hollar Book and Arts Shoppe – a store for tourists featuring books, stories, arts and crafts of local writers and artisans. (Downstairs from the residence in the downtown area.)

Geography: Relatively isolated from other towns and cities. Lakes, hills, creeks, caves, sandy loam, and pine forests. A rock hound's paradise.

Education: Elementary and High School students bussed 46 miles north to Benning. B will be homeschooled.

Access: Regional bus service once a day – three days heading north and four days south. It connects with Greyhound at each end. On north-south state highway 13. Several county roads converge. Privately owned airport for small, prop planes.

Climate: Summer highs in the mid 80's. Lows in high 50s. Winter highs in the mid-forties. Lows in the teens. Lots of snow. Lots of sunshine.

Entertainment: You name it: music, theater, film, Friday night square dances, in addition to the more typical tourist activities – shopping, observing artists and crafters, tours, trails, and workshops in art, writing, and dance.”

Jason paused and looked again at Albert.

“I guess that sounds okay. Never lived in such a little place before. I figured they'd try to hide me out among a million people in some sprawling, stinking, city. This will be better I think. You know how to teach me?”

“We'll get by, I'm sure. Probably lots of resources available as I imagine many of the kids are home schooled there.”

“Wouldn't that be *since I imagine* instead of *as I imagine*?”

“It would indeed. Thank you. I can see I'm going to have to be on my grammatical toes now that I have a built-in critic in the family.”

“No offence but you are odd, Sir . . . Grampa.”

“And he knight's people as well. *Sir Grampa*. I like that. Thank you, your Lordship.”

Albert bowed ever so slightly, then asked for clarification.

“Odd in what way and is it good odd or bad odd?”

“Oh, it seems to me to be good odd. Like you make jokes about things nobody else in the universe would think could be made funny. You often respond in really off the wall ways. You don’t really treat me like a little kid – I still have to figure the limits about that. You never raise your voice and seem more tickled at my personal oddities than upset. Do you ever get upset?”

“Seldom. I’m a solver not a blamer.”

“More, please.”

Jason settled back in his chair prepared to listen.

“When problems arise I first of all look for solutions. I ask myself what needs to be done or fixed so that inappropriate reaction or situation never has to come up again. I believe blaming only can make matters worse and never helps. It almost always leads to anger and that to punishment. Who cares who caused something? Fix it! Punishment never taught a new skill, improved anybody’s self-esteem, or created a wonderful new option for humanity. Get it fixed, that’s my perspective.”

“I like that. I’ve never lived with it so it’ll take some getting used to. Do you spank kids?”

Jason was gathering data.

“I never touch anybody in anger and from what I’ve observed spanking is most often an anger-driven act. Has it seemed that you’ve needed to be spanked often?”

Albert was gathering data.

“I got a lot of them when I was smaller. When I was in kindergarten my butt didn’t stop glowing the whole year. It gradually eased up, I guess, and by this year it took something really bad to earn one.”

“I do hope you won’t miss them.”

“There you go with one of those of those off-the-wallers. I like that.”

“During the next few weeks we will spend lots of time talking about how we will go about living together. It’s never easy melding two lifestyles into a relationship that works comfortably.”

“I’m used to being told what to do and how I am to do it so I may not be much good at this cooperative thing I think I hear you

suggesting.”

“That is certainly what I am suggesting. And, never having been a full-time parent, I may not be much good at that in the beginning. Let’s agree, right now, to help each other with our new responsibilities.”

“I can do that. You make me smile inside, did you know that, Grampa?”

“And not only Lord of the Roundtable but Rasputin the mind reader as well. You have certainly put a smile in my heart, Jason. Now, we just have to know that it will take diligent and constant work on both our parts to keep them beaming.”

Jason nodded. Part of his inner smile seeped across his face. He spent some moments in apparent deep reflection before speaking again.

“How should I refer to the people who raised me?”

“I’ve noticed you are experiencing a problem about that. Why do you feel the need to change from how it’s always been?”

“I don’t know. They lied to me. They celebrated fake wedding anniversaries. They made up lies about their past and mine. I always loved them but now I don’t know how to feel.”

“I can’t tell you what you should feel. I will tell you this, from what I have observed of you it seems clear that they managed to raise a very fine human being and for that I believe I would be grateful. The way I read your pedigree, they *are* your biological parents so the terms *parents*, *mom*, and *dad* are certainly not inappropriate – biologically speaking. You may decide to use John and Mary as I have heard a few times, or maybe Siegfried and Roy for all I know. Try out various monikers and use what feels comfortable.”

Jason laughed out loud.

“Siegfried and Roy. That’s really funny. I guess you’ve caught on that I’m not used to a lot of humor in my life. I love it but I may over react sometimes. Thanks, for that about my parentage. It helps. And, I am quite certain that I have never heard the words *pedigree* and *moniker* in the same paragraph before. Is that what it is when you speak – a paragraph?”

“Or passage, I guess. Passage is more indefinite as I think about it. There may be no good word for what you are referring to.

We'll do some research. You may just have to invent a new term. I just love your questions. I hope you will never hold one back."

"I have a few more but I'd like to get to get to know you better before I lay them on you – boy girl stuff."

Albert nodded.

"Whenever you're ready."

He privately hoped they *would* wait a while. He felt the need to do some research himself. That part of adult-child relationships had never come his way. Suddenly the level of responsibility seemed to have been raised a notch – *or ten!* He would do his best to be up to it. At that point he had really moved beyond the point of choice.

There were other sheets. One contained their altered backgrounds. Albert's story would be that he was a retired English teacher from Springfield, Illinois and Jason his nephew (marked out) grandson (penciled in) was from a suburb of Denver whose parents died in a boating accident when he was eight. Their last name was to become Thompson – Albert O. and Jason Carl Thompson.

Eventually the plane landed in Madison. They taxied to a remote corner of the tarmac and were hurried into a waiting SUV.

Again, it was Buck who accompanied them. The new driver was Monica – a lovely addition, Jason thought. Lora said good-bye. Her part in it was over. She promised to email and be available if she were ever needed.

They headed north out of the city. Jason stretched out on the seat, head on his new Grampa's lap. Albert leaned back – a pillow provided – and they were both soon asleep.

For security purposes, they changed vehicles four times within the next several hours. Albert walked Jason through two of them without the boy really waking up.

Albert was yet to see the anger the agents had indicated. He waited patiently for the boy to explode. It probably needed to happen. According to one of the background sheets, he had apparently completely destroyed his room upon receiving the information about his parents' deaths and the sudden change in his situation. Albert thought that could have been handled more appropriately but then agents aren't social workers.

Albert would find a way to deal with it. Albert always dealt

with whatever came his way. He was concerned about the safety issues but since he was fully helpless in the matter he decided to trust those who should know what they were doing. The prospect of running a small store intrigued him. It had been on his short list of possibilities when he had become serious about making some changes in his life. He understood that a middle-aged woman, Kate Sherman, who had been with the store for twenty years, would continue as the manager. He was eager to meet her and reassure her that the store was really hers to run until he leaned the ropes.

The sun had been up for several hours when they pulled into an abandoned filling station on county road 13. As the engine silenced, Jason awoke from what had been at best a fitful sleep. He rubbed his eyes.

“It’s morning?”

It had been a question surfacing through his still cloud-ridden mind.

“Yes. It is morning. I suspect that we are very close to Punkin Hollar.”

Buck turned back to them and spoke.

“That’s your car.”

He pointed to a dark blue Chevrolet probably three years old. It was two door with new tires, complete with a well-weathered bumper sticker proclaiming, *Wisconsin, the Land of 1,000 Lakes*. He handed the keys to Albert.

“Registration, title, and so forth in the glove compartment. Here is your Wisconsin driver’s license. Expires in two years. As you can see our tech guys gave you a white beard. We suggest that you grow one similar. One day’s growth and I can see it’s plain that won’t be a problem for you. And Jason . . .”

The boy interrupted.

“Sorry, but I seriously doubt if my hormones are up to producing a beard yet regardless of how hard I might strain.”

There were chuckles all around.

“I do believe the two of you deserve each other. What I was going to say, *Jason*, was here is your Wisconsin State Identification Card – good ‘til you get your driver’s license. You both need to memorize your new place and date of birth. Also, you each have a new social security card pre worn so as to not look suspiciously new.

Here is the combination to the safe in the apartment – north bedroom, front wall. Inside it you will find cash along with instructions on how to get more. There are also several credit cards in there. Practice your new signatures, gentleman, then sign the cards.

“Finally, you both get new cell phones.”

He handed them over the seat.

“Speed code is preset: 3-2-4 if you need to reach the agency.”

“The letters on those buttons spell out FBI,” Jason pointed out. “Is that wise?”

“Our encryption department says it is – should make it easy to remember in a bind, I’m thinking. At any rate, I am taking their word on it. On our end it will be answered ‘County Power Company’. You will then press 1-1 to signal it is really you, then talk. And this is important. Last thing before you hang up press 67. Without that the entire conversation will be treated with suspicion.”

“Sounds like you guys expect us to get into big trouble,” Jason said as color drained from his face.

“We expect you to be completely safe but we always prepare for the worst possible scenario. In the beginning an agent will never be more than a few minutes away. When *we* call you the phones will play a special ring tone – *The Old Grey Mare*, in honor of Albert, I suspect. Without that ring tone, it won’t be from us. Feign confused ignorance and call us immediately if somebody calls on your regular ring tone purporting to be us – you get to choose your own, by the way. Phones are loaded with choices.”

“I am suddenly really scared, Grampa.”

“We have to remember all this has been planned and arranged by the world’s best – our FBI. We have to trust they know what they are doing.”

“Okay, part of me will trust them but I just imagine another part of me is going to be pants-wetting scared for quite a while.”

Albert had no good response so he just drew the lad close and patted him.

They exited the vehicle.

“Punkin Hollar is straight on up this road – about twenty miles north – it is a beautiful drive between hills and through pine forests. About half way, you’ll cross a creek. Great fish-ing, I’m

told, if you're into that. Try to enjoy the trip. I'll be close behind in that white Ford."

He pointed it out and then shook their hands – first Albert's and then Jason's. The boy was clearly unpracticed in such things but made an acceptable attempt. The offer of a handshake made him feel quite special – more grown up.

They entered the new car.

"You do know how to drive, don't you, Grampa?"

"Got my license when I was fifteen. Of course, I haven't been behind the wheel for twenty years."

"That fills me with confidence. *I've* driven more recently than that. It was a go cart but still . . ."

They pulled onto the road and were soon well into the first of several forests. It became like twilight with occasional splotches of sunlight streaming its way through the tall trees, spilling onto the grass and blacktop. Jason relaxed when he decided his new Grampa was pretty good 'behind the wheel,' but made no mention of it.

As had been suggested, it was a beautiful drive. The pine trees were tall and grew tight like green-clad soldiers standing at attention shoulder to shoulder. The ground beneath was dark, strewn with brown needles, leftovers from seasons past, looking to be a foot deep. Still, occasional spots of color appeared there, thanks to a wide array of apparently tenacious wild flowers and multi-hued grasses able to survive in such light-starved areas. Small animals scurried about – rabbit, squirrel, prairie dogs. The birds seemed to prefer the periphery, flitting back and forth across the road but seldom venturing in among the trees.

Jason figured it was probably filled with poison ivy and venomous snakes. He would explore for rocks elsewhere. He had never been fishing but thought it might be fun. He didn't mind worms or the idea of threading them onto hooks, and could see no reason to be bothered by slippery fish. Gutting them might take some getting used to. He had once seen a recently deceased cat, hit by a car and remembered with displeasure the sight of its overflowing innards.

Presently he broke a long silence and spoke what was really on his mind.

"So, here we go on our new life or lives or what to call it?"

“Our new life together. Will that work for you?”

“You really are good with words. I must admit that I have never read any of your books. I saw some in your brief case when it was open. They looked like kid’s books. Did you write them?”

“They are and I did. I brought them thinking there might be some down time on the trip you’d need to fill in some way. Between chatting and napping that wasn’t necessary.”

“Mom always said those were two of my best things – I’d add eating to the list.”

He was able to smile at the recollection and felt more or less comfortable using the old, *mom*, ‘moniker’.

“I didn’t ever have a grandfather – no relatives at all. Sometimes I wondered about that but for some reason never asked. I’m sure they had a story cooked up for if I did.”

“*For if I did?*” Albert repeated smiling. “I’d like to see you diagram that.”

Jason shrugged and smiled, enjoying the old man’s humor and already understanding he didn’t have to defend anything. That had been a wonderfully comfortable realization.

They passed a group of five deer feeding beside the road. They seemed quite unimpressed though perhaps a bit irritated by the noisy vehicle slipping through their territory. Jason turned to watch them as they moved out of sight in among the trees.

“Hey. Did you see the luggage in the back seat?”

“I did. I suppose it will appear to be more legitimate if we don’t arrive empty handed. They may even contain some new duds. Like Christmas in June. First, we’ll find the bookstore and go in and introduce ourselves to Kate. She can prompt us from there.”

“Does she know our secret?”

“No. So we need to be on our toes about it around her. I understand she is completely trustworthy but we wouldn’t want to put her in jeopardy by letting her know about us. Later in the day, up in our apartment, we will need to rehearse our new background stories – really grill each other until we are flawless.”

“That’s a good idea. We just don’t dare slip up do we?”

“No. We don’t.”

“Can that be scary for me?”

“Being a little afraid may just keep us super sharp. So, that’s

probably not a bad thing.”

“So, I should be pleased that I’m scared out of my gourd?”

“I didn’t realize you had a gourd.”

“That’s probably because I’ve been scared *out* of it for two days. Didn’t you hear me?”

They shared a smile.

“I can only imagine how terrifying and confusing the time has been for you. Believe me, there is nothing wrong with being frightened of frightening situations. It would be irresponsible to be otherwise.”

“So, you’re saying that you are scared, too?”

“*Keenly cautious* and *mildly suspicious*, I think would better characterize my feelings right now.”

“I read once in a story where a father told his son that courage was going ahead and doing something even though it was scary. You think that?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hmm. Then you know what?”

“What?”

“I’m just about the most courageous kid I’ve ever heard of.”

“Or that I have ever heard of.”

“Really! You mean that?”

“Jason, you will soon learn that I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

“I already got that. Sorry I seemed to doubt it. Words of habit, I suppose.”

Silence. Gramps continued to be impressed by the boy’s intelligence and social sense and particularly the way he used language.

“You really did good today, Grampa.”

“I did? Well thank you. *How* did I do good?”

“That very first thing – the thumbs up thing and the moment of hesitation – really took the edge off. The salt and sugar stuff. That, me dating Miss France joke. All that stuff in the car. You planned that out to help me relax about things, didn’t you?”

“If planning can include doing what seems best on a moment’s notice, then yes. At least we could say I made my best

effort to help you become more or less comfortable in my presence, which I assume must have been one of the most difficult situations you have ever had to face.”

“It was – honestly it still is, sort of. You did that very well. I imagine kids like you a lot.”

“I’ve never had one tar and feather me. Well, not yet. I suppose the jury is still out on how you’re going to react by the end of our first week together. I’ll warn you right now; I’m going to keep my eye out for any plucked chickens running loose down Main Street.”

It was worth a mutual chuckle and a long-held glance between them. Neither really knew the other and yet each was already certain their new life together was going to be all right, wonderful, even, perhaps – well, if the bad guys stayed away!

CHAPTER THREE: The New Terror

Punkin Hollar was quaint by design. Its colorful city limits billboards boasted 1,000 trees to match the state's 1,000 lakes. From edge to edge it was nearly square, its streets laid out in a rather precise checkerboard pattern on a narrow plain lying between low hills to the east and west. Lawns were lush green, well kept, and punctuated with flowers and colorful shrubs. Houses were mostly two story and white, sitting back some distance from picket fences and cobble stone sidewalks.

The downtown area was at the center of the community – geographically and socially – spread out along both sides of Pine, a spacious street paved in spotlessly clean red bricks. There was no motorized traffic or parking in that area – a few bikes and boys on scooters or pulling wagons. Folks walked the street and rested or stopped to chat in the several white, lattice covered gazebos or on the dozens of shaded, green, benches. There were trees at five-yard intervals just beyond the twelve-foot wide, covered, wooden walks in front of the picturesque, colorful, storefronts. Flower boxes and small, street level beds were everywhere. One's mind was immediately whisked back to the Midwest of the early 1900s. It went on for five blocks.

The adjacent side streets continued in the same style. Parking lots – free – were never more than a block or so from the main thoroughfare. Three and four piece Oompah Bands regaled the

tourists with music from a time gone by.

Using the hand drawn map Buck had provided they drove directly to the alley behind their store and parked in the spot newly marked, “Thompsons”. The building sat on the west side in the middle of the block.

“Thompsons with an S, like the *two* of us,” Jason said pointing.

“Looks like *we* are expected. I imagine we should enter through the front door this first time. We’ll need to retrace the alley and circle around. It will give us a chance to get a good first look at our new community.”

They left the car.

“It’s nine o’clock. Think it’s open?”

“We’ll soon know I guess.”

“I tend to get impatient. Always been that way. Not my best quality, I suppose. Dad says . . . said, I tend to rush through life. It’s probably true. Never enough hours in the day for me. How about you?”

“If I just say that listening to that comment wears me out, will that answer your question?”

Jason grinned the broadest, longest grin, Albert had seen. ‘How nice,’ he thought. He pulled the boy close to his side as they began the walk down the alley. He’d not embarrass the lad by doing that in public but it just seemed right at that moment. It must have been a mutual feeling as – *since* – Jason immediately eased himself into the old man’s side.

They were soon standing in front of the store.

“It says the hours are from 8:00 to 8:00. That’s a long work day,” Jason said.

The front of the bookstore was unique. It sported a clean and tasteful red, white and blue paint job. The tall and wide center window was flanked by a door on each side. One was marked IN and the other OUT.

“That ‘out’ sign won’t do much good.”

“Why’s that?” Albert asked pausing to look the place over.

“It’s outside. If you’re going to leave you’ll be on the inside. I hope there’s a sign in there, too.”

“I guess we’ll see and if there isn’t one there today I’ll just

bet there will be by tomorrow.”

They exchanged grins. Albert opened the ‘IN’ door on the right (north) side of the building and motioned Jason ahead of him. Kate was facing away from them behind the counter that ran the length of the ‘out’ side of the large, open, room. There was a wide, arched, doorway in the center of the rear wall that led into a second large room. The front area contained paintings and craft items; the other housed book cases and large tables filled with a wide variety of face-up titles – many by local authors. A bell tinkled when the front door opened. Kate turned to greet them.

“Welcome to our little shop . . . or perhaps that should be welcome to *your* little shop. I assume from the descriptions I’ve received that you would be the Thompsons.”

“And you would assume correctly. I’m Albert, the Grandpa in case you couldn’t tell, and this is Jason, grandson, artist, writer, and president of the impatient kids’ club.”

Albert extended his hand and they shook. Following his Grampa’s lead, and by then with some practice under his belt, Jason followed suit, extending his hand and shaking. That time it went rather well, he thought.

“This is a *great* place,” Jason said turning around slowly, surveying the various components of the room with clear excitement.

Kate got right down to the business of the moment.

“Your apartment is upstairs. You can enter it from the outside through the rear or from inside the office behind the book room. We store things in the basement – dry and dehumidified to keep it that way. An old rope and pulley elevator descends to the bowels and rises to the upper quarters. Works like a charm. I can manage half a ton on it with my modest strength. Rated for a ton and a half at its last checkup. A place to park out back.”

“We already found that,” Jason said. “Thanks for the Thompsons sign. That made us feel right at home. We have luggage.”

It was a last second addition Jason thought would help accomplish that ‘lending legitimacy’ thing that Grampa had mentioned earlier.

“The rest of my things . . . er. . . *our* things will be delivered by moving van later in the week,” Albert added.

It had been his first new life error and he hoped he had covered it well enough.

“The new furniture for Jason’s room arrived already. I had Mike – our new handyman – put it all together. He’s new to town, seems to need work, sounds educated, sweet, didn’t really get his story yet. You may want to rearrange things to suite your taste, Jason. There is a bed left in the other bedroom. I made them both up in case you wanted to stay up there while you wait for the rest of your things.”

“How thoughtful. I’ve been told you were the most organized person in Wisconsin.”

“I don’t know about that but then I suppose you’d have to be close to it to keep track of all the stuff we’ve accumulated in here through the years.”

“I can’t tell you how pleased we are that you have agreed to stay on. We will be depending on you to show us the ropes, you know.”

“I’ve been here through five owners. I got that rope showing thing down to a science. I must admit the sale came as a complete surprise to me but I’m glad to have you both here. The former owner was strictly absentee, so I seldom saw him.”

“We’ve been on the road all night,” Albert said. “I think we’ll get our things upstairs and clean up. Give us an hour.”

“Then we’ll need to eat. I am starved,” Jason said clearly trying out his role as a partner in his new family.”

“Indeed,” Albert added confirming the idea.

Kate escorted them through the book room to the back entrance.

“I’ll show you about operating the *lift* – as we call it around here – when you get your things in.”

“I can probably figure it out,” Jason said. “I’m pretty good about mechanical things.”

“Then I’ll just bet you can,” Kate said.

Jason suddenly understood that he was to have two comfortable people in his life. It wasn’t at all how he wished his life was, but considering everything, it seemed to show promise. One other thing had impressed him, Grampa’s continued use of the term *we*. He had really meant it when he said their new life together was

to be a cooperative venture.

They gathered the things from the car. As Jason had predicated, he handled the lift like a pro.

The apartment was arranged like most second floor, over-the-shop apartments that boasted 1930s architecture. Across the back were the two bedrooms. In this case, a hall between them allowed access to the lift at the rear. The doors entered into that hall. To the front of Albert's bedroom on the north was a long, narrow, bathroom – shower across the far end – and a square kitchen – compact, eating table, appliances, ample cupboards and counter space. Jason went right to the refrigerator. Kate had stocked it with a few essentials. The Mountain Dew hit the spot. It went well with the chips waiting on the counter.

The main room was large and had two, wide, floor to ceiling, windows at the front that flooded the area with natural light. It was L-shaped with an alcove to the front of the kitchen that looked to be just right for Albert's writing area. The well-worn floors appeared to be original: wide planking set in place with wooden pegs. Spreading a few, large, braided, area rugs would soften the area more to Albert's liking. The walls were painted pale blue and the white ceiling was decked out in old fashioned, four-foot square, steel panels – ornate with deeply embossed designs. They contributed to the echo in the empty space.

“Well, what do you think, Jason?” Albert said, hands on his hips as he looked around.

“I think it will be great! Like a bachelor pad. I guess that would really be like a bachelor bachelor pad. I like the stuff in my room. You pick it out?”

“No. I imagine that was the agency's doing – maybe Lora, even. Probably much better quality than if I had done the purchasing.”

They opened the luggage. Inside were clothing and other essentials – towels, washcloths, soap and a few toiletries. They showered, slipped into new clothes and were ready to face the first day in their new little town.

“We're going to be okay for money, aren't we? I had some savings in a bank but I suppose I'll never see that again.”

“I have been assured that we will be fine. As I understand from information provided in that brown envelope, we will receive a

stipend plus whatever we can bring in from the bookstore. Our finances are not for you to worry about. That's my area."

"What's *my* area?"

"Continue growing into a fine and happy young man, learning all you can, and being my partner, helping me make lots of the decisions."

"And learning how to get on well with girls. We mustn't leave that out."

"We most certainly must not."

"Maybe we can find *you* a girlfriend, too, Grampa."

"I just imagine my girlfriend days are over but I suppose I shouldn't rule it out. I can just see the two of us on a double date."

"No offence, but I *can't*." He shivered his shoulders. "So, we got enough money to go get breakfast?"

"We do indeed. You go down and get the word on local cafes from Kate. I'll be right down."

Jason was off on the trot back through the little hall toward the lift. Albert entered his bedroom and found the safe hardly hidden behind a hideous painting. That would need to be changed. He tried the combination. It opened. Inside were the things he expected plus a few others. He removed five, twenty dollar, bills, placed them in his wallet, and closed the safe.

Downstairs Jason and Kate were getting to know each other.

"You married?"

"No. I was. My husband was killed while serving in the Marines. I've been alone for quite a few years."

"I'm sorry about that for you. I lost my parents . . . sometime back."

Kate nodded but had no words.

"Grampa said to get the scoop on the best café in town for breakfast."

"I'd recommend *Abby's Café* across the street. Owned and run by Abby Mills. It's small, great food, lots of us locals eat there. Been here forever, like Abby."

"Where do the kids hang out?"

"*Billy Joe's Soda Shop*, one block north."

"Soda shop? He just sells pop."

“In the old days, a soda was an ice cream drink with carbonated water and flavoring like chocolate or fruit. You’ll find lots of old fashioned things around Punkin Hollar – it’s what makes us so charming and special and a tourist magnet. Billy Joe’s has booths and games and a jukebox – you know jukebox?”

“Yes. The Waffle House back home had one. Plunk in a quarter and it plays you the song you selected.”

“It’s a place kids feel comfortable. Around here, kids like to hang at each other’s homes. We are big on family. The park is two blocks west. It’s also a good place to meet kids, and *Punkin Lake* on the east edge of town – swimming, water skiing, boating, and a picnic area. I’m sure you will find the kids very open and friendly here. It isn’t all that often we get new permanent residents.”

“Grampa suspects that lots of the kids here are home schooled.”

“He’s right. We sell lots of school supplies. We do special orders of most anything related to reading or school activities.”

“I’m going to be home schooled. Grampa is a retired teacher.”

“I’m eager to learn more about both of you.”

“I think I’ll like Punkin Hollar. It’s a lot different from what I’m used to. I come from a pretty big town in Colorado – near Denver.”

He suddenly realized that was the sum and substance of what he knew about his cover story. He would need to get on that immediately. It became his first priority after food. Albert entered from the book room.

“You’re not filling her full of stories about all my shortcomings now are you, son?”

“Actually, and no offence here, but your name only came up in passing.”

“Oh. So that’s how it’s going to be. Two against one. We’ll have to see about that.”

Jason turned to Kate.

“I guess you know he’s kidding. Grampa is always kidding.”

He tuned to Albert.

“She says great food across the street at Abby’s place. I vote we take care of that first.”

“If you’ll excuse us then, Kate,” Albert said. “Nothing more pitiful than a whiny, hungry, twelve-year-old.”

“I’m almost thirteen.”

“Go! Scat!” she said getting into the playful mood the newcomers had set. “Why not take some time to look over the town. Monday is a slow day. Kyle will be in at eleven. He’s a college boy who works here summers and weekends during the winter. You’ll like him. He’s a real sweetheart. We can begin getting serious about the store later in the week.”

They left and made their way across the street. Jason liked the way the bricks felt beneath his feet.

“Kate is really nice. Her husband died in the Marines a long time ago. She’s single. Didn’t find out if she has kids. I guess they’d be grown up wouldn’t they?”

They entered the café and at Albert’s urging, Jason chose a table – his pick was close to the front window. He was clearly unpracticed in helping make such decisions. The tables were square and decked out in red and white gingham. There were matching curtains. The dark, roughhewn, paneled walls were laden with memorabilia. What they would soon come to understand was the ubiquitous pumpkin, there in the Hollar, sat on one end of the counter to the right as they entered. Abby approached and introduced herself. Grampa kept the small talk to a minimum not yet ready or prepared to share all that was usually entailed for a newcomer. They ordered.

“I gotta use the restroom,” Jason said. He stood, and left.

Albert suddenly felt a fully unexpected, frightening, chest tightening wave wash across him. It was the first time the boy had really been out of his sight, or earshot assuming the lad’s top of his voice singing in the shower counted. He couldn’t very well protect him when he was out of sight and yet he couldn’t continually keep him at his side. Life was going to be strained in ways he had never before experienced. ‘What word designates overwhelmed to the 10th power?’ he asked himself. He understood it was best not to share the true extent of his safety concerns with Jason and yet he had to help the boy develop a thoughtful concept of reasonable caution. Suddenly there seemed to be a monumental number of things that had to be accomplished in a very short amount of time. And not just accomplished, but accomplished flawlessly. On their side in it all

was the boy's apparent off the charts intelligence and budding social sense.

Jason returned, clearly agitated. He took his seat.

"Is everything okay?" Albert asked.

"I don't know. Did you see those two men who came out of the restroom just before me?"

"Yes. What about them?"

"They said stuff in there that sounded like they were bad guys – maybe smugglers or even terrorists or maybe I'm just looking for bad guys to show up and do me in, you know."

Albert motioned to keep their voices low.

"What kinds of things did they say?"

"I couldn't catch it all. They spoke quietly and with accents. One was like a Russian accent and one a Latino. I had a friend whose grandfather was Russian – that's how I recognized it. The Russian guy was at one of the two urinals. The Latino guy walked up and stood at the one next to him. The Latino guy said: 'I am Miguel.' The Russian said: 'I'm Nikita.' Then it sounded like the Latino guy said: 'We received payment from your people. I have ninety minutes to get you through the gate before it closes. You'll stay in the holding area for a month while you get your makeover. It's very comfortable – good food, plush, movies, girls. Then the special plane will take you and your package across the border. You should be home by the first of the month.'"

"Where were you while this was going on?"

"In a stall. I'm pretty sure they didn't know I was in there. The only urinals were occupied by two other guys when I first went in; that's why I used the stall. You'll find I am not the least bit modest about such things if that's what you were wondering."

"It could have all been just innocent conversation," Albert said attempting to put a neutral spin on the experience and calm the lad. "The references may have been to things we just can't understand, not knowing their points of reference."

"I suppose. I hope so. You know what I thought of right away, don't you?"

"No. What was that?"

"That *I* was the *package* the Russian was going to carry out of the country."

“You read too many mysteries and watch too much late night, black and white, TV.”

Jason managed a quick smile and a shrug.

“I suppose. This new life thing is going to be really hard. Every time I encounter somebody new it seems like I’m really not prepared for it yet.”

“A valid observation. Neither of us is. I think we have a long and fascinating day ahead of us helping each other get better prepared.”

“I’m ready for that!” Jason said. “I thought once we got here I could stop being scared and it even sort of seemed that way when we were over at the store but that wasn’t real, I guess. I’m very, very, scared again, Grampa Albert. I don’t know what to do.”

Albert sensed that the time had come for him to take control of things for the boy. Perhaps he had miss-stepped in trying to provide too much leeway there at the beginning. He laid it out in a steady, commanding, tone.

“Here is our plan, Jason. Listen carefully. First, eat breakfast. Eat like you haven’t eaten in days – which shouldn’t be difficult. Second, we will walk Pine Street, one end to the other, so we can feel more at home – safer if you will about where we are. Third, we will return to our new digs and work on our stories until not even the trickiest of foreign spies could possibly ever trip us up.”

“And then we’ll eat again, right?”

“I’m sure we’ll be ready.”

“Maybe have pizza delivered,” Jason suggested. “I saw a phone book on the floor in the living room.”

“That might be a good idea. Perhaps we just need to keep out of sight until – well, until our beards grow in.”

“I’m not hanging out in my bedroom for six more years. Oh, you were kidding again.”

The chuckle eased the tension. Much of the meal was passed in silence. They both took note of the men as they left, one turning south and one north. It added to their private suspicions. If one was escorting the other to a ‘gate’ why would they suddenly go their separate ways? Why did the Russian not carry a package? Had they split up to go in search of the package – Jason?

Neither shared their questions with the other.

On their way back through the bookstore, by then offering its wares to a dozen customers, Kate introduced them to Kyle. His great smile, broad shoulders, and strong arms impressed Jason. Albert was taken by his gentle manner and obvious intelligence.

“In college, I understand,” Albert said/asked.

“Yes. Down in Madison. Double major in physical education and English.”

“In all of the history of higher education has any student ever before declared that set of majors?” Albert asked, smiling.

“It is certainly not the usual. I’m in the PE department because of my football scholarship. Not first string but it’s paying my way; otherwise I couldn’t go. I have no plans to use it in life. I want to be a writer and maybe teach in a community college.”

“What position?” Jason asked turning the conversation back to an area more in line with his interests.

“Linebacker. You a football guy?”

“Just from the sidelines. My slight build makes me almost too small to even qualify for water boy.”

“I’ll tell you a secret. I didn’t begin growing until I was a sophomore in high school. Then Bam! Nine inches and thirty pounds in one year. Don’t give up.”

Jason appreciated the pep talk but fully understood the implications of the small parental stock from which he had come. He seriously doubted if there was a football player making growth spurt in his future. That was all right. He had lots of other interests and truly preferred to keep his streak of unbroken bones and unscrambled brain cells in tact. He was more committed to tennis anyway.

Kate asked for their cell phone numbers and that was attended to before they made their way back upstairs. Jason navigated the lift and Albert assumed that was how it would be from then on. So far the boy was a joy. So far the boy was the greatest burden Albert had ever known. He was committed to seeing it through and deep inside would not have it any other way. He hoped he would be up to the task.

“Hey, look here,” Jason said as he opened a set of doors that covered shelves built into the wall that separated the living room from his room.

“What?”

Albert crossed the big room to see what had caught the boy’s attention.

“I think this TV monitor is hooked up to a camera downstairs. Yes, it is. See! A view from the rear-right corner of the front room. Shows the counter and the exit door mostly.”

“Interesting.”

“Interesting *and* useful. I can keep a look out for girls and when I find one to my liking I can go down and meet her.”

It was not the variety of ‘interesting’ Albert expected to hear.

“Are you sure you’re not really sixteen in disguise.”

“I reached puberty way too early – so mom said anyway. I am handling it very well, though, I think. So far I am fairly content just to look and fantasize. I am getting eager to find out about kissing. It is probably fortunate that I am sadly lacking in courage when it comes to approaching girls.”

Albert chuckled out loud.

“What?”

“You are a joy, Grandson. Just never stop talking with me and we are going to manage this life together very well.”

“I guess I’m not sure what all that means but it sounds good so I’ll take your word on it. I can’t imagine me not talking – saying my mind, which is what I believe you were referring to.”

“Indeed, it was. I hope there is never anything we can’t talk over. I can’t promise to have answers to all your questions but I guarantee I’ll help you search for them.”

The moment of bonding was interrupted by an image on the screen.

“Oh, my!” Jason said pointing to the monitor. “There’s that Russian man.”

He glanced at his watch.

“It’s been forty-five minutes of that ninety minutes the Latino mentioned and here he is in our store.”

The man went directly to the counter. Kyle approached him. He removed several puzzle books from the display rack and presented them for payment. While Kyle was making change and bagging the purchase, the man looked around. For a long moment, he stared directly into the camera obviously knowing it was there. It

was as if he wanted to make sure he was seen or recorded. Jason stopped breathing and hid his face behind his hand.

“That’s a one way hook up you know, son. He can’t see you.”

“I know but his face scares me.”

“Have you seen it before?”

“No. I don’t think so. It just scares me.”

“Look. He is leaving,” Albert said.

Jason turned to Albert.

“I want to be at home with mom and dad, in my own room with my own stuff you know. This is all so unfair.”

Tears began to dampen his cheeks.

Albert drew him close. It was their first, full-blown, Grampa to Grandson hug. They held it for some time. Gradually Jason eased his hold and eventually moved back. Albert handed him a hanky from his rear pocket. He took it but chose not to use it. He felt no shame in crying.

“I know I’m not alone but I feel alone. I know I have a future but I feel like I don’t. I know I never was who I thought I was and I sure don’t know who I am now. I’m so confused I could burst. I just want to scream and tear things up.”

“Pillows are great things to scream into. Maybe you need some time alone in your room. I’ll be in mine. I’m going to lie down. The door will be open. You come on in if you need me or when you’re ready to get on with things.”

Jason nodded and left.

There was screaming – muffled but full out, anguish filled, heart wrenching, screaming. Then silence. A few minutes later he entered his Grampa’s room, pillow in hand. Albert moved to the back of the bed and turned onto his side facing the center. Without a word, Jason positioned the pillow and laid down, his back toward his new person. Sleep immediately overtook him.

One of the unexpected items in the safe had been a handgun. It was under Albert’s pillow. He decided a wall needed to be built across the back hall just in front of the lift opening. It would be extra sturdy, have a metal door, and a multitude of locks – perhaps it should come with a regiment of Marines in full battle gear and a tank and His imagination raced to places he wished it would not.

Sleep wouldn't come for him. He reached out and drew the boy close.

CHAPTER FOUR: Befuddled about Claptrap

By the next morning, the two had their new identities down cold. They knew who they were, birthdays, relevant numbers, where they had lived, the names of all their close relatives, the schools they attended, parents' names and occupations, and on down the entire list of essential personal information. They had even managed a descent night's sleep and by seven a.m. were working their way through pancakes, sausage, bacon, eggs and country fries at Abby's.

Although nothing about the uncertainties and possible dangers of their situation had changed, they agreed they both felt better – more confident – about things. The encounter with the men in the restroom had been put on the back burner. They decided to take Kate's advice and explore their new little community. After breakfast, they were going to do the tourist's tour beginning at the north end of Pine Street and back and forth their way to the south.

Albert concluded that Jason needed a real vacation that would provide at least a momentary distraction from the multitude of unpleasant things that had been forced onto his young mind. It just might not be so bad for Albert, either. He was astounded at the amount of food a boy that age could put away and the frequency with which he could do it. He figured the youngster was consuming four thousand calories a day – minimum. At that rate, he (slim and trim Albert – well, almost) would most certainly weigh three hundred pounds before winter was upon them. He'd need to find a cozy hole in a tree and settle in with a family of squirrels 'til Spring.

They entered every shop. Jason offered a running

commentary about what he liked and disliked and how he thought he could improve each place. They agreed up front they would make no purchases that day so they wouldn't have to lug things around. Taking mental notes, they could return another day. Every store had its version of the Hollar's Punkin. Fat, skinny, tall squat, yellow, pink, green, real, wooden, ceramic, pastry . . .

"It may be a good thing that this town has no high school. Can you imagine the Punkin Hollar *Pumpkins* taking to the gridiron to do battle with the Benning Bearcats?"

Of the thousands of pieces of merchandise they saw, only one thing seemed to really catch Jason's eye.

"That's some telescope. I had a small one back home. Only good for exploring the moon and certain windows in the neighborhood. The sky was too light at night in the city. You need darkness and coolness to really see things. Did you know the heat from a city causes ripples in the air that obstructs and distorts the view of heavenly bodies?"

"Yes. I believe I've heard that."

"I'll bet there's a great view from the top of one of the hills around here."

"I imagine you are right. Somehow I missed that astronomy was one of your interests."

"Probably because I have so many I usually don't refer to any of them. Dad said that was a double-edged sword for me."

"Explain."

"Well, having a lot of interests exposes me to lots of areas of knowledge which could help me eventually find the one I will want to pursue seriously. But, having so many, means I don't go into depth on any of them. It's like I know a little bit about a lot of things but not a whole lot about anything."

"I understand. Does what he said make sense to you?"

"Sort of. I think he should have seen it as a two-stage affair. First, I have to sample a lot of things. Then, later, I begin sorting out and focusing in on the ones that really catch my fancy. I believe I'm still in stage one."

"What you say makes sense to me."

Albert noted the model number of the device and its price tag.

Down the street, they lingered in the dulcimer store. Employees took turns playing them to the delight of the customers. They resonated with a haunting quality – like the three-string equivalent of a bagpipe. Jason had never heard that sort of music and he was immediately drawn to the long, narrow, shallow, wooden instrument. At one point a clerk handed one to Albert and told him to give it a try. To the amazement of all onlookers, he played it with the touch of a professional. Jason stared at him, mouth agape. Albert finished and smiled, sheepishly, handing the instrument back.

“Imagine that! I must have had lessons.”

The comment drew both laughter and applause from the onlookers and staff. A beaming Jason took it all in as if it were some fine, positive, reflection, on himself. They moved on, again empty handed.

Jason spoke first.

“We just keep learning new stuff about each other. I think that’s great. You teach me how to dulcimer?”

“If you’ll teach me how to astron?”

“Astron? Oh, I get it. Use a telescope for *astronomy*. I hope you won’t give up trying to make jokes just because I don’t always get them right off. Like I told you, I didn’t grow up with much humor in my home. Mom and dad were pretty serious people. I guess now I understand why.”

They agreed to share and help each other explore new interests.

There were wonderfully aromatic shops in which colorful and intricately carved candles were being made. There were candy shops in which scrumptious sweet treats were bubbled in vats and spread on long tables to cool and be worked and cut. There were taffy shops and silversmiths and carvers and painters and portrait artists who amazed the onlookers with their quick stokes of pastel chalk. Jason was amazed and completely enthralled. Albert was pleased to see that he could apparently lose himself so completely. He managed to consume cotton candy, hot dogs, a frozen banana, pumpkin cookies, and free samples of all the goodies along the way. By lunch time the boy was simply . . . “Starved. Can we eat now?”

They tried a different place for lunch – *Aunt Wilma’s Home Cookin’*. It was just that, served family style. Had it not been for Albert’s sizeable tip, she would have certainly lost money on Jason.

They ended the day at the Wax Museum at the far southern end of Pine Street. It was located in an old, brick, warehouse, backed into a low hill. It had been beautifully refurbished inside and out. There were two floors filled with historic figures from Adam and Eve to the Pope and the current President and First Lady. There were outlaws and marshals, generals and tyrants. The likes of Marilyn Monroe, Kim Novak, and Madonna caught Jason's eye. Albert put up no fuss as Jason chose to linger in their vicinity.

Jason's favorite section was the Pirate area with real waves crashing against Blackbeard's ship, a crew of sword wielding cut throats, the Jolly Roger flying in the breeze, and cannons that fired periodically, belching both fire and smoke.

As they were at last making their way from the rear of the first floor toward the exit up front, Jason stopped in his tracks and whispered up to Albert.

"There's Miguel – the Latino guy from the restroom."

He clearly had another man in tow as if leading him all quite deliberately toward the rear of the building. Both carried luggage and the man had two plastic bags – one was red, white, and blue like those from their store. Jason turned to watch them and was drawn to follow. Albert allowed it since his interest had also been piqued. Behind the pirate ship was a floor to ceiling blue curtain backdrop. The men moved past it and out of sight. Albert put his hand on Jason's shoulder to rein in his pace.

Behind the curtain was a stairwell leading down. The sign read, *No Entry. Employees Only.* A gate of sorts was in place across it. Miguel swiped a pass card at the lock and it opened.

"I guess this is the end of the trail for us," Albert said pointing at the sign.

"He's up to no good, I know it," Jason said wanting so much to follow but knowing he wouldn't since Grampa had put a stop to it.

It was coming clear to Jason that although many things were open to negotiation, in the final analysis, Grampa was in charge. He figured that was how it needed to be.

"I'm sure you want to revisit Anne Bolin getting her head chopped off over there, right?" Albert said with a wink.

"Huh?"

"I believe there is a good view of a certain place from *over*

there,” Albert explained without providing full information. Others were standing close by.

“Oh! Yes. I see. I’d really like to get to get a picture of that with my cell phone. Gory. I love gory.”

They worked their way into a position from where they could keep watch on the stairway but would be hard to be seen by anyone emerging from it. Fifteen minutes passed and Albert looked at his watch.

“Just five more minutes. Please!” Jason said understanding the universal adult signal that time was about up.

“Five,” came Albert’s response with a nod.

Presently, a head appeared from the sunken staircase. Then the shoulders and torso. It was Miguel. He was alone. The person accompanying him along with the luggage and sacks had stayed behind. They didn’t know what to make of it but both knew it would be material for discussion far into the night. They followed him to the front exit. He got into a late model Rover and drove south out of town.

Jason had learned well his lessons about secrecy the night before and didn’t speak of it until they were outside and isolated from others. Then, it poured forth.

“I’ll bet that was the *gate*. And the holding area, Miguel mentioned is in the basement. And there are living quarters down there and a place to eat. And there is probably a secret way out to the plane. I don’t get it why they have to stay there so long - a month? And what about the make over? Isn’t that what girls do at sleepovers?”

“It could be they get a change of clothing or such so they will be more appropriately dressed for their final destination.”

“Ah! I get you. But it doesn’t take a month to change pants. And what about the plane – no the *special plane* he called it? This is nowhere near the airport. It’s on the north edge of town. This is south.”

“I don’t understand that either, or most of this for that matter. How about heading home and ordering in. I noticed earlier that there were Chinese and Mexican restaurants that deliver in addition to the pizza places.”

“Okay. That was sure good pizza, though.”

“Pizza it is then, but I get to choose what goes on at least half of it.”

“That seems fair – or one third. You really didn’t eat all that much last night, Grampa.”

For Albert that created a sizeable smile inside.

“Should we contact the agency about all this?” Jason asked, clearly concerned.

“And what do we tell them? ‘We are suspicious of two guys who met while using adjacent urinals in a café restroom and later went down stairs together in the wax museum.’”

“I see what you mean. I got Miguel’s picture on my cell. Maybe they could run it through facial recognition programs.”

“I think we need to control our imaginations and step back. We can discuss possibilities and likely improbabilities this evening.”

Albert’s phone rang. It was his regular ring tone.

“Hello. . . I see . . . Ten o’clock . . . That will be fine. . . Come in the rear of the building.”

He hung up.

“The things from my apartment will arrive in the morning. That was the moving company.”

“Wouldn’t that message probably come from the Agency instead of a moving company?”

“I hadn’t considered that. Perhaps I should call the Agency and make sure.”

He placed the call. He pressed all the correct code numbers just as practiced and re-practiced the night before. Jason had insisted they be able to operate their phones in the dark. It turned out to have been a genuine call. Albert got the idea the agency might have just been checking them out. Thanks to Jason, they passed with flying colors.

“Good work, Jason. You must help me learn to be more cautious. I am strictly a trusting person at heart. I always give people the benefit of the doubt until they show me they can’t be trusted. Oh, how I hate to give that up, but it seems these new times require a number of changes from the old, the familiar, and the comfortable.”

“I’m sorry I got you into this. It’s really none of your doing.”

“That’s the *last* I’ll hear of that claptrap, young man. You know the word, *claptrap*?”

“I have a pretty good idea – hogwash, rubbish, baloney, nonsense.”

“You nailed it! I am here by choice. You were no more the cause of this than I was. Remember that. None of this is of *your* doing. You got that!”

It was as forceful as Jason had seen the man. It surprised him. Actually, it reassured him. Albert had succeeded.

“Okay. Yes. I got it. It won’t come out again. Sorry. The guilt thing, you know. I understand it’s . . . claptrap, but that doesn’t mean I can just turn it off.”

“I understand. Sorry if I came down a bit strong. I just wanted to make a point. Regardless of whose doing this is, I am here with you – willingly – for the duration. I just want to make sure you understand that.”

Jason nodded.

“I understand. Thanks, or whatever is the correct thing to say to somebody who gives up there whole way of life for you.”

“I can see we still have a way to go on this issue. We’ll return to it.”

“That’s a good idea. I’m pretty befuddled by it all. You know the word, *befuddled*?”

They shared a chuckle as they walked north. That time it was Jason who put his arm around his Grampa’s waist and pulled him close. Albert took note thinking:

‘And would you believe he is doing it right here in front of other people.’

They arrived home at five and used the outside, rear, entrance.

“I stink,” were Jason’s initial words as he brought them to a halt at the second floor. “Just got a whiff of my armpit while I was working the rope. That’s the main drawback I see to puberty – adult male sweat really stinks. I’m going to take a shower, and then pour on the deodorant, okay?”

“Fine. Tell you what, I have business down stairs. You order the pizza and clean up. I’ll be back in twenty minutes.”

“Okay . . . I guess.”

Jason's tone was clearly hesitant.

"The being alone thing?" Albert asked.

"Yeah. Hadn't thought about it 'til right now. I guess you can't be with me every minute of the rest of my life. In fact, I really don't want you to be with me every minute of even the next few weeks. You go. It will be good for me."

"I'll be glad to stay. Perhaps I was rushing things."

"No. Really. I want to do this. When are we installing that wall and door in front of the elevator, by the way?"

"We can begin tomorrow after my things arrive. You can take the measurements and we can sketch it out while we pizzafy our systems this evening."

"Sounds good. I'm going to have the pizza delivered to the store like we did last night and have them call me when it gets here. We can reimburse the register like we did before."

Albert was pleased that the boy had not felt the need to add his usual, "Okay?" at the end as if needing his permission. A family unit was beginning to take shape. Albert left.

He made his way to the camera shop where they had seen the telescope. It just seemed that a housewarming gift or a new town gift or a just for the heck of it gift was in order. He arrived back at the store just as the shallow, square, box, was being delivered. He handled the exchange out front and made his way through to the back. Kate and Kyle were both busy with customers so they just waved as he passed.

In the lift, Albert called Jason on his phone to let him know it was he who was approaching.

"That was thoughtful, how you called me. I did okay right up until I thought about that shower scene from the movie, Psycho – speaking as you did about late night black and white TV. If I'd have been wearing pants, I'd have wet them. I pulled back the curtain so I could keep watch on the door so the bathroom floor is a little damp from the splashing. We need to get a mop."

"Sounds like quite a mini-adventure. You approached it in a most resourceful manner. I assume you were prepared to fend off any intruder with the always feared washcloth and a bar of soap."

"Actually, I had in mind wrapping his head in a big towel and running bare-naked into the alley."

They smiled at the exchange.

“Ready for Pizza?”

“Oh, yeah!”

Albert had left the telescope in the lift saving it until after they ate.

“Diet Coke or Mountain Dew for you?” Jason asked.

Not waiting to receive an answer he removed one of each. It had been how things had gone the evening before. They sat at the kitchen table and Jason opened the box.

“I got double sausage for you – like you said you preferred – and ham, pineapple, and pepperoni for me – like I said *I* preferred.”

He smiled, obviously pleased with his little attempt at humor. It was acknowledged with a smile, a nod, and a chuckle.

“I don’t have the measurements yet. I figure we can sketch it out now and add those later. I figure the hall is only four feet wide. If we put a thirty-inch metal jacket door in, that leaves a little over one foot on each side. These old ceilings are high. What do you think? Ten feet?”

“Right at that, I’d say. We’ll need to borrow a measuring device from downstairs. I just realized we don’t have one. Add that to the list with the mop.”

“I’ll take care of that after we eat.”

“Speaking of size, what size is this pizza? I don’t believe I’ve ever seen one quite so large.”

“The phone girl called it super-humungous. Guaranteed to feed a family of five.”

“Well, then that just *might* take care of us.”

They exchanged grins.

“I like cold pizza for breakfast, but there’s seldom any left when it’s ordered this early in the day. You tipped the delivery guy, right?”

“I did and it was a delivery gal.”

“Darn! I’ll wait downstairs next time.”

“She was a bit old for you.”

“That’s okay. Like I told you I’m still just into looking – mostly.”

Albert let the ‘mostly’ pass, quite sure he was not ready to

pursue it.

“I had a great day, today, Grampa. Thanks for doing it. I came close to putting some of my junk out of mind a couple of times – when you were playing the dulcimer and when that one storekeeper let me help pull the taffy. I hate latex gloves, by the way, so I imagine that means being a doctor is not in my future. We sure saw lots of cool stuff.”

“Speaking of cool stuff that requires cool nights, I believe there is a long narrow package somewhere up here that should have your name on it.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“Cool stuff. Cool nights. Long and narrow. Come now, young man, surely you can put that together.”

“All that comes to mind is that telescope we looked at today.”

Albert allowed the pause in the conversation to linger on. Presently Jason’s face lit up.

“Oh? Really? What did you do? Where? How come?”

He left his chair and retraced Albert’s trail toward the lift. He was soon back handling the box as if it were a *Stradivarius* (or, an *Uncle Jake* if one were to be talking Dulcimer). He took out his pocket knife – the first-time Albert had been made aware of it – and carefully sliced away the plastic wrap. He lifted off the top and removed the black and chrome tube. It was four feet long, six inches in diameter and had two eyepieces, the purpose of the second Albert knew he would eventually be told. A bottom compartment in the box contained the three-legged stand, telescoping to a maximum height of sixty-six inches according to the bulleted list on the side of the box.

Typical of boys his age he laid the instruction manual aside and did what little assembly was required, *a cappella*, so to speak.

“This is so great, Grampa! Thanks, a thousand times. When can we head for that hilltop?”

Clearly ‘Grampa’ hadn’t thought this thing through completely. He began parenting on the fly.

“I just imagine sundown would be a good time, wouldn’t it?”

“Tonight?”

“Doesn’t seem humane to give a boy a telescope and confine

him to the house, now, does it?”

“Thank you again. We can take chips and pop.”

The boy’s brain never seemed more than mere millimeters away from thoughts of food. How did he remain so slim? Suddenly Albert understood the wisdom in his doctor’s earlier admonition that he should join a gym. If only he could have seen into his own future. ‘This just might be even better,’ he thought, ‘if, after the fact.’

Nights were cool there in northern Wisconsin so they donned the light jackets that had been thoughtfully provided in the luggage – red, white, and blue, even. The telescope weighed some thirty pounds and the stand another ten. The plan was to walk to the nearest hill – the one behind the Wax Museum. It was only four blocks to its base. They traded off, telescope for stand, every block or so. Jason proved to be a trooper eager to pull his own weight.

It was not a large hill but proved to be higher than it looked from a distance. It took about twenty minutes from the apartment until they reached the top. Looking north they could see the lights of the village. Looking south there was nothing but the endless black of the Earth’s night melding imperceptibly with that of the darkness of space that lay beyond. Even the moon had cooperated by offering but a meager slip low in the eastern sky. Jason scouted the area and decided on a relatively flat spot some twelve feet square. Oddly, they both thought, there was a fireplace there. Perhaps it was a camping area, unoccupied that night.

Jason went about the business of setting things up.

“It has two eyepieces so we can both look at the same time. I’ll go ahead and find something then you can join me.”

He searched the sky for some time as if he had forgotten Albert existed.

“Wow! This is awesome, Grampa. I have it focused on the moon and through this I can see its full corona – the circular outline of the whole moon – not just the eighth or sixteenth or whatever we can see tonight with the naked eye. It’s real faint but it’s there. Come and look!”

Albert looked. During the following two hours it was focused and refocused on every quadrant of the sky. They often had no idea what they were seeing but it didn’t matter. The splendor of the astonishing view was singularly important.

“For some reason, there seems to be ripples in the air back to

the northwest. Maybe a dark area – open soil maybe – that is still giving off heat captured during the day. No problem. There is a whole lot of sky up there in other directions.”

It had been Jason’s observation, proposed explanation, and editorial comment.

He continued to move the focus from place to place, occasionally calling in Albert to look at something or help him discern what something might be.

“We’ll need to study up on what’s out there, you know,” Jason said. “When your computer arrives tomorrow I’ll Google and see what we should be looking for this time of year. This is the greatest gift I’ve ever got . . . gotten . . . received.”

They chuckled together at the boy’s humorous run at trying to fix the phrase. After several hours, Jason carefully disassembled the unit and they laid back on the grass to look up at the stars and contemplate the naked eye version of the universe before they started back down the hill.

Again, it was Jason.

“My mind won’t conceive of a universe that just stops and there is nothing beyond it. I mean everything here on earth has a beginning and an end but beyond the end there is always still something else. Can you get your mind around the nothing at all beyond the stopping point thing?”

“No. That only seems to be handled in equations and not in this human mind that at least most of us possess.”

They remained for some time, mostly in silence.

“Dad took me outside to look at falling stars one night when I was real young.”

Albert remained silent, hoping it was a good memory the boy was reliving.

Then, out of the darkness – the darkness of the rippling atmosphere to the northwest – they heard men’s voices. It caused more than a moderate adrenalin rush for both of them. Albert reached out and covered Jason’s mouth before he could speak. He felt the boy nod. Quiet! They turned over onto their stomachs and, staying low to the ground, surveyed the area. They saw no one, but the voices continued.

Jason tummy crawled his way toward the fireplace, which

seemed to be the source, and was soon back at Albert's side.

He whispered directly in his Grampa's ear.

"The voices are coming from the fireplace. I don't think it's really a fireplace. There is a major updraft coming out of it. The voices seem to be carried on that – like a vent from down inside the hill. It's why the telescope's view was all ripply in that direction."

Albert accompanied Jason as he returned to the fireplace and was able to confirm what he had been told. They listened.

Voice One: "Either you get the package here by eight o'clock tomorrow night or you and the plane will leave without it. We only have three nights a month to pull these things off. Understand?"

Voice Two: "I'll have it here. Doc still has my activity limited, you know. 'll have to make a few calls. I'll find a way to get it here."

Again, in a close order whisper: "That's Miguel and then the Russian, you know."

"I'll have to take your word. I've never heard them speak, remember. They certainly do sound to be Latino and Eastern European, however."

There was a final comment before the conversation from below stopped.

Voice One: "See to it that that loose end is taken care of before you leave. It could jeopardize this entire operation. Unless it is, your future back home is in serious doubt regardless of the pretty face."

///

FIVE: **Love and Hate**

They were home by eleven-thirty. Jason had chattered the whole way and didn't stop once they entered the apartment.

“*Loose end.* That's the term Agent Baxter used when he was explaining why I had to be hidden immediately. I was a loose end that my parent's bosses wouldn't want left behind. I know they are looking for me to hurt me. *I'm* that loose end Miguel and the Russian were talking about.”

“Well, first of all, I doubt that those people have any idea where you are or you wouldn't be here right now. Second, do you know how many times a day that term – loose end – is used in the English language?”

“No.”

“Well, neither do I, actually, but my point is thousands and thousands of times and the references are to thousands and thousands of separate . . . *things*, for lack of a better word. With all the precautions the Agency has taken, there can't be more than one chance in a billion the bad guys know where you are. I imagine we

have just stumbled onto some all quite separate something-or-other.”

“Things? Something-or-other? Your language has deteriorated.”

“It has. That happens when one’s system is being plied with a pint of fresh adrenalin every minute.”

“You scared?”

“Scared is not the proper word. I was startled – super-startled. Because of it my system continues on high alert. I feel the need to be cautious.”

“Somebody told me it was okay to be frightened of frightening things.”

“Okay. You got me. Up there on the hill it was a bit frightening. Back here in the safety of our apartment it is just a left-over rush. Given a few minutes’ things will be back to normal.”

“No, they won’t because one chance in a billion is still one chance. I’d feel better if we’d call the Agency.”

“We can do that. Not at all a bad idea.”

Albert dialed and set in the code.

“This is probably Grampa and Grandson paranoia, but we have encountered two suspicious and threatening looking men with foreign accents. It appears they may have made some veiled references to Jason. I suppose if you had any indication we were in danger you would alert us.”

“We are 100% positive no one connected with the Wilson/Kiev case is anywhere near Punkin Hollar. Believe me. We know *who* they are and we know *where* they are. You are as safe as the kids who lived in the shoe. Tell you what, I’ll have agents move in a bit closer and watch your place, front and back, for the next couple of days. That help?”

“Yes, Sir. That will help. Sorry to be so much trouble.”

“You can never be trouble. Remember that. Never hesitate to call. Anything else?”

The conversation had been on speaker so Albert looked at Jason as if to repeat the question. The boy moved close to the phone.

“Just make sure those agents stay awake tonight.”

“Not a problem. Sleep tight young man.”

Albert punched in 6-7 and hung up.

“Feel better?”

“Yes, in my head. No, in my gut.”

“That would be the normal reaction, I’d think.”

“One good thing,” Jason said sliding into a kitchen chair, chips in one hand and Dew in the other, “there is a lock on the lift that keeps anybody on a different floor from making it work. Kate showed me earlier. I engaged it just now when we left it.”

“And you were going to tell me about that when?”

“I didn’t want to worry you that I was worried so I just didn’t say anything that might worry you. That makes no sense as I hear myself saying it, especially since I’ve been worrying out loud about everything for the past hour.”

“Well, now that we leveled with each other about our fears and since the Agency assures us all is well here in Punkin Hollar, I suppose we need to try and relax. Ready for bed?”

“Are you kidding? I may never be ready for bed again.”

“My bed sleeps two, you know,” Albert said. “Nothing wrong with doubling up for a night or two.”

“Well, if you’ll feel better with somebody else in your room, I suppose I can oblige.”

They laughed out loud. It was more tension driven than humor driven but it felt good. Albert reached across the table and playfully swiped the chips out of Jason’s hands.

“Coke?” Jason asked feigning a total lack of concern.

“No thanks. I’m only after the chips to aggravate you, you know.”

“I don’t think that’s the word.”

“Oh?”

“It’s like your way of saying I’m important to you. Thank you for that. You’re important to me, too. I think it is like the very first hint that love may be beginning between us.”

“I am sure you are correct in that. You *must* write something for me to look at. I am so taken with the way you use words and express ideas. It seems to be a true gift.”

“You think so? Mom used to say, ‘Just spit it out’. I got the idea neither of my parents liked the way I played around with words. Now I understand that it may have been because English was not their native language and maybe what I did to it confused them. Do

you think I will ever get all the facets of my old life – my first life – sorted out so I can make sense of it?

“I have full faith that where there *is* sense you will discover it. You have to understand that much of it was not based in what you’re referring to as *sense*.”

“The unfair parts, you mean?”

“That wasn’t really what I had in mind. I think the sooner you can move beyond the fairness concept the sooner you will be able to come to some sense of understanding about it. Let me try it this way: The basic premise of your life – two foreign agents, having a child and living lie after lie on their way to harming our country – has no elements of fairness for you in it whatsoever. I understand that. But, the life they provided for you contained may wonderful, helpful, character building, and enriching experiences. They kept you safe and well cared for. You were not neglected but, in fact, were given many advantages lots of kids don’t have. Those parts seem extremely fair to me. I hope the day will come when *those* are the elements from your first twelve years that will become meaningful, if not treasured, for you.”

“Wow. That’s like a whole novel in one sentence, passage, whatever. I will think on it and try to remember what you just said. I was already on my way to deciding there were some things about them I would always hate but there were probably some things that I would still love.”

“I think you just said it better than I did. You’re going to be fine. I know you are.”

“Can I ask you something? Of course, I can. Did you ever hate anybody?”

“What a *huge* question. I have always tried to divide my feelings about folks into two separate sections: their worth as a human being and my evaluation of the worth of their behaviors or beliefs. I try my best to love everyone in my human family, but that doesn’t mean I can always accept or like those other things about them. I can detest how somebody acts or what he believes but I can also still love him. For instance, I am sure there will come times in our life together when I will make decisions that you will not like – hate perhaps. I just hope you can separate that reaction to my behavior or requirement from how you feel about me as a human being, as Albert, as your Grampa, as a person who loves you.”

“I’ll do my best. Can’t imagine such a time will come but you’ve been around longer and I’ll bow to your experiences about such things. I guess I sort of do understand. I’d get mad at restrictions my parents would put on me, but it never lasted very long. I’d think I hated them while they were spanking me but ten minutes later it would all be over. Is that kind of what you mean?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Here’s another illustration. There was once a boy in my life – I was his swimming coach at a boys’ club – and we became very close. He had no father and his older brother was in prison. I grew very fond of him. One day I discovered that he had been stealing from me. That didn’t change the way I felt about him as a person but I certainly could not approve of his action. I was terribly disappointed and I could never trust him again. Once trust is breached it can never be fully restored. There will always be that lingering doubt. Let’s you and I never do anything that will damage the trust we now have between us.”

Jason nodded thoughtfully.

“I’ll do my best. It’s a huge thing, you know. I’m still a kid. Kids tell fibs – lies even sometimes if there is a difference in your mind. It will mean I’ll have to really work at it, but I will.”

“What more can any human being ask of another than that?”

“It just made me think of something humongous. My fibs and lies are usually to protect myself from looking bad or trying to make myself look better than I am. It seems to me that with you I don’t need to make myself look like anything but what I am. I don’t have to protect myself like that with you, do I? Like you just said, you don’t change how you feel about me because I come out looking good or bad. Wow! Where have you been all my life?”

“Unknowingly preparing for this time together, I imagine. I hope I’ve done that job well.”

The comment either went over the boy’s head or he chose to ignore it.

Jason munched on into the evening, occasionally offering the bag of chips across the table. There were periodic periods of sustained silence.

“Do you think a person can hate something and like it both at the same time?”

“You’re full of huge questions tonight. My first thought is that if it were to be true, it would certainly set up – in your words –

one *humungous* conflict for the person. I wouldn't say it couldn't be. Do you have something in mind you want to share?"

"This new life."

"I see. Can you be more specific?"

"I hate it because it isn't the life I really want. Like I said, what I really want is to be back with my parents the way I thought it used to be. But I like it because it's mostly comfortable, and I know I'll be taken care of, and I really do like you but you aren't my parents. Does that make any sense? – no offence, by the way."

"None taken and it makes perfect sense. You hate your loss and that has to color the way you see your present. You wish it weren't your present. It is like a replacement present and you hate that it has to be. I think it makes perfect sense. My original analysis stands, however. It has to be causing a monumental conflict inside you."

"I hate that you have to be my parent but I know I'm really lucky to have you. I meant that as a complement."

"And that is exactly how I accepted it."

"You angry about having to give up what *you* had? You got a conflict, too?"

"Nothing like yours. In fact, probably just the opposite."

"How's that?"

"Well, ever since Evelyn died – my wife of forty years – I have been experiencing an indefinable itch to stir up my life somehow – to set out on some new adventure – to find new endeavors to undertake. It appears that all of that has suddenly become a reality for me."

"So, my junk is your treasure?"

"You have a remarkable mind, Jason. Yes. In a way your junk has become my treasure and my sincere wish is that gradually some or most of it will become your treasure as well. And if not treasure at least valued bling. Is that right word – *bling*?"

"That's it. We should have quite a life together with these two remarkable minds leading the way."

"I love you, son."

"I know you do. It's too soon for me to return that in a fully honest way, you know. However, when it happens, you'll be the first to know."

Albert nodded thinking that perhaps he should have saved the words for later but if honesty was to be the key to their relationship then it needed to be said.

Jason had one more thing to say about it.

“Love was never spoken of in my home so in a firsthand sort of way it’s pretty much a foreign concept. When mom kissed me goodnight it was nice and I liked it but I never thought of it as an expression of her love for me.”

Again, all Albert had was a nod.

“This is deep stuff,” Jason said. “I like deep stuff, especially with you, but after a while it turns my brain to mush. I think I’ll finish these chips and turn in.”

(Of course, he’d finish the chips!)

“Then I think I’ll hit the shower and do the same. Tomorrow will be a big day. Moving in at ten and getting started on that new wall and door. I’ve been thinking that we should ask Mike the handyman to help us with that. He’ll probably have the tools we need and my toolbox is rather skimpy, I’m afraid.”

“Sounds like a good idea. The sooner built and the *better* built the better.”

Albert had a guest for the night. He *did* feel better with somebody there in his room with him.

After an early breakfast – Albert arose at five a.m. regardless of his bedtime – they drove to the west edge of town to a furniture store that Kate had recommended. Within the hour they purchased a selection of rugs – braided in blues and browns for the living area, hall, kitchen and Albert’s room, and a deep pile, very plush, ‘toes friendly’, blue and orange one for Jason’s. They created quite a sight with seven, sizeable, tightly rolled rugs roped to the top of their blue Chevy. It was cause for much giggling and numerous attempts at humor between them. Jason was slowly getting the hang of the joke. Albert realized he had awakened a sleeping giant – in many more ways than just humor. The months and years ahead would be exciting – exhausting, but exciting.

They laid the rugs. The furniture was delivered. The computer was hooked up. And the wall was begun. In the end, Mike did most of the work. Early on it became clear to Albert that the help he and Jason had to offer only impeded the man’s progress. There were many things to occupy their time. Boxes had to be

unpacked. Furniture was arranged and rearranged until it flowed comfortably around the area to their mutual satisfaction.

Jason came upon a box of magazines – for writers, artists, musicians, coaches, and a few dealing with computer skills.

“I had some *special* magazines at home. You know, *special*?”

“I do believe I know, *special*.”

“Mom would throw them out if she came across them and called me a pervert. I wrote that off to the fact she’d never been an almost teenage boy. Dad may have said that to me. He said he was happy I was interested in such things. He said that if young males didn’t have such interests the human race would have died off centuries ago.”

“He was a wise man in that way, I think.”

“So, if I got my hands on some you wouldn’t mind or think I was a pervert.”

“Definitely not to both. I will consider that your very normal, private, teen boy, business.”

The matter seemed settled and deserved no further conversation as far as either was concerned. Jason had no immediate idea how he would come by them but was confident he would. Albert had no immediate idea how Jason would come by them but was confident he would.

By mid-afternoon they had the place looking shipshape. For Albert that brought some comfort and a feeling of home. For Jason, it only meant more new things to get used to. While Albert worked at organizing his writing area Jason began one of the books his new Grampa had brought along for the trip. He curled into one end of the couch, barefoot. Early on at the apartment he had announced he preferred that to shoes and socks and so was pleased when the rugs had been laid. A splinter from old floors was not something he would risk.

Albert opened a box and motioned Jason to come take a look. It was not something for the handyman to see or hear about.

“What?”

Albert pointed inside the box. Spines up, it held, some two dozen books, all with the author name, Mason Jordon. He put a finger to his mouth, which the boy understood meant the

conversation was to be private.

“You really write all these? Of course, you did. Wow! How many?”

“Twenty-three and counting, with one in the oven as my wife used to say.”

“Can I read them? Of course, I can. Or are they too adult for my tender years?”

“You can read them. There is nothing in them I’m sure you don’t know about. I don’t write R rated. Adult in interest level but pretty much PG-14 content. No kids in most of them. Written strictly for adults – primarily women thirty to fifty.”

“A sexy male hero, then, I’ll bet.”

“I suppose that’s for you to decide. My main point here is that we can’t talk about them around others and I won’t be putting them on display up here. In the jargon of my books, ‘that might blow my cover, Jase’. I’m Albert O. Thompson, retired teacher.”

Mike called in to them.

“I gotta go get some drywall mud, Mr. Thompson. Be about an hour.”

“Okay. We may or may not be here when you come back. Have to keep this lad’s risibles filled and it will soon be feeding time again.”

They returned to their conversation.

“I notice you used the penname William Thomas on the one I’m reading – I really like it by the way. Should I keep that out of sight when I have friends over?”

“No. I see no reason you can’t like the books William Thomas has written for young teens. Who knows, we may start stocking them downstairs. We must just be careful not to connect them to me as the author.”

“There is one thing I *really* don’t like about our new life.”

“What’s that?”

“We have to lie. My parents had to lie and I hate that and now I have to lie and I hate that.”

“I believe there is a difference. It’s heavy but it seems the time has come for it to be said. Okay?”

“Okay?”

Albert motioned them to the couch. His voice remained low and confidential. Jason sat cross-legged at one end, facing him.

“Your parents were lying so they could someday do terrible things to our country. We are . . . *lying*, as you put it, so we can survive. We have no intention of hurting anybody. So long as we remain safe and free and comfortable we have the potential of doing wonderful things for other people and maybe even for our country. It is not your choice to lie. However, it certainly *was* your parents’ choice and plan to lie.”

Jason took it in and thought about it before responding.

“In a way, it was my parents’ choice that I now have to lie. Does that make sense?”

“Complete sense. Just remember, when we speak of them in this way we aren’t demeaning the part of them you love. It has to be so difficult for you. I feel inadequate to help you keep it all straight.”

“I decided already how I’m going to try and do that.”

“You have? Great! Is it something you can share?”

“You don’t have to keep asking that – ‘Is it something I feel like sharing.’ I won’t bring things up that I want to keep private.”

“Very well. Good arrangement. Thanks for making that clear. I’m eager to hear your plan.”

“I’m going to use the words hate and love to make this easy for you to understand. I’ve decided that when it’s something I hate about them they will be John and Mary. When it’s something I love about them they will be dad and mom. You think that’s okay?”

“I think that is a stroke of genius. It still may not always be easy but it is a fine approach.”

“Do you suppose there was a funeral for them – or maybe for all three of us?”

“I don’t know but I’m sure we can find out. Shall we make a call?”

“No. Not now. It really doesn’t matter, I suppose. What I have left is just memories, anyway. You can’t bury memories and they – their bodies – were blown to bits the way I understand it.”

At that the boy began to sob. His chest heaved and his lower lip quivered. He moved close into Albert’s waiting arms. They sat close that way for many minutes. Eventually the sobbing stopped

although the tears continued.

“Did you cry when your wife died?”

“Oh, goodness yes. For weeks afterwards, my eyes dampened my pillow every night and my cheeks many times every day.”

“How did you get over it?”

“At this moment in your life, Jason, my answer won’t be at all satisfactory, but here it is. We don’t get over the loss of a loved one. We do, however, find ways to live with it and go about living a happy life the way we know they would want things to go for us.”

“You’re right it wasn’t anything like the magical solution I hoped for. It seems like there is very little magic for grownups.”

They sat together in silence for a long time. Without moving Jason spoke again.

“They haven’t held me like this since I was a little kid. I liked being held and I liked their hugs and kisses. I never understood why they stopped. Sometimes I thought I had done something bad that they hadn’t told me about. I never asked. I figured if it was that bad I couldn’t ever make up for it.”

“Maybe they just thought you had outgrown hugs and kisses. I sort of made that same mistake myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I figured – without asking – that at your age you’d be embarrassed by even having my arm around your shoulders out in public. You showed me that wasn’t true. I shouldn’t have made that decision unilaterally. Maybe your parents made the same kind of error – not because they *didn’t* love you but because they *did* and didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Maybe, I guess. I like that better than my version, but you didn’t know my parents.”

“You’re right. And you are the only one who can decide about it. I guess I personally would always rather keep an open mind about such things and give folks the benefit of the doubt.”

“Hard to give such terrible people the benefit of the doubt.”

“Maybe hard to do it for John and Mary, but how about dad and mom? And, I don’t expect a response to that.”

“Rhetorical. I know that word, concept, whatever. Thanks. I’ll think on it.”

He suddenly became agitated.

“It’s like I need to keep a list of all the damn things I have to think about. Sorry about the damn. I’m not usually given to swearing and I know you’re not.”

“No harm, no foul.”

“Like missing a shot at a duck.”

“What?” Albert was at a loss to understand the comment.

“If you miss the shot and don’t *harm* the duck – you get no *f-o-w-l*. No harm, no foul. It was a joke that didn’t seem to work.”

“Actually, it was a wonderful joke – a pun of sorts. I guess my head just wasn’t set to expect one at that moment.”

Jason eased away – just a little, freeing himself from his Grampa’s arm. He sighed and wiped his face on a handy pillow proving that part of him really was twelve.

“About feeding my risibles. I think it’s time. Yours hungry yet?”

“After repeatedly following you to the feeding trough over the past few days I may never be hungry again, but that’s not even the point. Where shall we go?”

“How about trying that sixteen-ounce burger they advertise at the *House of Burgers*? I’m sure they also have something more in your size.”

“I’ll just ask for a *burg*.”

“I get it. That’s funny, too. An abbreviated burger. I’ll bet you kept your wife in stitches.”

“Actually, *she* was the knitter in our family.”

“That was really bad. I liked it but it was *really* bad.”

“And suddenly he’s the critic.”

It was worth one short hug between them before they slipped into socks and shoes and made ready to leave.

CHAPTER SIX: Silent Hawk

“You know who owns the Wax Museum?” Jason said more ready to reveal the information than seriously asking the question.

They had returned from doing battle with a pound of well-done ground beef on the world’s largest sesame seed bun, half an onion, a cup of catsup, and Albert’s heartburn from just watching. Jason had been on-line for some time. Albert was writing.

“Who?”

“A guy named Dr. Heinrich Gustoff. He’s a surgeon from Brownsville Texas. What’s he doing owning a place up here?”

“I have no idea. Perhaps it seemed like a good investment.”

“It says it took them a year and half to complete the restoration of the old warehouse and set up the museum displays. They even dug a brand-new basement for offices and climate controlled storage and work areas. Sixteen feet deep – that seems like overkill, doesn’t it?”

“How high do you suppose the ceilings are upstairs in that building?”

“I see what you’re saying. At least fourteen I’d estimate. A big expanse needs high ceilings. That means they had to remove a huge amount of dirt.”

“Enough to build a small hill out back, I’ll bet,” Albert added realizing his writing had come to a halt for a while.

“Could be. As the hills go around here it is a small one.”

“And think about the foliage growing on it.”

Jason closed his eyes as if bringing up a mental image.

“No trees. All the other hills are loaded with decades old trees.”

“And what might that suggest?”

“A hill too young to have grown any – at least naturally. You are also a fairly good observer, Grampa. We just may make a writer out of you, too, someday.”

Jason returned to his investigation, which had initially been aimed at finding something interesting to gaze at with the telescope.

“Hey. Get this!”

It was delivered with a good deal of excitement.

“You know who owns the Punkin Hollar Book and Art Shoppe?”

“Well, knowing what I now know about the efficiency of the Agency, I imagine somebody named Thompson.”

“That’s right. And get this it says Albert *and* Jason Thompson – *and!* I didn’t know I owned part of it.”

“Nor did I but I think that’s great. Which part do you own?”

“The safe part. . . . Sorry. I was trying to make a joke.”

“And I believe you did. It’s better to be honest about your fears and poke fun at them than to bottle them up and fret over them – or so I’ve heard.”

“I’m not a very good bottler.”

“So I’ve noticed. Have you found anything wonderful to gaze at tonight?”

“We going again tonight? Great! I’ll find something. *Where* we going?”

“I figured we had a pretty good spot last night – high, cool, dark, within easy walking distance.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

With the new knowledge about it being a manmade hill, they both wanted to get back up there and do some further investigating. For some reason, they felt uncomfortable admitting it.

“We have a couple of hours before dark. I think I’ll work a little more on the book. I’ve done very little the past several days and I do best if I put in at least some time every day. I like to use

this old dinosaur of a computer here on my desk. You can continue using the laptop. After I got it I discovered that my old fingers that were trained on typewriters have trouble navigating the laptop's flat keyboard."

Albert got re-situated. He was thirty years used to his former writing spot and it was clearly going to take some getting used to there in the new alcove. 'The inspiration is in my head, not my surroundings,' he told himself and he got back to work.

Half an hour later Jason was at his side, laptop in tow. His appearance conveyed undisguised distress.

"What, son? What's the matter? Find some renegade asteroid hurtling toward Punkin Hollar? Should I light the pumpkin signal and call our local super hero, Pumpkin Man?"

None of that lit up the boy's somber expression.

"I found a site that gossips about spies and terrorists and things like that. There is an article about me and my parents."

"Really. That surprises me. Let me take a look?"

Jason began to summarize its contents.

"It doesn't name names but it says they were a husband/wife team of long term plants from an unnamed Eastern European country – Russia, I'm thinking – and that they had been under surveillance for several years. A sophisticated and potentially devastating worm was discovered in a piece of software the man helped develop for the navy. It was the kind that would just sit there in a low traffic area and wait to be activated, maybe years later. It could have reportedly taken down the entire military communications network. Says it was the work of a certifiable genius. They traced the work to John – well it refers to him as the man or the husband. Most likely I have him to thank for my smarts. It could be funny, sort of; a sleeper planting a sleeper.

"Anyway, the FBI decided it was time to arrest him so they set a time to take him down. Somehow the couple – John and Mary, I'm betting – got word of it and made an attempt at a getaway in their – our – car. They left their son – me, I'm thinking – behind in their house. I knew or assumed much of that. But here's a twist I hadn't thought of. The writer poses a question: 'Did they abandon their son to gain their own safety, or were they so sure they would be harmed that they wanted to make certain he was out of harm's way?' I never thought about that second possibility. Do you think their last

thoughts could have really been about my safety?”

“Jason, if you are a true reflection of the best parts of your parents, then I have no doubt that was, in fact, the case.”

“Wow! Now everything I thought I had worked out about them in my head is up for grabs again. Anyway, it goes on to say the FBI suspects that the agent’s own government blew them up so they couldn’t cut some sort of deal in return for revealing secrets. I knew about that likelihood. Here’s something I hadn’t heard, though. An hour after the car explosion there was a second explosion. Our house was blown to smithereens. I had obviously already been whisked away. There are two theories discussed about that. One is that the foreign county blew it up to make sure I – the son – was killed and any incriminating information in the house was destroyed. They speculate that the boy might have picked up on things he wasn’t even aware of that might reveal spy secrets. The second one is that the FBI blew it up to make it seem like I had been killed – like to protect me. I’d think if the bad guys didn’t do it they would know somebody else had done it. That part doesn’t really make sense. Which do think works?”

“Well, and this is my mystery writer brain at work, if it were my story, and knowing the bad guys had your parent’s car rigged to be blown up whenever – if ever – they thought it needed to be blown up, they probably had the house rigged in the same way. It could be that the FBI located the explosives in the house, and after they got you to safety and removed the evidence they needed, the FBI allowed the place to be blown up – in order to protect you – to make it appear you died in the explosion. For all we know the FBI may have temporarily disabled the explosives at the house days or months before but had been unable to get to the car. That would probably satisfy the foreign bad guys.”

“Wow! Seems like everybody but the bad guy bosses were looking out for me. I got some major rethinking to do about all this, you know. Can we just leave for the hill now? I need to move around. That always helps me think and I need to use up some of this excess adrenalin that seems to suddenly be drowning my . . . what did you call them . . . my risibles? I’ll put some goodies in a fanny pack.”

The decision had apparently been made. Not even such huge and confusing revelations could stem the boy’s thoughts of food.

Surely that was out of habit. He couldn't possibly be hungry.

Ten minutes later they were on their way south with the telescope. Jason suggested they travel the alleys – every block in town had a north to south alley dissecting it. Even though all the new information tended to indicate he was probably safer than he had suspected, his suddenly elevated anxiety made it feel better if they stayed to the shadows.

It was still light when they reached the base of the hill.

“Let's separate by ten yards and hunker down while we are making the climb to the top. We'll be harder to spot that way.”

“Fine.”

Albert was willing to do whatever it took to ease the boy's mind.

“You just refuse to get ruffled about anything, don't you, Grampa?”

“Mostly. Just don't get me started on torture, world hunger, and war.”

“I guess I could have predicted that. You really care about people. You sure as . . . *heck* wouldn't be here now if you didn't”

They kept moving. Jason kept babbling.

“That was a strange substitution I just made,” he said.

“Which? And how was it strange?”

“Heck means exactly the same thing as hell and yet heck is acceptable and hell isn't. People are really strange.”

“Yes. People are wonderfully strange. It keeps life interesting.”

“It keeps life *absurd* – sorry but that's how it seems to me right now.”

“No need to be sorry. I'm not the keeper of either sanity or opinions in this world.”

“Sometimes I get on my soapbox about things.”

“Me too. Lots of times it's why I write.”

“I don't get how you can write a mystery and fill it with your soapbox topics but then I'm yet to read one of your books for grown-ups.”

He *would* look into the matter.

Soon up the hill, they located their spot and in the last

vestiges of evening light could see it was actually a flat-topped rise that was somewhat below the actual top of the hill on to the west.

“Want to go on up to the top?” Albert asked.

“No. This is fine.”

Albert smiled and said: “Translation: Jason wants to nose around the chimney some more.”

“*Complete* translation,” Jason said, grinning: “Jason *and* Albert want to nose around the chimney some more.”

“I guess that was a mutual ‘gottcha’,” Albert said chuckling.

They each put down what he was carrying and approached the fireplace. In the dim light, they could see it was, in fact, a working fireplace, red brick, with a grate for cooking, the leavings of ashes, and a tall chimney to produce strong airflow across the wood or charcoal. Jason climbed to the top of the chimney and looked in. His hair blew wildly above his head as he peered inside.

“As I suspected there is a humongous updraft of warm air. I can see well enough to tell there are two air channels – one in front, curved up from the firebox, and a much larger one behind it that extends straight down into the mountain. A vent of some sort. Like I said, most likely the exit of the ventilation system from an underground complex and now we know when it was probably built – during the Museum’s renovation. I’ll bet that stairway behind the curtain in the museum leads right into it. Not into the basement but into this hill.”

“It all makes sense. In fact, the remodeling of the warehouse into the museum may have merely been a front for the clandestine construction of whatever is housed beneath this hill. I imagine the entrance, at the bottom of the stairs inside the museum, is so well disguised no one would ever suspect it was there.”

“I just did some quick, rough, figuring. From an area that large and deep they would have removed something like 20,000 cubic yards of dirt to make the basement. Figuring this arched hill is roughly the top half of a circle, twenty yards high and fifty or sixty yards long, they didn’t remove nearly enough dirt to build it. There is some large structure inside it just covered with that dirt.”

“Of course, all that is just our conjecture. For all we know now, there may have been a small hill there to begin with and the excess from the excavation only added to its size.”

“I like my very probable hypothesis better,” Jason said disinclined to ponder any possibilities to the contrary. Evidence-supported conjecture, I’d call it.”

Jason looked around in all directions from his perch.

“Look over there, the valley to the south. Odd.”

Albert looked.

“What?”

“That odd colored green strip running up the valley floor. Can barely make it out in this light.”

“I see it. That’s a box valley. There is no outlet. Hills all around. Maybe it’s just early evening shadows or some special crop presenting an unusual green hue dissimilar to the grass surrounding it.”

Jason jumped to the ground and began assembling the telescope. Daylight was fast fading. Albert stood back and watched knowing the boy was up to something – something strictly non-heavenly. Once set up, Jason viewed the valley from end to end and side to side.

“Come and take a look.”

Albert obliged.

Jason asked.

“What do you see?”

“I see lots of grass and a fence that seems to run the entire periphery of the valley floor.”

“Look at it close-up – at the fence. It’s like twelve feet tall, chain link, with a strand of electrified wire stretched along the top.”

“Well, a strand of wire at least, electrified yet to be determined. Could just be barbed wire.”

“Somebody wants to keep people *out* of that valley.”

“*Or*, somebody wants to keep something *in*. Cattle maybe.”

“Do you see any cattle – any twelve-foot-high-fence-jumping cattle down there? That would be, cows on steroids, like right out of Hey Diddle Diddle, the cat and the fiddle, The cow jumped over the moon. I was bothered by that dumb rhyme from the first time I heard it, by the way.”

“Actually, I don’t see any – Hey Diddle Diddle variety or any other. I’m sure you have a theory.”

“Not really except it looks very suspicious. And, that odd colored grass strip. It’s what, fifteen or twenty feet wide the whole length of the valley?”

“About that. Perhaps some genetic experiment. Maybe developing a hybrid grass that must not be disturbed during the pollination season, hence the fence. Maybe a new strain of wheat that will grow more robustly in the shortened growing season this far north. Several possibilities.”

“I think you doubt all that as much as I do, Grampa. Can we go down and take a look?”

“Not in the dark, son. I’ll tell you what, though. We can investigate it further in the morning before breakfast.”

Jason chuckled.

“Before I knew you I didn’t know there *was* any morning before breakfast.”

The delay was mostly a ploy on Albert’s part to extend the boy’s focus on something other than the many unsolvable and growing uncertainties in his life.

Jason broke out the snacks and pop. They sat in the grass and watched the dark conquer the light. He then made an attempt to become engaged in the stars. Nothing seemed to catch his fancy. The slip of a moon that had been present the night before had completely disappeared. The night sky was clear of clouds but the stars alone couldn’t muster enough candle power to light up the world below.

At eleven he was packed up and ready to head for home.

“What’s that? Listen,” Albert said.

“I hear it. From the valley to the south. A *whishp* sound – that’s Onomatopoeia – a vocal immitation of a sound, but you knew that. It goes on and on. Listen.”

About that time, it stopped. In the darkness, there was no way to determine how it had come about. They continued to listen. Presently a low, murmuring, sound emerged. It was constant. At first it was only a marginally audible *whir* like that from a quietly revolving ceiling fan. It grew louder and louder but never much beyond a whisper. It could have just been a gentle breeze set up by the suddenly cooling valley floor. Silence followed and lasted for perhaps ten minutes. Then it began again. That time it gradually

became fainter and fainter and soon disappeared. The original *whishp* returned, continuing for about three minutes.

Voices again resonated from the chimney. They moved in close.

“That’s Miguel.”

“Silent Hawk is up and gone. It will return tomorrow at the same time. That will be your turn, Nikita. Package or no package you *will* take your turn. We have a schedule that cannot be disrupted.”

“I’m told the package has disappeared. It may have been destroyed. My people are making a final effort to locate it. I will take my turn regardless.”

The unmistakable metal on metal scraping sound of a heavy, door, swinging closed ended the sounds from the vent.

“Not so much scary as eerie, I’d say,” came Albert’s take on it all.

“Eerie for sure,” Jason agreed. “Let’s get down from up here. I’d suggest we use the east slope leading down to the rear of the museum. We won’t be seen in this darkness. It will be faster and right now faster sounds pretty good to me.”

Jason was already on the move.

Twenty minutes later they exited the lift onto the second floor. The wall had been completed and the door installed. The keys hung by a string from the knob with a note.

The mud will dry overnight.

I will sand it in the morning.

I will paint the wall tomorrow afternoon.

To speed things up I will use a primer and finish-coat all in one paint.

– Mike

“I didn’t dream Mike would finish it in one day,” Albert said clearly impressed. “Looks good. From the nail heads, we can tell he put the upright two by sixes every six inches like we asked. Anybody will be hard put to get through that wall with anything short of a jackhammer.”

“I feel better,” Jason said running his hand across its surface. “One thing bugs me about it. Mike never did question why we were having the wall built like a fortress. He just nodded and went about

building it. I'd have sure put the owner through the wringer on something like that. All that extra work!"

"From the worker's standpoint, the more work the more pay."

"I suppose so."

Inside Jason locked the door and then re-checked to make sure it was locked. There was also a deadbolt that worked from the same key. It was engaged and Jason sighed.

"I really do feel better – safer. Thanks for doing all this. We both still have to remember to keep our cells on beside our beds at night in case we need to communicate about . . . well, about anything, you know."

"Good plan. You can always check to make sure mine is in place if that will make you feel better going into the night."

Albert handed one key to Jason and slipped the other onto his keychain, suddenly realizing that except for the car key and store key, the others were no longer of any use. He would go through them and discard those later.

"I'll keep the key in my wallet. I imagine it will be the only one I'll have," Jason said.

"There will also be the one to the rear entrance down stairs. We'll get you one made tomorrow."

Jason nodded as he slipped the key into a snap-closed compartment in his wallet. It brought up another issue.

"What is our privacy policy going to be?" Jason asked as he stowed the telescope on a shelf in his room.

"Explain a little more."

"I figure our rooms are where we can have our privacy. You in yours and me in mine. What do you say?"

"Sounds good." Albert said and sensing the importance of the topic for the boy he went on to elaborate. "When a door is closed, we knock and never enter unless we are given permission. That should go for whether the person is in or not. No exploring each other's rooms without permission. Will that handle your privacy concerns?"

"Excellent! I never really had any at home. They'd just march right in on me any time they wanted to. My door will probably mostly be open, anyway. It's just good for a kid to know

he has control over some space in his world, you know?”

He sounded like an old man.

“I do indeed. I’m just happy you decided to make *that* space *your room* and not the *kitchen*.”

They enjoyed a laugh and moved to the living room where Jason stretched out on the couch and Albert sank into his recliner. Jason had more things on his mind.

“So. About tonight – up there – the sounds – Miguel – the package.”

“So. What about it?”

“Any of it make any sense to you?”

“Not really. It does appear as you suspected all along, that Miguel is in some way involved in getting the Russian out of town.”

“Out of the country, I’d say. He mentioned across the border.”

“Perhaps. Likely, even, but we haven’t heard anything to verify that. I’m interested in the reference to Silent Hawk.”

Jason had ideas.

“It could be a code name for some secret operation like *Desert Storm*.”

“Could be. I had another thought flash through my mind up there but I can’t support it with facts.”

“What? Give. Surely by now you understand I don’t necessarily operate according to facts.”

Albert had to smile.

“You made reference to overhearing something about a silent plane, right.”

“Yeah. Miguel used the term in the restroom.”

“What if *Silent Hawk* is the term used to designate such a plane?”

“Makes sense – hawk for flying, silent for . . .well, silent. You’re actually into this, aren’t you?”

“I’ve never been able to ignore a mystery. Here’s the problem. It certainly sounded to me as if Miguel stipulated that the plane had flown tonight – right there in front of us and yet we heard nothing. Engines big enough to power even a tiny plane make noise. We neither saw nor heard a plane. It was more like a gently grating

or rubbing of some kind. Not good words but the best I have. Also, unless that valley floor has been picked clean of rocks and is smoother than most of the terrain we've seen up here, there was no place for a plane to either land or take off."

"I'll have to admit that the *whishp* didn't sound like a plane. And like you said even the *whir* didn't sound anywhere near powerful enough to move a plane. I guess we are still missing something. How about this? The whir was the sound of an electric car used to transport Miguel's guests to the airport north of town?"

"That certainly has real possibilities, Jase. It could be we heard it arrive – the faint to louder sound – and then leave – the louder to fainter sound. I think you may be onto something."

"But what's under the hill and what is it with the fence and the odd colored grass and the vent out the top of a hill and the long-term Miguel's guests have to stay around and why would any of this be located here in peaceful, little, square dance every Friday night, nice people, Punkin Hollar?"

"All good questions. For starters, crank up that laptop and see what we can learn about the airport."

"Great idea!"

Jason was immediately on it. Albert moved to his side on the couch.

"County Airport – that's hardly original and certainly not very personal," Jason said reading from the website. "One problem, Grampa. Look here. It isn't lighted for night landings or takeoffs. I guess that tramples my idea into the sandy loam of north central Wisconsin."

"It would seem so, if, perhaps, a bit overly dramatic. However, expertly piloted small planes can land and take off with a minimum of light if it's properly placed."

"Like a beacon at each end of the landing strip so the pilot knows exactly where to set down and which direction to head."

"Exactly. I think we need to take a grandfather-grandson field trip to the airport tomorrow. Your first homeschooling assignment."

"A good plan. You know I always wanted to learn how to fly. How about you?"

"Actually, in the old days, I had a pilot's license."

“Really. Awesome. Can you teach me?”

“That’s not how it works. In the first place my license expired two decades ago. In the second, we would have to find a certified instructor willing to take on a youngster. I don’t know what the regulations are about age and such anymore.”

“So, you’re saying we can look into it?”

“Is that what I said?”

“Sure sounded that way to me.”

It was delivered with the boy’s wonderful grin.

“We’ll see – and I know in most homes that means, ‘No, but I don’t want to tell you that until later.’ I guarantee you right now that in this home it really does mean, ‘we’ll see’.”

“Are you rich? Pardon. I had no right to ask a thing like that. Forget I asked.”

“Well, I see two things, there.”

He held up one finger. Jason smiled and chuckled remembering that first night.

“One, we are a family and you have a right to know, at least in a general way, about our finances.”

Jason held up his own two fingers.

Albert continued.

“Second, I will need to know how you define rich before I can begin to answer.”

“Fair enough. Could we retire and live comfortably on what you now have?”

“Yes. In fact, with some good planning, you would be able to live out your life comfortably on what we have.”

“Wow! I’d say that’s rich. And there is also a stipend from the agency you talked about and the money we make from OUR store and the money you make from any new books you write and those that I may write someday. Wow! I guess I can stop worrying about money.”

“I failed to recognize that you were concerned about that. I apologize for not handling the matter earlier.”

“I tend to divide my worries into public and private,” Jason said. “You’ve witnessed on a pretty regular basis my current public worries. There are some I keep to myself. It isn’t like a put down to

anybody else; it's just like my private stuff. You understand?"

"I do. But, remember you don't have to worry alone about anything if it becomes overwhelming. It is why grampas were invented. We listen, we offer ideas *if* they are requested, and we *never* tattle to anybody."

"Thanks. I think I knew that. I'm ready for bed. I'm going to try mine tonight."

"Fine. You know where I'll be."

Jason nodded and grinned.

"If you get lonely, Grampa, you can always call me, you know."

Jason chuckled himself back to his room. He left his door open.

The boy clearly felt better about a lot of things. So, did Albert. Each, however, privately checked the lock on the new back door before turning out their light that night.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Snooping and Speculation

Albert was up first. He showered and dressed before awakening Jason. It was as if a torturous, Texas, twister had played among the boy's sheets. With only momentary reluctance he was up and out of bed.

"Be dressed in a jiffy. It's out to the valley first thing, right?"

"Right. You want a sandwich to tide you over 'til breakfast?"

It had begun as a joke or so Albert thought.

"That would be great. Some of that luncheon meat and cheese we got at the grocery yesterday. And maybe a glass of milk. Gotta coax these bones of mine into growing you understand."

It took him six minutes to get ready, five minutes of which involved combing and arranging his hair. Albert used the time to prepare the sandwich of all sandwiches – half a pound of meats, two slices of cheese, mayo, lettuce, and a touch of mustard. It was the best he could remember from the boy's earlier prattle about his preferences. It passed muster with a compliment, even.

"Great sandwich. You make them the same way I do."

Clearly the previous conversation had passed out of his mind.

"I suggest we wear back packs. In case somebody doesn't like our snooping, we can say we are out for an early morning hike.

It's the truth in some ways."

"We can do that. Are you expecting armed troopers and machinegun nests to be guarding the valley?"

Jason smiled.

"Not really but I tend to like to be prepared."

Jason continued to munch on the sandwich as they walked Pine Street south. At five a.m. they had the street to themselves. It was already light.

"Shorter summer nights and longer days than back . . . home," Jason offered. "I like it. For some reason, I'm feeling a lot better about things this morning – safer in lots of ways."

"I'm glad. To what do you attribute that?"

Jason smiled up into his Grampa's face.

"Sometimes you talk like you write. He lowered his voice, pretending Grampa's. *'To what do you attribute that?'* Most people don't do that. If people wrote the way they talk they'd fail every essay their teachers would ever grade."

Albert smiled.

"That's why I write a lot of dialog – anything goes when people are talking. You were about to make a point."

"Oh, yeah. Feeling safe. I think between that website stuff and how you put it all together for me I've been able to relax. Most likely the bad guys really do think I was killed in the house explosion. I'm definitely leaning toward the idea that mom and dad really were trying to protect me at the end. I'm feeling better – more confident – about the Agency's plan to get me – us – here without the bad guys knowing about it. Lots of reasons that I feel safer today, I guess. Oh, and the new wall and door and locks – just in case I'm wrong."

"Good. I'm pleased."

"Actually, you know, for a dead guy, I feel great."

His initial smile faded.

"There is one thing that really still bothers me."

"And that is . . .?"

"Two parts. He held up one finger, but all quite seriously. My friends back home think I'm dead and I'll never be able to set them straight or see them again, and second, they probably think terrible things about me and my parents – spies, you know."

“I understand. *You* must understand those are things you have no control over. You can’t change any of that. People will think what people choose to think. I just imagine those friends who really knew you, won’t for a minute believe you had any part in your parent’s spying activities.”

“You think? I sure hope so. I’ll try to set my mind to think that way. Thanks. It seems like every day I have so many new things to thank you for.”

“Well, you may not see it now, but I, as well, have many reasons every day to thank you. Not so concrete perhaps, but many reasons. And you must remember that the day will come when those tables will be turned?”

“What do you mean?”

“When I’m old and frail and you have to push me around in a wheelchair and feed me supper and comb my hair, then I’ll be on the *thanking you* end.”

“I don’t like to think about that.”

“Hey, getting old happens just like being young happens. So far, it seems to me that you and I are working this old and young thing out pretty well. No reason to think it won’t just keep getting better and better. I for one am eager to watch how our roles gradually shift from me in charge to you in charge. The better job I do raising you now, the better job I can count on you doing for me later. I’m certain that if I’d have searched the world over I couldn’t have found a better young partner for the long term.”

“Thanks. See, there I go again! But I mean it. It’s like we have a lifetime arrangement going here, isn’t. Hadn’t thought that far ahead yet. That’s, well like in your book I’m reading; in one place, you use the term *wonder-filled* instead of just wonderful. I think that what we’re talking about here is going to be wonder-filled.”

“It certainly should be our goal.”

They reached for each other’s waists at the same time. It was, in fact, a *wonder-filled* moment.”

Jason was sensitive and insightful beyond his years. Albert hoped that in the end there would still be plenty of little boy left inside him.

They walked on in silence although their thoughts were

nearly identical. A week before they each had their own very different life with their own very different dreams and concerns and family and acquaintances. Neither felt he really had any safety issues. They had no knowledge of each other. They had no need for each other. That changed. It changed into this, and this – they were both convinced – was going to be first-rate (*humongously awesome* in the mind of the younger Thompson). Their job wasn't to replace anything for the other. It was to add something new – a relationship, a way of living, a mutual bond, and an ever growing and emerging feeling of family.

They left the sidewalk just south of the museum and crossed a wide and deep grassy lot that ran the length of the warehouse and beyond to the base of the hill. The fence was just as Jason had described it when he first studied it through the telescope – twelve feet tall, chain link, with that single wire stretching along the top.

“It *is* electrified,” Jason said, pointing. “See the ceramic insulators where the wire is supported at the fence posts.”

“I do see and I bow to the correctness of your run-away imagination.”

Jason grinned understanding it was Grampa's way of saying it had really just been a lucky guess. It had been, but he was willing to take credit for an *insightful speculation*. He liked trying to think in big words the way Grampa said that he did. He was amazed at how many of them he already knew and could use. His friends wouldn't have understood them so he never said them. This was going to be, well, humongously awesome.

Albert looked for security cameras. He saw none but understood that didn't mean they weren't there – hidden or tiny or telescopic from some distance away. He pointed south and they began walking along the fence away from 'Fireplace Hill'. They really had no evidence the valley was in anyway connected to either Miguel or the Wax Museum or, in fact, any intrigue of any kind. It occupied their thoughts, however, and that provided some measure of diversion from the horrors of the past week. For Albert, it was like living the writing of a novel. For Jason, it was playing out a childhood, cops and robbers, fantasy. Perhaps those are the same.

“Will there be chiggers and ticks, in this high grass,” Jason asked. “I've read about them but have never had the experience. Not many in downtown . . . back in the city where I lived.”

“I don’t know much about such little critters in this part of the country. I guess we will see. I know a few chigger remedies if we get some and most cortisone salves will stem the itch until they disappear.”

“I hope I get some. It will be like part of our new adventure together.”

“I will gladly give you my share. You walk on ahead. Maybe they’ll attack you and leave me alone.”

“Is that because I’m so sweet or you’re so sour?”

“I will ignore that.”

“If I’m not mistaken you already just did *not* ignore it.”

They smiled to themselves and walked on.

After a quarter mile, they topped a low rise from which they had a good view down onto the valley.

“There’s that odd colored grass. And what is that, like a big irrigation pipe laying along this edge of it”

“Looks like that. Wish we had your telescope.”

“These binoculars do – found ‘em in my luggage.”

He removed them from his backpack.

“What we looking at?”

“Follow that pipe north – back toward our hill. What happens to it?”

“It seems to run into a cement block whatever it is – like a tiny building about four or five blocks wide and ten high – right up against the hillside. A well or water source or valve station or something. Here you look. It’s just down the hill from where we set up to look at the stars.”

“I just see what you see. There are those three wires running back into the hill through some sort of pipe or conduit.”

“I saw that. Something in there is electric – 240 volts with three wires. Provides lots of power. What that small could need that much power?”

“I’m thinking a very big motor,” Albert said.

“Like for a well pump, maybe?”

“Maybe. Take a second look at that pipe – right out in front of us where you can see it up close and straight on.”

“Okay. What?”

“How does it irrigate?”

“I see the problem. No holes or spray nozzles. Hmm? Maybe it is just a water feed line that takes it from the pump to somewhere else. Or maybe we have it backwards. It is a feed line coming *into* the hill from a remote water source. Part of the town’s water supply, maybe or at least the museum’s.”

They boy could certainly spin options.

“All interesting possibilities. That grass on the other side, the grass you call odd, is so bright and green. One might speculate that it was being watered and fertilized in some special way formulated to maintain that color.”

“*One might*,” Jason said mimicking Albert to emphasize the high-class language the man often used around him. He had begun taking it as a compliment – it was like the man was giving him credit for either knowing the words or language pattern or for being able to quickly pick them up.

“And it’s not just a different color,” Jason went on. “Look at it. It’s short and perfectly even. The grass on both sides is taller and more uneven the way grass usually grows.”

“I’ll bet I know how that has come to be,” Albert said as he continued to scan the area through the binoculars.

“You going to share your, ‘I know’ thing?”

“Sorry. My head got caught up in the ideas the realization imparted.”

“You really do think in a different style from most of us other mortals, Grampa.”

Albert acknowledged the truth of the comment with a shrug and smile. Depending on how one looked at it, it had always been either his strength or weakness.

“Artificial turf, like on football fields and patios.”

“Here, let me look again.”

The boy studied it.

“I think you are right. You know, if they dragged it in there before laying it, that would have been a *turf toe*.”

Grampa snorted out loud.

“Very good! Towing it into place. *Turf toe*. That possibility completely slipped past my own old neurons. It’s one that I wish hadn’t.”

“Really? Thanks. I’ll get the hang of this humor thing yet. Did I mention that I really feel better today – after last night?”

“I believe I received that message. I’m so glad and frankly, so do I.”

“How long do you suppose that strip of turf is?” Albert asked.

“I’m not a good judge of things like that. I suppose we could try to count fence posts and multiply by ten feet – the distance they are apart.”

“Can you see the posts clearly enough to count them?”

“Just the middle half here in front of us.”

“Know how to multiply by two?” Albert kidded.

“I get it. Give me a minute.”

He concentrated and slowly moved the binoculars south to north.

“I get approximately 150 posts in that middle section.”

He lowered the binoculars.

“That would be fifteen hundred feet times two would be three thousand feet. Now, what does that tell us?”

“I’m not sure but it seemed to be a good piece of information to have. An investigator has to have data before he can figure things out. Often, when I’m writing, I create data that I have no idea how my characters may be able to use later. That’s how life works naturally, I think.”

Jason continued thinking aloud.

“That’s a little over a half mile. It would make for humungous wind sprints but since there is no football team here that seems irrelevant. I just don’t get it.”

“Seen enough?” Albert asked.

“No. I want to dig my way under this fence and go out there and see if our ideas pan out.”

“Too many *No Trespassing* signs on the fence for me to think that would be wise or appropriate – at least during daylight.”

“I seem to smell a little wiggle room on that ‘wise and appropriate’ position, Grampa. There is a depression under the fence back there a ways that could become a crawling under opening with very little work.”

“I took note of it as well.”

“You’re thinking we return here tonight and position ourselves close to the grass and the pipe and see if we can figure out if one or both of them is responsible for the noises we heard, that is if the noises are repeated. They didn’t happen that first night, remember.”

“Is *that* what I’m thinking?”

“I’m pretty sure.”

He grinned.

“You’re right on. I got to thinking back on those *whirring* sounds. If it had been a car coming and going to the streets of the town it would have moved east/west. It seemed to me the sound came at us from the south, growing louder, and then left going back south until we could no longer hear it.”

“I think that’s right. You thinking the car is traveling up and down this turf covered a road?”

“I can’t move beyond the facts of the movements of the sounds. We must not get locked into the concept of a car. It might be a scooter or who knows what.”

“Gottcha. This is great. I keep going back to the voices and what they talked about. I still haven’t completely given up on the idea that I might be the package, but if they knew I was here, it wouldn’t be any problem to try and snatch me. They’d get caught but they haven’t tried so I’m thinking they probably don’t know – like you’ve been saying all along. And, the Russian doesn’t sound real confident anymore that the package will arrive. So, if I *am* the package it doesn’t sound like they know where to look for me.”

“An interesting, if round about, analysis. We can’t know, at least at this point, but I understand your position and applaud your logic. Now, let’s return the way we came and somehow note exactly where that dip is under the fence.”

At the depression, Albert tied his hanky through the wire, a foot above the ground.

“That will be high enough so we can find it easily in the dark and low enough that it shouldn’t be visible from a distance. We will need a good, wide beam, flashlight and a couple of penlights. Looks like there will be some purchases to make after breakfast.”

Half an hour later they were enjoying one of Abby’s calorie

and cholesterol laden breakfasts. She pampered them and when she had time would become quite chatty over refills. She extracted their stories and Albert felt sure that would effectively put it all into the local gossip pipeline. The sooner folks no longer had to wonder about them the better. Facts were almost always less intriguing than rampant speculation.

“Abby, we saw a man in here a day or so ago: short, dark, Latino,” Albert began. “I’m thinking I may know him from somewhere but for the life of me I can’t place it.”

Jason smiled into his napkin as he watched Mason Jordon the Private Eye go to work.

“Miguel. Don’t know a last name. He’s been in town maybe a year. Lives south of here I think. Again, not sure. He tends to hang with other . . . how shall I say it . . . non-locals.”

“Folks of foreign origin?” Jason suggested, trying to be helpful.

“Yes. Very good. Exactly. We don’t usually get many of those kind here so in a way it’s sort of strange, I suppose. I see him with maybe a half dozen a month. Seldom more than once. He’s a really good tipper. Always pays for both of them. Likes the corner table back there. Doesn’t seem to have any permanent friends. Never see him around with what you might call regular pals. I’ve wondered if maybe he’s a minister or a priest taking care of refugees.”

“I suppose it could be as simple as the fact that foreigners often stick together,” Albert said. “I appreciate the information but it really doesn’t ring any bells. I’m probably mistaken. Lots and lots of Latino folks down in Springfield where I lived.”

Abby seemed fine with the conversation. She refilled Albert’s coffee and sat a second hot chocolate down at Jason’s place. She leaned close to him and lowered her voice.

“Only my special beaus get free cocoa refills. Don’t spread it around.”

Jason leaned toward her making his return comment in the same hushed voice.

“Thanks. I do hope you have some older beaus as well. I got a nine-p.m. curfew.”

It prompted chuckles all around and earned Jason a hair

ruffling. He didn't seem to mind. Jason was a toucher and clearly enjoyed physical contact. She left.

Jason turned back to Albert.

"How do you know what to say like that?"

"I just pretend I'm writing and say what I'd type in for my hero to say."

"Pretty sneaky. I loved it, by the way. Maybe you can write me some lines to use with girls."

Jason raised his eyebrows as if lobbying for a positive response.

Albert put on an exaggerated frown as if to say, 'That will have to be your own doing.' Jason wasn't discouraged. He had twenty-three and a half Mason Jordan novels to search for what he was pretty sure would provide excellent assistance in his on-going quest to become popular with girls.

They finished and walked to the Dollar General where they found the flashlights they needed. They also picked up batteries and two chargers for their cell phones. Albert had hoped to find binoculars at a bargain price but that didn't happen. They crossed the street to the camera shop and found what they needed at a price he was willing to pay.

They were back at the apartment by 7:15. Mike was already busily at work sanding the dry mud on the outside wall. Albert had forgotten to leave him a key.

"Worked out fine. I'm just finishing up out here. By the way I want to give you both one of my new business cards. I hope to build things up in a hurry here. I really like Punkin Hollar. If you'll keep them in your wallets, then you can give folks my phone number when you hear anybody talking like they are in need of my services."

"That's great. You will certainly get good recommendations from us," Albert said.

Jason was immediately out of his shoes and socks. He installed batteries in the three new flashlights and soon had both cell phones charging.

"It won't be long 'til I'm going to be ready to begin spending time with kids my age. That going to be oaky?"

"Of course. Kate can probably help you determine where

you can find kids.”

“Already done that research. Parks and soda shop – you remember soda shops I imagine.”

“Oh, my, yes. I spent many an after-school hour at a soda shop with a pretty girl.”

“That seems odd to hear but I guess you had to go through puberty once in order to get to where you are. So, you liked to date?”

“I did, indeed. Spent most of the money I earned on the fairer sex.”

“By the way, what am I going to do for spending money? Mom and dad gave me an allowance.”

“Well, Grampa is going to give you a job at the bookstore instead. We’ll work out a schedule and tasks with Kate. When you need more money, we’ll try to work out more hours. We’ll always have family money for the big things.”

“That seems fair. I’m older now and I should begin to work. I like that. How soon can I start?”

“We’ll need to speak with Kate. I’ll talk with her first. Today or tomorrow as time allows. You have some pressing financial need?”

“No, but I fully expect to need money for sodas. My plan includes putting my shyness behind me and spending time with actual girls. Do you think they’ll like me?”

“Not being a twelve-year-old girl I’m probably not the authority on such things but I certainly can’t see why they wouldn’t. You’re good looking, clever, smart and becoming quite witty.”

“And I have *great* hair!”

“Indeed, you do. Once you get the hang of the local teen jargon I believe things should go well. You should understand that I am not inclined for you to go on dates yet – just you and a girl together. Group gatherings and walking a girl home some-times seem appropriate.”

“That probably means no girls in my bedroom.”

“That probably means that, yes, at least with the door closed and never when I’m not here. I want you to feel comfortable about having your friends come here, however. I want to meet them. I promise to do my best not to embarrass you in front of them.”

“I can live with those ground rules. How old before I can date?”

“I really don’t know. I suppose that will depend on several things – your continued trustworthiness, your level of maturity, and to some extent, I suppose, the customs of this community.”

“Okay. I can see we will be working on that during the next several years. How old were you when you kissed a girl for the first time?”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen!!!! My hormones will explode by then.”

“I grew up in a different time and a different culture. And, of course, I can’t tell you when you can kiss for the first time since clearly it won’t be in my presence. I will trust your best judgment – that’s the judgment that originates from the waist up and not from the waist down.”

“That was a funny line. You better write it down. I’ve seen you writing down good lines. If I manage any good ones you have my permission to use them. I have some of those from the waist down questions to talk over with you but the time doesn’t feel quite right yet.”

“That’s fine. I just hope you will ask me or some wise adult and not rely on the misinformation of your peers. Understand that’s not a putdown to your age group. It is just the age-old fact that kids can’t possibly have the benefit of experiences us older folks have. You at least owe it to yourself to give us a listen before you begin making important decisions for yourself.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I know what you mean. Tommy and I had it all figured out when we were nine and come to find out we were *completely* off base.”

CHAPTER EIGHT: Night Flight?

Jason began working two hours a day sweeping the floor and keeping the books and art objects dust free. It wasn't what he had envisioned his job would be but he accepted it with no complaint. Not having to be engaged with customers gave him more flexibility to find ways of lingering near the young ladies who entered the store. He understood that he needed to keep busy, something that had never been a problem for super restless *Jase*.

It came out that he had always been called Jase – rhymes with base, lace, chase, face. He preferred that, so Albert agreed, of course, and did his best to remember. It was never a big deal when he forgot and actually it seldom came up between them. Jason had become comfortable calling Albert Grampa and Albert had become very comfortable being called Grampa. A week earlier the old writer had not dreamed that would ever be a part of his life. But then a week *earlier* neither of them could have dreamed of their week *later*.

Kate and Albert were privately amused by the sudden increase in young female traffic through the store. Jason had no clue, which made it all the more amusing.

The afternoon of the day they had planned to return at night and explore the valley floor, a rainstorm moved in, requiring a twenty-four-hour postponement of the outing. With the wind from the southwest and sixteen hours of searing, summer, sunshine, things dried out.

“So, we go tonight, right,” Jason said as Wilma served them the blue plate special. That noon it was an open face hot beef sandwich with mashed potatoes, brown gravy, corn on the cob and green beans. It provided a good start on a meal, and the pie a la mode to follow and several candy bars pocketed for the afternoon was all designed to keep the boy alive until supper (as the evening meal was called in Punkin Hollar).

“Yes. Tonight. After ten. Most of the tourists will be off the streets by then and we should be able to slip out to the valley unnoticed.”

“I’ve been invited to drop by the Soda Shop at four o’clock today. I guess that will be okay, huh?”

“If you have your work done at the store it will be fine. I’m glad you’re ready to take that step. Which *guy* invited you?”

Had they not been out in public it would have called for some wrestling moves on Jason’s part. Still, he enjoyed the humor and went along with it.

“*His* name is Mary. For a guy, he’s really pretty – long black hair, a great smile and a . . . well, let’s just say is nicely developed for his age.”

“Biceps, I assume.”

“Never ever heard that reference used in this instance, actually.”

They smiled into each other’s faces.

Miguel entered the café and took a seat several tables away. He was alone, which was at variance from Abby’s observations. Perhaps he just didn’t frequent Abby’s place when he was alone.

“You see who came in?” Jason asked quietly.

“I did.”

“I think he’s watching us.”

“And why wouldn’t he be, two such striking gentlemen. I’m sure we must stand out from the crowd.”

“I’m serious.”

“And you believe I’m not?”

Then things *did* become serious. A second man entered. Miguel stood and motioned him to his table. They shook hands as if it were a first meeting. They sat and talked in low tones with heads close and occasional glances around the room, which included some

undisguised glances in the direction of Jason and Albert.

“Need the restroom,” Jason announced. He stood and made his way to the rear of the room, finding it necessary to move close by Miguel’s table.

He was back within minutes.

“Got info,” he said in a whisper. “That new guy is Russian. Could tell from his accent.”

“So, relieving your bladder was all a ploy to spy on them?” Albert asked.

“A two fer oner. Reconnaissance I believe it’s called.”

“Yes, by soldiers risking life and limb to gain information on the enemy. In the future let’s discuss such moves— *before* you make such unilateral decisions.”

“Like they would make a move in a public place like this?”

“No, but you may have tipped our hand that we are aware of Miguel as somebody who is interested in us.”

“Hadn’t thought of it in that way. Sorry. No more unintelling.”

“*Unitelling?*”

“Unilateral intelligence gathering.”

“I think I prefer English,” Albert said.

“It was English.”

“How about uncoded English then?”

“I can do that.”

Miguel and the new Russian had ordered and were eating as Albert and Jason left the cafe.

“What’s with all the Russians?” Jason asked.

“I can’t know. Interesting, I will say. I assume you didn’t recognize him.”

“How would I recognize him?”

“I just thought maybe you had seen him with your parents.”

“As far as I know they never hung with Russians. Closest they came to that was moms, to die for stroganoff – bad choice of words. I learned to make it, however.”

Albert offered a quick smile. Jason continued.

“I did notice something odd in there. Miguel took several clandestine picture of the Russian – with his phone. Question one:

Why take his picture – face only I think? Question two: Why try to hide the fact he was taking them?”

“Maybe he uses some facial recognition program to verify the man’s identity,” Albert said. “Listen to us. We sound like a couple of government agents ourselves. Let’s just step back, take a deep breath, and analyze our thinking. Maybe the whole thing out in the valley is a bad idea. I think it’s fueling our imaginations far beyond the distraction I was hoping for.”

“You know you can’t do that, 007.”

Jason burst into laughter as Albert directed them toward the clothing store.

“We need black for tonight – jeans or sweatpants and sweatshirts with hoods.”

“Hoodies. They’re called hoodies – sweatshirts with hoods.”

“Thanks for the jargon update.”

“Like a real secret operation, isn’t it?”

“Let’s see. We don’t want anybody to know what we are doing. Might that not be ‘secret’ by definition?”

Jason grinned and shrugged. It was like he was living one of Grampa’s wild adventure stories.

The purchases were made. Jason went to work. Albert went upstairs and back to writing.

The hour at the soda shop went well, very well, according to Jason’s later report.

“It was great, Grampa. I met a dozen kids – not all girls. Freddie invited me to play tennis later in the week. I’ll need a racket. Can we manage that some way? I won’t have enough saved from work. He said I could use one of his but before I thought I said I had one. I do, did. A five hundred dollar Dunlop.”

“A *racket* we can handle – probably not that expensive, however. I assume you know where to get one?”

“Yup. Freddie told me. His dad and mom own the dulcimer shop by the way. The girls say he’s really good playing them. I may save up my pennies to get one. He loaned me one of his so I can see if I like it. There’s a dulcimer orchestra. Maybe you’d like to look into that. Now that I’m getting a social life you probably need to get one, too.”

Albert was amused although he appreciated the boy’s

concern. He didn't explain that he hadn't had a social life since his wife passed away and that he really wasn't yet ready to move in that direction. He nodded as a generic response and wasn't required to commit himself.

"Are you tired of pizza?" Jason asked. "I seem to get a craving for it every afternoon at about this time."

"We can do pizza one more time. Then we have to begin thinking about cooking around here ourselves. You any good in the kitchen?"

"Very. I can eat anything you can prepare. Actually, I *can* cook a little. We should make a shopping list. That could be fun."

The pizza arrived – same delivery girl, same panting Jason waiting for her downstairs.

After filling their systems with fat, cholesterol, salt and caffeine, Albert wrote for a while. Jason finished reading the book he had begun earlier in the week. In the end he gave his review."

"Five stars, Grampa. Of course, that's five out of fifty."

Albert snorted at the humor but kept to his task. Compared with his previous residence where his closest companions had been two, never flowering, African Violets and a leaf-challenged philodendron, it was noticeably more difficult to concentrate there with a babbling boy in the background. It was just a first draft, however.

"Can I read what you're writing?" Jason asked as he moved in behind Albert and began reading over his shoulder.

"I suppose I have no problem with that. Just don't be too harsh. It is still in the laying in process."

"What's that?"

"I think of my first draft like the painter thinks of his newly primed canvas. It merely sets the stage for what will eventually transpire."

"Interesting. I'd never thought about it that way. When I write, I try to get it all said just the way I want it said the first time. Like you've undoubtedly noticed, I'm an impatient sort."

"There are different ways to go about the process."

"But . . .?"

"I hadn't intended a *but*, but since you bring it up you might try going through what you write at least a second time. I used to

tell my students that writing is twenty percent writing and eighty percent *rewriting*. It's really more like five to ninety-five but I figured that would be far to discouraging for many of them."

"What do you mean, students? Being a teacher is just your cover story."

"I've taught creative writing most all my adult life. Just a class or two a year but I always enjoyed it."

"Good. You'll teach me, then. My English teachers have all said I have a talent in that direction. It's like a curse. I seem to have too many talents in too many directions."

"It will all come clear somewhere down the line. Keep exploring the things that won't let you put them aside."

"That's an interesting way to look at it. If it doesn't keep jumping up and biting me in my . . . rear end, it may not be a true passion."

"Write that down. You can surely use it someday."

"Really? Okay. Maybe I need to start a yellow idea pad like you keep."

At nine forty-five they left the apartment through the rear door. Dusk was fading fast under the clouds of evening. They wore dark colored backpacks, this time containing things other than snacks – a camera, the flashlights, two sets of binoculars (Albert had purchased a second pair at the camera shop), and a trowel Mike had left behind from his dry wall mudding they could use for digging if that became necessary.

They found the handkerchief still tied in place. Albert had feared the depression might be filled with water but the sandy soil had provided superior drainage and it was, in fact, baked dry. Jason was able to roll under the fence with ease. Albert handed the backpacks through the opening and then wiggled himself under the wire head first, face up, fitting through without the need for removing more soil. Had there been one more pizza, however, and it would have been a close call. They had expected a new moon. If it was there it was still so low in the sky that the hill behind them to the east blocked it.

They made their way out to the pipe. It was a foot in diameter and made of heavy steel. Clearly it was not intended to carry water. It was, in fact, made in sections, each forty feet long. They were connected with large toothed gears set between them, the

teeth of which protruded like a Goth necklace some two inches beyond the surface of the pipe. Each gear was cradled in a device set into the ground that contacted that circular gear with a worm gear. All indications were that each such set-up was itself powered by an electric motor. It was all buried in some kind of weatherproof container and most likely supplied with power from buried cables running from the cement block structure. The mechanisms were designed to turn the pipe – roll it. The reason for that soon became obvious.

The special grass was, as Albert had suspected, artificial turf, set onto a strong, fabric back, which was embedded with a matrix of wires to provide added strength yet remain flexible. The entire eastern edge of that sheet – the near edge – was riveted to the pipe. When the pipe turned, it rolled the turf around it, pulling it across the ground and uncovering something. What?

They walked out onto the turf. To allow for the pipe's attachment to the drive gear, the turf was also cut into forty foot sections lying only four inches apart. The narrow open seams had been unnoticed from a distance. They knelt down to explore the area beneath the seam, the opening across the ground.

“Cement!” Jason said.

Albert held the flashlight while Jason snapped pictures of the gear boxes, the turf, the seam, and the cement below. At that point he removed the memory card from the camera and slipped it into his sock.”

“Why?” Albert asked.

“In case we're caught and the camera is confiscated.”

He put a new, blank card in place.

“You really do think like a secret agent, son.”

They moved to the far side of the turf. There was a second pipe but only half the size. It was assembled in a similar manner. The pipe was covered with a fabric of sorts – much like the backing of the turf. It was thin, tough, and black, with a very slick, Teflon-like, finish. It was attached to the opposite edge of the turf.

“When the turf gets wound onto the big pipe, it is replaced over the cement by this layer of smooth, tough, fabric.”

It had been Jason's explanation.

“I really don't get it,” he went on. “Why would there be a

secret road running up this valley and why cover it with, like, a fancy tablecloth?"

"Maybe not a road. Maybe a . . ."

Jason continued the thought.

". . . runway for a plane. But we know we didn't hear a plane engine. There is no way we could have missed that."

"We've seen what we came to see out here," Albert said. "Let's move back twenty yards and belly down for a while. We heard those strange sounds at about eleven, right?"

"Right."

"I'm quite sure the first and last sounds – *whishp*, as you quite aptly described it – are most likely the sound of the turf and fabric being drawn across the cement."

"If it's a plane of some kind that is going to land, why go to all this trouble?" Jason asked. "Couldn't a plane land on grass – or the turf in this case?"

"One would think so, but apparently not. Tell me this, why replace even short grass or turf with a slick, Teflon surface?"

"To cut down friction."

"Bingo, Jase. Now we have to figure out why that would be necessary."

"Obvious."

"Oh?"

"The plane doesn't have enough power on takeoff to handle the friction caused by the grass and ground. It can't get up to flight speed. The slick surface must make the difference."

Albert nodded in the darkness and took Jason's idea a huge step further.

"An electric powered plane, maybe. Its maximum power production would most likely be quite low."

"But the drain on batteries would be tremendous. They couldn't power it for long considering the weight that a sufficient number of them would add to the plane."

"Plus," Albert added, "if the plane is to take somebody across the border into Canada it will need to have a powered flight of at least 250 miles from here. Not looking good for an electric plane considering distance, and the weight of the batteries and at least two people – the pilot and the passenger."

“And a package sometimes,” Jason said.

He had a question.

“Couldn’t they land someplace close to here and transfer to another plane?”

“What would be the point of all this, then? A regularly fueled plane would risk being heard as it crossed the border. If it flew high enough *not* to be heard, it would risk being detected by radar. I believe it would have to fly very low and that means very quietly and probably very slowly to maneuver around ground obstacles.”

“That makes sense and of course it pretty well writes off the electric plane theory,” Jason said, “although that coming and going whirring sound – like a ceiling fan – could sure have been a propeller sound minus the racket of an internal combustion engine.”

“So, what you are saying is, what it *has* to be, it *can’t* be.”

“Pretty much. Yes. *That’s* disheartening.”

“If it is a plane of some kind and if it came toward us when we were up on that hill and if it then left moving away from us back south on this runway, our best chance to look it over will be closer to the fireplace hill when it parks. The whirring noise stopped for about ten minutes. If it is a plane it stopped up there, turned around, and probably took on a passenger. The ten-minute window is our best chance to get a look at it. Let’s make our way over there.”

It only took a few minutes. Getting that close revealed several things they had not been able to detect before. The west side of what they thought was a small building was open. Inside was a fuel pump – like at a gas station – with a long hose rolled onto a spindle.

“*That* holds either gas or diesel,” Jason said. “It certainly confuses the issue.”

Albert agreed but kept quiet, cautioning Jason with a finger to his lips.

Cut into the hillside near the block structure was a green door. It was set into a concrete frame and draped in green tone camouflage netting.

“Somebody doesn’t want that door seen,” Jason whispered, softer than before.

Albert motioned Jason to retreat with him back against the

base of the hill some fifty feet east of the door. They sat and waited. Jason had the camera ready and Albert scanned up and down the runway for activity.

Two things began simultaneously. The turf began to roll up making the *whishp* sound exactly the way they had suspected – expected, in fact. Second, the end of the runway near the door lit up – it was a circular area about two meters in diameter. It sent forth no beam but merely illuminated the area with a soft glow.

“I imagine there is one similar to it at the far end of the runway, Albert said. “Together they act as the visual markers necessary for the pilot to set down and then taxi to a stop.”

The *whishp* ceased as the pipe stopped turning. Joining Albert, Jason put his binoculars to his eyes and they both scanned the horizon, which was at that point back-lighted over the far hill by just the barest hint of moonlight.

“There!” Jason said. “See it?”

“I do. Listen. The faint propeller noise like before.”

It was a larger plane than Albert had expected – perhaps twenty-five feet long. It was a bi-plane of sorts with flimsy double wings that swayed slightly as the plane set down and moved the final two hundred feet in their direction. Other than the faint whir of the single prop – at least eight feet long over all – it made absolutely no noise. Albert noted that the prop moved at nearly the expected speed. It was a mystery to him.

The plane, painted in matte black, slowed and turned so it was headed back the way it had come. The prop stopped. The door opened just behind the cockpit and a man jumped to the ground.

“The pilot?” Jason said some question in his tone.

Again, Albert chose not to respond out loud. The man carried a ten-foot ladder to the rear of the plane and unrolled the gas hose. He climbed the ladder with the hose and began filling an interior tank. As that process began, Albert thought out loud – and immediately wished he had kept his thoughts to himself.

“I sure wish we could get a look inside,” he whispered.

With that Jason stood and, bent low, ran to the plane. He pulled himself up in through the open door. Five minutes later the pilot removed the nozzle, recapped the opening, and backed down the ladder. He re-rolled the hose and repositioned the ladder to give

access to the plane's open door. Albert's heart all but stopped.

The pilot then approached the heavy, green, metal, doorway and reached out appearing to push a button – a signal bell, perhaps. Jason's face appeared in the plane's door opening. He looked to find the pilot facing away toward the door in the hill. He swung himself to the ground. At the moment, the door in the hillside opened, Jason collapsed on the ground beside Albert. It wasn't the time for Albert to express his extreme displeasure so he said nothing, just drew the boy close thankful that he was safe.

With the opening of the door in the hill, a man appeared.

“The first Russian,” Jason whispered.

He closed the door behind him and the pilot helped him up the ladder. The pilot then removed it to its spot behind the block structure. He pulled himself into the plane and closed the door. The propeller began to turn very slowly at first and then faster and faster until it reached full speed – not at all like the immediate power thrust provided by an internal combustion engine.

As the plane began to roll down the runway, a small beacon of light began blinking near the top of the far hill – a signal, no doubt, that allowed the pilot to gauge proper take off distance. As silently as it had approached, it rose into the night sky, banked right, and soon faded into the blackness. The turf was re-rolled and the lights went off.

They made their way directly to the fence and then followed it south to locate their point of entry.

Jason managed to contain his news until they were back on the sidewalk headed home.

“You will never in a billion eons guess what I found inside that plane – I got pictures.”

“Do you want me to guess or shall I just listen?”

“Just listen. Four seats: pilot, one to his right, and two behind. The whole floor area was like a wide, shallow, metal fuel tank, flat on top like it made the floor inside. I figured to find a gazillion batteries but I didn't. What I did find was a small, thick walled room or compartment at the rear, which contained a sizeable truck engine and a huge generator or alternator – I don't know how to tell them apart. That compartment was soundproofed on all six sides and vented through a muffler out the top. I got some great pictures. The plane has a silent electric powered propeller that is

actually powered by a diesel engine by way of a generator. Can you believe that?”

Albert smiled down at the lad.

“You had that all figured out, didn’t you?”

“We couldn’t know for sure without eyeballing it.”

Jason looked up into Albert’s face.

“You have every right to be angry with me for doing what I did, Grampa. It was irresponsible and could have got us both into serious trouble and I wish I could say that given similar circumstances I will promise never to do it again but we both know I would and so given all that I’m as sorry as it will allow.”

“If I were given to meting out punishment I suppose I could merely force you to diagram that last sentence. You have said all there is to say. If I had a further comment it would be to reiterate that you really do need to find some way to rein in your runaway, impetuous, inquisitiveness in the face of possible mortal danger – but then you seem to know that.”

Again, Jason smiled up at his Grampa.

“I’ll diagram mine if you’ll diagram yours.”

They broke into quiet laughter.

“Did you notice the tires on the plane?” Albert asked.

“No. What about them?”

“Slick. No tread. More friction control.”

The conversation was interrupted.

“I think we are being followed,” Albert said as they approached the front of their store. “Let’s keep it cool and go inside. We won’t turn on the light but will watch and see if we can determine who it is.”

They followed that plan. It was Mike, whistling up a storm, apparently on his way home from somewhere – Jason hoped from a date. He lived in a room over the clothing store four buildings on up the street. They were relieved and went upstairs. Jason spoke.

“If the Russian took a package with him it had to be small enough to fit in his pocket. No briefcase or box and certainly no person. Best of all, I guess, *no me!*”

The pictures were excellent. The turf, the gear boxes, the cement showing through the open seams, the fuel tank, the door into Fireplace Hill, the circle of light in the runway, the plane, and the

interior of the plane. There was even one of ‘Grampa’ bending over – definitely not his best angle! Jason thought he should post it on the refrigerator.

“Do we print them or just stash the cards?” Jason asked.

“Let’s not print them. All we know is *how* something is being accomplished. We really don’t know the *what* or *why* of it, you understand. That remains strictly a product of our fantasies.”

“In the wall-safe, then?”

“No. Let’s go for somewhere less obvious. But where?”

He looked around. Jason had the first suggestion.

“How about inside the Dulcimer Freddie loaned me. I’ll transfer all the pictures onto one card. With my small hands, I can easily tape it to the inside of the top so it won’t be seen from the opening. Why we being so secretive? You suspect something you haven’t told me?”

“Your plan sounds fine. Let’s be sure any files are erased from the computer. An old mystery writer tends to see the possibility of conspiracies everywhere. I guess this is more just to fulfill my post-middle age fantasies than anything serious. Who knows, it may pop up in a book someday.”

The answer didn’t satisfy Jason but he didn’t let on or pursue it. Ten minutes later he handed the doctored instrument to Albert who looked it over and gave his approval.

Jason took it back to his room performing a quick mental inventory: Double locked door in a fortress-like wall, hidden computer card, deleted files, a black-garbed, nocturnal sortie into the night, Albert alert to and concerned about possibly being followed. Upon reflection, it began to look pretty serious to the boy. What *hadn’t* he been told?

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CHAPTER NINE:

The Plan

During the next several weeks they settled into their new life in their new town. They became more or less comfortable with their new identities – certainly adept at spitting out aspects of their stories whenever called for. Albert began learning about the store and how it worked and started spending a number of hours down there every day. He found both Kate and Kyle compatible and enjoyable to work with.

Kate and Mike, the new handyman, had dinner (supper) together on several occasions. He was younger by ten years but that didn't seem to be a consideration for either of them. It meant that Mike found reasons to spend time at or near the bookstore. Albert suggested they keep a supply of his business cards on the counter for folks to pick up. Kate said she had suggested that but he said they were expensive and didn't want tourists taking them as souvenirs. Earlier, Jason had noticed and commented on the expense to which he'd gone for a handyman service – raised printing and an inset gold crest.

Jason's social life blossomed. He added a few hours of work a week so he would have sufficient funds to spend time at the soda shop and elsewhere. There was no special girl. "Why settle on one when a dozen like to hang around with me." He began playing tennis regularly and immediately achieved recognition for his considerable skill. He had friends up to the apartment within the framework of a schedule he and Grampa worked out so Albert could

maintain blocks of uninterrupted time to write. That he was a writer remained a family secret.

The adventure in the valley and all that it had disclosed was never far from the front of their minds but the investigation had more or less come to a standstill. Jason's web research turned up several related items. Miguel was single, 33, and a US citizen born in south Texas. His last name – oddly perhaps – was Carter and he had moved into the area fifteen months earlier. He had made several trips to Brownsville Texas, which, incidentally, was the home city of Dr. Heinrich Gustoff, the owner of the Wax Museum. There was a once a week commuter flight out of County Airport. Albert had made some contacts there on the pretense of perhaps taking instruction to renew his license. Maude, the do everything office girl at the airport became immediately interested in him and willingly spoke about anything to keep him engaged in conversation. She was a nice person and only a few years younger than Albert. He liked her – well, not liked her liked her in the jargon of Jason's pre-teen friends but he left that possibility open. It was through her he discovered the Miguel-Brownsville-commuter plane connection.

Even more interesting was the fact that Dr Gustoff made regular visits to Punkin Hollar. He would fly in late one afternoon piloting his own plane, stay the next day and leave early the following morning. Always the same pattern although not on consistent dates or days from month to month.

Miguel had no means of support so far as they could determine. He lived alone at Harper Crossing, a five house, six dog, unincorporated, settlement ten miles south east of the Hollar – local speak for Punkin Hollar. He drove a nice car but nothing special. He was seen in town almost every day. Jason had determined that he always visited the Museum.

“So, let's put together what suspicious facts we know about the goings on at and around the Wax Museum,” Albert said as they finished the dishes one evening.”

They took seats across from each other at the kitchen table. Jason manned the yellow pad ready to make the list.

“Miguel is a key player,” Jason began.

“Right,” Albert said, “and Miguel and Dr Gustoff most likely have some association considering Miguel's trips to Brownsville and his connection, however nebulous at this point, with the Wax

Museum.”

“Gustoff has some reason to come every month,” Jason said. “I suppose that could just be business stuff about the Museum, since he owns it. Payroll and like that.”

“He’s a surgeon, right?” Albert asked.

“Yes, he has the letters ASPS after his name as well MD.”

“What does that indicate?”

“Not sure. Let me crank up the laptop.”

Jason returned with the computer and soon had the answer.

“American Society of Plastic Surgeons. Maybe that’s his interest in the Wax Museum. Maybe he’s an artist at heart and he does the sculpture for the faces for the new exhibits. It would fit with his medical skills, I’d think.”

“Get it on the list. It will take further thought. What else?”

“Miguel associates with foreigners – mostly Russians but I saw him with an Iraqi or Iranian looking man this morning – I guess that would be Arab. One other time as well – the morning after we discovered about the plane and landing strip.”

“And, you reported that you saw him taking pictures of at least one of the men in the café that time.”

“Right. A close-up of his face.”

“Interesting. Very, very, interesting.”

“What?” Jason asked.

“What comes to mind when we toss these things into the mix? Plastic surgeon, pictures of their faces, foreigners being transported out of the country in secret, the men in question having to remain here a month in a ‘holding area’ where they are fed and entertained, clandestine flights of a silent plane.”

“And, the surgeon comes about once a month,” Jason added. “So, you’re thinking the foreigner who needs to get of the country arrives here, Miguel takes his picture and emails it to the doctor who plans the surgery ahead of time, then flies up here, does the surgery to change his appearance, the patient spends three or so weeks healing and is then transported across the border to Canada.”

“Well, I’m thinking it, *now*. Very good junior secret agent.”

“Just call me *Single O7*”

“Very good. One O for junior.”

“I bet they make a bundle doing this,” Jason said, having no real facts to go on.

“I’m sure your right. A plastic surgeon makes a minimum of, say, \$2,000 an hour. If he leaves his practice for two days, that’s probably about 12 hours of surgery or \$24,000 worth of his time. This has to be a significantly better moneymaker than that. Probably fifty or a hundred thousand a pop – maybe more with the surgery.”

“Or,” Jason said, “It could just be a business trip about the museum like I said.”

“Party pooper? *Now*, the boy becomes the voice of reason! How can I get a new novel out of a plastic surgeon who is in reality a frustrated sculptor slash bookkeeper?”

“I have a feeling you could do it.”

Jason grinned.

“You really think we have it right, Grampa?”

“I’d bet on it. But how do we get proof?”

“I have an idea. Let me get the camera card.”

Jason was immediately back at the table, with the card inserted into the laptop. He scrolled through the pictures.

“Here’s the picture of the big Russian man about to get on the plane that night. His face is plainly visible. If we only had a before picture, like the ones Miguel takes at that first meeting, then we could compare looks.”

“It is a general plan, for sure. But, we would need some way to confirm the two are actually the same person and not, in fact, just two different men who would naturally look different.”

“Fingerprints! We get fingerprints of the guy at the first meeting and then fingerprints of the guy that gets on the plane a month later.”

“That would work but how to get the prints?”

Jason scrolled back through the photos.

“We just have to get the fingerprints off his water glass from that first meeting in the cafe,” Jason said. “Prints to confirm identity and picture to confirm the pre-surgery look. Then, we take prints off the handle of the green door after he closes it on his way to the plane.”

“I do believe you have just earned your second ‘0’, agent. I’m not sure how we go about that.”

“Miguel usually gets to the cafe real early like we do. So, we stake out the place, and on the mornings he arrives, we go to breakfast. Using some well-practiced sleight of hand from my days as a magician – ages eight thorough ten – I trade glasses and bring the foreigner’s back here to be dusted for prints. We may need to send away for a dusting kit.”

“I follow you so far. Now, once more, how do we get the man’s prints as he is getting on the plane?”

“The time we saw it, it was the passenger who opened the hillside door from inside, exited, and then made sure it shut behind him. His prints will be on the outside door handle.”

“Along with dozens of others.”

“Not if I go in ahead of time and wipe the handle clean. I could even add a thin coat of oil or wax to make sure we get really good prints.”

“Is there such an agent as 0-0-0-7?”

Jason grinned. He still wasn’t used to receiving credit and praise for things he did well. Such things hadn’t often been present in his original home. Albert spoke:

“We need to be able to predict the exact dates of the flights. And, I have an idea – two in fact. Those flights apparently need two things – silence and . . .”

“. . . and darkness – pitch darkness. I see. It was no coincidence that they were made during the dark of the moon. The lunar cycle is 29.5 days so about every second month the dark days or the new moon days creep forward by about one day like the 30th then two months later the 29th, then the 28th, and so on. I can get a lunar chart that will tell us exactly. Let’s see, we witnessed the sounds of a flight – the first one we didn’t know was a flight – on June tenth. Then it rained on the eleventh and we were over there snooping and saw the plane and all on the twelfth. When we went back to the hill on the thirteenth and fourteenth nothing happened. It appears they just use those three nights a month when the sky is the darkest. And, they call it off during bad weather – the relatively flimsy and low power plane I imagine.”

“So, the good doctor will most likely come on or about the new moon to give his patients the maximum amount of healing time before that next flight,” Albert added. “And since it is a super-secret program, I sincerely doubt if he would allow any two of his clients to

be here at the same time unless they were a team, perhaps. Each one gets in and out in 29.5 days.”

“It sure all fits,” Jason said. “Now, we need another list – one outlining our exact procedure – with data, supplies, movements and things like that.”

“When’s the next dark moon?” Albert asked.

“On the ninth. Looks like another three-night window or, better said, I suppose, window *shade* since they will all be dark. Sometimes I think I’m beginning to think like you, Grampa.”

“And just how terrifying is that for you?”

They smiled and held a glance for a long moment. It was a very good thing they were getting going between them.

“That’s next Saturday, Sunday, and Monday,” Jason said having turned to look at the calendar on the refrigerator.

“So Doc should arrive sometime between Friday and Monday. If the current client flies out on Saturday night, the new one can be moved into the holding area on Sunday. If our scenario is correct, Miguel will meet the new person at breakfast on Sunday. We will need to be there.”

“Conditions are great,” Jason said. “We are in a period of very low humidity. The condensation on the outside of the glasses at the café will be nearly nonexistent making it easier to remove the fingerprints.”

“How do you know all these things?”

“Those late night black and white mystery movies, mostly, I suppose. Remember Sam Spade and Charlie Chan?”

“I do and I suppose I can see the connection. Before DNA testing the sleuths had to depend on their wits and very practical procedures. So, on to that new list.”

Breakfast at Abby’s on Sunday the tenth.

Switch glasses on Sunday the tenth

Get a full-face photo on Sunday the tenth

Preserve the fingerprints on Sunday the tenth

Find out about Doc’s arrival at the airport over that weekend.

Find out about Doc’s subsequent departure from the airport.

Wait until . . . when is the next dark of the moon?”

“The ninth of next month – again, three nights in a row.”

“We will need to be inside that fence close to the hillside door on the night of the ninth, then, in case the client leaves on the first possible night. If not, then we return nightly until he leaves.”

“And I get the night vision photo when he comes through the door and once they’re gone I’ll capture the prints from the door handle.”

“Then, assuming we have not yet been caught, and drawn and quartered, we come back here and analyze our data.”

“Drawn and quartered?” I’m not familiar with the term.”

“Enough said just to know it was an absolutely torturous way of being put to death back in the Middle Ages.”

“Ouch!”

“That was the general idea.”

Albert had another question:

“Do you know who runs the Museum? Surely there is some local person who manages the day to day operation.”

“Freddie will know. I can call him. Will that be too obvious?”

“Hmm. Good thinking. How about saying as a new store owner here in town your Grampa wants to begin meeting the other business people. Maybe ask about three or four places so it won’t seem so obvious.”

“You are certifiably sneaky, Grampa. Of course, we could just ask Kate.”

“I’d rather leave her out of this. No need to involve innocents in our fantasy or give her any reason to begin suspecting something about us.”

“It sure doesn’t seem like a fantasy anymore.”

“No. I agree.”

“What will be our next move if we prove what we are pretty sure we are going to prove?”

“I suppose we should contact the Agency and provide our evidence.”

“That seems right. Let me make the call to Freddie.”

A few minutes later he had the information.

“William Baxter. He supervised the renovation and then came in to be the manager for Gustoff. He changed all the personnel.

It had been a really small business before – only covered half the first floor, I’m told. He set up all the new exhibits. No real locals work there. He lives somewhere in the warehouse building and isn’t often seen around town. Not the social type, I guess.”

“You had mentioned earlier we would need to get a fingerprinting kit.”

“Got that covered. Went to a website and learned how to do it with household items. All I’ll need are powdered sugar, Scotch tape, and a few 3 X 5 index cards. A really soft, fine bristled, paint brush would help. That’ll do it.”

“I get the idea. I believe Jordan used something like that in a pinch once – baking powder I believe it was.”

“You speak about him like he’s real.”

“A writer’s characters become their best friend’s while they are working on a book. After two dozen outings with Jordan, I suppose he does seem real to me.”

Jason nodded.

“So, we have a couple of days to wait for our next step. You ever going to ask Maude out on a date? Everybody in town thinks you should.”

“My romantic life is now everybody’s business?”

“It’s a small town, Grampa. They don’t have a lot of excitement. You and I are the most interesting things to happen around here in months – maybe years.”

“Well, then they should be pleased. Maude and I are going to the square dance together on Friday night.”

“Really? That’s so great? We’ll be there, too – my friends and I. I’m surprised everybody doesn’t already know. Maude isn’t what you’d call closed mouthed. Are you sure you’ve you told her yet?”

“Yes. I think she is reserving the news for our grand entry together. Maude has a flair for the dramatic – over dramatic I suppose. It’s part of her charm.”

“You going to kiss her?”

“You going to learn to stay out of my private business?”

Jason grinned having expected some such response. He was a lad who pushed the limits – the nothing ventured nothing gained strategy. Albert was beginning to understand how the lad had so

often got into hot water – or acquired a *hot* bottom – in his former home.

“I still haven’t really kissed a girl, in case you’ve been wondering.”

Albert took note but decided not pursue into the difference between kissing and *really* kissing that had just been implied. The boy seemed to be handling that part of his life quite well.

“My real birthday is the 27 of next month,” he said. “I know we are only celebrating my new October birthday but it’ll be hard not thinking about it and knowing I’ll really be thirteen. I hope it isn’t sad. I’m afraid it’s going to bring back memories and stuff.”

“My fully unsolicited advice is to let happen what happens. Working oneself up into a tizzy about mere possibilities has never helped in the whole history of the human species. Tell you what, on each of our real birthdays we will plan something very special just between the two of us. Maybe a little trip somewhere? I don’t even know what it might be. You be thinking about it. Sky’s the limit so long as it doesn’t cost more than a buck forty-nine.”

“A joke, right?”

“A joke, yes.”

“That’s really a good idea. Thanks. Private celebrations. That somehow suddenly seems very special. Just the two of us sharing a wonder-filled secret. When is yours?”

“December seventh.”

“That’s Pearl Harbor day. I can remember it that way. Okay! This is great!”

It had obviously been a concern gnawing at Jason for some time. The problem had not occurred to Albert and he kicked himself over it. He should have been on top of such a thing. In line with the spilled milk principle, he tried to put it out of his mind. He had his own concern.

A *date* after nearly a year without the company of a woman. He felt no guilt over it. He wasn’t trying to replace his wife. It was more the jitters. A new turn in the relationship. He felt like an awkward, inexperienced, young man again. There was the not knowing what to expect. All the hopes about what *wouldn’t* happen: sweaty palms or armpits, fly away hair, bad breath, stepping on her feet, where not to place his hands, awkward periods of silence,

forgetting to clean his fingernails, uncertainty about how to go about leaving her at her doorstep. It was the same list young men had fretted over generation after generation. He had just not expected to have to go through it all twice in one lifetime. On the other hand to get a chance to relive a few moments of his youth should have its positive side.

“By the way, Grampa, what is *square dancing* and do you know how it’s done?”

“I do know how it’s done. It is an energetic romp around a dance floor all according to the instructions of the caller.”

“Can you teach me?”

“I can show you the basics. It might be best to admit to one of your female friends that square dancing was not something young people did back where you grew up so you don’t know how. Ask her if she’ll give you some pointers. Private lessons with a young lady where holding each other close is occasionally required certainly couldn’t be all bad.”

“You’re like an old man edition of Dear Abby. Thanks. I’ll do that. Never mind that, ‘will you teach me’, thing. I can see the advantages of extrapolating this procedure into other areas. Claim ignorance of other things and ask for lots of close order, individual, instruction. You are a genius, Grampa. It really helps to know somebody who’s been through all this teenager stuff before – even if it was eons ago. I can adapt into the present.”

And adapt he did. By Friday night he was do-se-doing with the best of them.

Albert and Maude were taking a break – punch and folding chairs there in the big VFW hall where most major, local, social events were held.

“He is a handsome lad, if I say so myself,” Albert said watching the youngsters expend energy as if it were an inexhaustible commodity.

“He is,” Maude replied. “He must favor the other side of the family.”

It made for a prolonged, forehead meeting, chuckle between them. She had a grand sense of humor and, a generally gentle manner.

“I hear that even better than handsome, Jason is a very nice

person,” Maude went on. “Everybody loves him – girls, boys, grownups. It speaks well for the people who raised him.”

“His parents seemed to manage that very well. I just came along and now reap all the rewards of their hard work. He is a delight, I’ll tell you that.”

“He speaks highly of you.”

“How nice, but doesn’t that mean I’m doing something wrong in this parenting role – if the almost teenager *likes* me?”

Smiles. She patted his arm. He felt a warmth he hadn’t felt for some time. They danced another set, but mostly Maude made the rounds with Albert in tow, making introductions and flaunting her catch. It wasn’t that she was haughty, she was just enjoying her moment in the sun *or* under the ancient recessed, often quivering, fluorescent lighting as was the case there in the old building.

The morning for which they had been waiting arrived. Jason’s vigil began at five a.m. He had been sitting cross-legged on the floor at one of the living room windows peering down onto the street, watching for Miguel. He wasn’t to be disappointed. At five forty-five the man appeared and entered the café.

“Pigeon is in the coop, Grampa.”

“What? Pigeon?”

“07 talk for Miguel’s arrived. Time to get over there, Grampa.”

They expended one minute exiting the apartment and descending to the first floor. One additional minute to cross from the back to the front of the bookstore and exit through front door. A final minute to cross the street, enter the café, and select a table appropriately located for ease of picture taking and such. Miguel ordered coffee. Jason and Albert ordered breakfast. A stranger entered and looked around. Miguel stood and offered his hand to the man. They shook and took seats. Abby approached them and took their orders.

Jason was able to snap several face-on pictures while ostensibly talking on his phone. As if on cue, the man had paused at the door to look around. There were photos from several angles. The boy’s heart raced and his ankle-locked legs swung beneath the table. It was clearly a bigger deal than he had anticipated it would be. The initial greeting had been loud enough to disclose another Russian accent. The men drank from their glasses. Good fortune

continued; the two men stood and walked to the rear to use the restroom. Jason, with far more nonchalance than any twelve-year-old Albert had ever encountered, managed the switch, emptied the glass, and stashed it in a small brown bag which he had selected for its stiff sides – “More stable so less likely to smudge the prints than a plastic sack,” he said.

They finished breakfast and chatted a bit with Abby before leaving. Jason made a mental note to return the glass another day. Albert had a third cup of coffee and Jason a second hot chocolate – he needed something to wash down the rhubarb pie Abby had managed to slip onto the table.

“Chocolate and rhubarb, and at six a.m.?” Albert said his tone and expression both questioning the combination.

“Think of it as a half cup of sugar and chocolate. Abby makes the sweetest pies on the face of the earth – at least those parts I have explored.”

Once outside they walked the street waiting for the men to leave the café. It was only a matter of several minutes. Like before, Miguel walked south toward the Museum and the Russian North as if window shopping. Eventually he turned east on a side street and entered a RV which sat toward the rear of a parking lot.

“I imagine he’s there until time to head for the Museum,” Albert said. “I see no reason to maintain a stake out.”

They made their way back toward the apartment.

“It is a new piece of the puzzle, though – the RV,” Jason said. “I wonder if it is a permanent fixture there. I’ve never seen it before actually so it may be more like the clients’ transportation into town – pretending to be real tourists.”

“Could be. I doubt in a set up as sophisticated as this that they would use the same means of transport every time. Clearly the clients need to maintain a low, non-suspicious, profile.”

“What better place to do that than out here in the middle of nowhere in a town perpetually filled with tourists,” Jason added.

It had been an astute observation. Isolated, naturally populated by people from all across the country, close to the Canadian border but not too close. It had been well chosen for the purpose.

Jason dusted the glass, found a full set of left hand

fingerprints, and transferred them to the cellophane tape. That, he affixed to an index card.

“Beautiful and I must say expertly done, son. I am continually amazed at all the things you have learned to do.”

“It’s that *‘lots of interests but no in-depth knowledge thing’* we talked about earlier.

“Except, you actually seem to have acquired significant skills along the way.”

“The school psychologist told my parents I was a one-shot learner. It has something to do with my high intelligence and super-efficient storage system somewhere in this gray matter inside my skull. I can take no credit for it so I probably don’t prize it as much as I should. Now, being a good tennis player – that reflects lots of practice. That’s more like it’s really my doing. Do you understand?”

“Completely – well, as completely as I understand any-thing about you. My fantasy, you should know, is that you are really a forty-five-year-old highly trained, government agent whose hormones are being controlled to maintain your youthful appearance.”

“Hey, there’s bound to be a story in that, Grandpa. Can I take a stab at writing it?”

“It’s all yours. Go for it.”

“The love interest part of such a story could get complicated,” Jason said thoughtfully. “Should he be interested in slightly worn, middle aged, women or sweet, young, teenagers? It presents an interesting conflict for the story to resolve.”

This boy was definitely a teenager.

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CHAPTER TEN: The Evidence

Although the next three weeks were actually very busy, in that one respect they seemed to just creep by.

Albert saw Maude more frequently. Jason's young heart had been won by Tabatha – Tabby as he called her. Albert began enjoying the dulcimer orchestra. Jason continued to astound the locals with his backhand and power serve. They each found their niche at the store and felt both comfortable and valuable there. Jason began doing more and more direct work with the customers and Albert began taking a more active role in deciding which titles and authors the store should carry. They both enjoyed chatting with the tourists.

“It could be a really, really, awkward evening,” Jason offered as his initial reaction to Albert's suggestion that the two of them fix supper for the ladies in their lives.

“I was thinking we could serve that fabulous stroganoff I hear you make and I would contribute my superior Grampa Albert's Italian Salad.”

“What's in a salad? Three kinds of lettuce and dressing out

of a bottle. I think I'm the one with the real responsibility, here."

"And, let's see, now. That being true, which of us will be seen in the more impressive light?"

"Ah! Oh! I see. You sneaky dog. Well, I guess it will be a win/win situation. I impress both ladies and get to walk the younger one home afterwards. Oh! I guess that's just win/win for me, isn't it?"

"Perhaps not. Once we mature folks get you two youngsters out of the place . . ."

"You really are a sneaky dog. I ply her with wonderful cuisine and you get to smooch her up after I leave."

"Where in the world did you get that word – smooch? It's right out of the thirties."

"One more highlight, I guess, from my late-night TV education. You're welcome by the way – the romantic mood setting thing. We will need to make a run to the grocery."

"I suppose we need to offer some invitations first and settle on an evening," Albert suggested.

"Oh. Yeah. Let's look at the calendar."

The arrangements were made. The bachelor bachelor pad was cleaned. The cooking turned out to be great fun. Chef Jase allowed Albert to assist him. The food was a smashing success. The conversation sailed along more smoothly than any of the four would have predicted. Although Albert was closed mouth – so to speak – about his evening with Maude after the young people left, Jason had things to share.

They finished the dishes and had just taken their usual late evening places in the living room – Albert in his recliner and Jason reclined on the couch.

"We kissed tonight, Grampa."

It was a subdued, serious, delivery about a clearly important moment in the young man's life.

"She directed us home through the alley behind her house and we stopped behind their garage. I knew what she was up to. I thought my heart was going to burst right through my chest. I hope she didn't notice. It, well *they*, actually, were wonderful – make that wonder-filled. They weren't anything R-rated. Just gentle, lingering, lip to lip kisses. I believe I am now ready for a steady diet

of kissing.”

“I am happy for you. Am I to assume the young people here don’t kiss out in the open like they do most everywhere else?”

“They do but like Tabby told me, she wanted our first kiss to be a private thing between us. It is how it should have been, I think. I’m glad we waited for a time like that. I doubt if I’ll be able to sleep. Want to play a game of chess?”

The reality was, that night, he couldn’t play chess either. Albert had checkmate after fewer than a dozen moves. The all-encompassing wonders of a first love! What else is there to say?

At Tabby’s suggestion, Jason put some effort into the dulcimer and, to his surprise and pleasure, quickly became quite good. He and Albert put together some humorous musical routines, which they were happy to perform at the mere drop of a, “won’t you please . . .”

Despite Jason’s impatience about it from time to time, the three weeks eventually passed. It came to be the first of the three dark moon nights. Decked out in their black gear and armed with a new low light camera, they made their way to the previous spot some yards away from the door into the hill. Jason had wiped the knob clean and applied a thin coat of spray wax. They lay back against the hill, fully invisible there in the darkness even from each other.

The anticipated noise began from the turf rolling, signaling the adventure was to transpire on that first night. The position lights lit. The hushed sound of the plane became louder and louder but, again, never much above a whisper. It landed, taxied, made its 180 degree turn and stopped. The pilot followed his previous routine to the letter. The large, illuminated, circular, position light cast the area in a soft glow. Eventually, with the ladder in place beside the plane’s open door, the pilot approached the door in the hill and reached out to ring the bell. The door opened. A man appeared. Jason clicked away, his new camera set on the lowest illumination setting. They would have sworn it could not be the man they had seen with Miguel. Jason’s heart sank but he played things out according to their plan. The man turned and closed the door using the knob. He was left-handed!

With the passenger inside the plane, the ladder stowed, and the pilot onboard, the propeller began to turn. The plane moved

down the runway and disappeared into the darkness. Had it not been for the continued, low, whirring, even the two of them would have sworn it had evaporated into the night.

They waited for the turf to roll back into place and the lights to go off. Then they approached the door and with Albert holding a penlight in close, Jason quickly obtained the prints. They were soon back under the fence and headed toward the street.

Back in the apartment Jason shed the hoodie along with his shoes and socks. Albert retrieved the first set of prints he had placed in the safe for . . . well, for *safe* keeping. They placed the two print cards side by side. Jason looked first, using the large magnifying glass that Albert sometimes used when working the smaller variety of crossword puzzles from the paper.

Jason began nodding his head and handed over the glass.

“Bingo, I’d say,” Albert said after just a moment. “No real margin for error. They are identical. Good work, son. Let’s compare the pictures.”

Jason retrieved the card and brought them up on the monitor.

“Sure wouldn’t know it was the same guy. Look, Doc even softened the cheek bones and added to the chin so it became square rather than curved. He’s good, I’ll say that.”

“So, we have our evidence,” Albert said. “For some reason, I feel a sense of letdown. How about you?”

“Yeah. Strange. I’d think we’d be sky high.”

“I guess the adventure and excitement is over. Now we just pass it on to the big boys at the agency and let them handle it.”

Jason sighed and looked into Albert’s face.

“I guess. I hope this doesn’t change our relationship.”

“With the Agency?”

“No, between us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, ever since that first late night we met in the car our thing has largely been about danger – keeping from being captured or killed, even. Not always out in the open but always there, you know. We’ve taken it all on together. Then this Museum thing with Miguel. More danger and intrigue and ways to keep our minds on the same, danger-based, wave length. I’m just hoping what we have is bigger than all that I guess.”

“I for one am not concerned about that. It seems to me that almost the opposite has occurred here. I think we have managed to slip the danger thing in between all the good stuff that has been growing between us. Despite the horrible reality that we may be the targets of some evil regime, we’ve been able to grow a family relationship, a friendship that seems pretty solid to me, and a killer nightclub act in case all else fails.”

That put a smile on Jason’s face.

“I know you’re right. I’m still referencing a life that turned out not to be anything that I thought it was. I’m having a hard time trusting what seems to be here. I guess I’m letting that old stuff get in the way.”

He paused and looked across the table, again directly into Albert’s face.

“I do love you, you know, Grampa.”

“I do know that, Grandson.”

“Well, okay then. It seems we’re good. Something better than good, even. Now what’s our next move?”

“How about getting a good night’s sleep? We can consider our next move in the morning.”

“That’s probably a good idea. I am tired.”

Things were put away and each moved into his own room. Both doors were left open as if they really didn’t want to be separated. For all the excitement, they slept surprisingly well.

* * *

“I feel like celebrating,” Albert said as Jason wandered into the kitchen at the smell of brewing coffee.

“This thing about me waking up at the crack of dawn is your fault, you know. I used to be a typical twelve-year-old. I would sleep ‘til noon if not poked, prodded, and occasionally dumped out onto the floor. Well, unless I had important things in the air, which I guess, I did more often than not. I’m just saying don’t expect me to keep this early morning routine up once I’m officially a teenager.”

“Points well-made and I will stash them for future reference.”

“Sure wish coffee tasted as good as it smells.”

“I think you’re smart to not get hooked.”

“How can you get hooked on decaf?”

“Psychological addiction, perhaps, or conditioning left over

from my well caffeinated earlier days. Part of my mind still thinks it needs its fix of the ugly, murky, liquid in order to get off to a good start each morning.”

“I guess I’ll just continue to enjoy the smell. Mom and dad weren’t coffee drinkers so such a steady diet of the aroma is something new for me. Here’s a humorous story line. Although I don’t drink it I get hooked on the aroma so by the time I’m your age I have to brew up batch every morning just for the jump start that ‘bouquet’ has come to provide me.”

“You do think like a writer.”

“Should I take offense at that?”

They exchanged smiles.

“Cereal or Abby’s this morning,” Albert asked.

“I sure have a hankerin’ fer a platter a Abby Mae’s flapjacks, Slim.”

“Where did that come from? – a good cowboy accent by the way.”

“I woke up from a dream about a campfire, and coffee brewing in a big tin coffee pot. There was other stuff but *she’s* none of your business.”

The lad laughed himself into bent over hysterics. Albert couldn’t help but laugh along. They were soon both wiping tears from their cheeks.

“Who hits the shower first?” Albert asked.

“I will while you finish your coffee. I’ll be in and out in a jiffy.”

By five thirty they were seated in the café and Abby had pretty well guessed their orders. Jason substituted milk for his usual hot chocolate and Albert hot chocolate for coffee. Otherwise it was same old, same old: flapjacks, scrambled eggs, bacon fried stand-on-its-end crisp, and hash browns. It had few redeeming characteristics but Albert had long ago learned to live with that. He could have felt guilty about training the boy in his own unhealthful footsteps, but . . . actually, he could think of no acceptable *but*.

Back in the apartment they gathered the evidence together and made copies of everything, scanning the prints and photos into the computer. Jason devised a way to hide them as an obscure file in a folder with what he was quite sure had no meaningfully, revealing,

tags.

“I suppose we are ready to contact the agency,” Albert said.

“I guess so. Seems so final. They’ll send somebody for the evidence and probably interview us don’t you think?”

“That’s how I imagine it will be done.”

“I’d feel better working through Agent Baxter,” Jason said. “He was with me right from the beginning and I mean the beginning. The car blew up at nine-thirty-two and he was at my house by nine-thirty-three. He must have been right on their tail. I guess that kind of efficiency impressed me.”

“I will request in the call that we need to speak with him. He did say we could contact him any time about anything.”

Albert placed the call and made arrangements to have Baxter contact them. They waited. Albert tried to write but he couldn’t keep his mind on topic. Jason picked up a book but was met with the same problem.

“Maybe we need to just get out of here,” Albert suggested. “Our phones know how to ring no matter where we are.”

“We can go out to the lake. There are hiking trails and Freddie showed me some the tourists don’t have access to. One is the local lover’s lane I guess you could call it. We can avoid that one in case . . . well, you understand about that as well as I do.”

“As well?”

“Okay. Probably better.”

He grinned at Albert.

“Maybe you and Maude have already tried it out.”

He broke into laughter at the thought. Albert gave him no satisfaction although he did repeatedly raise his eyebrows leaving the accurate response in doubt.

It was a little over a mile to the lake. They walked and took their time. As had come to be typical, Jason kept up a steady commentary, describing all the things he had learned about the community. They passed lots of tourists and also several locals who stopped to pass the time of day. It was a friendly, close knit, little town and the people had gone out of their way to welcome the two Thompsons.

“I didn’t know a town could feel like this,” Jason said and then went on to explain. “Everybody speaks to each other and here,

when people ask how you are, you know they really mean that they want to know. I've never experienced that before. I am trying to be like that. If I really *don't* care I don't ask, but I find I usually *do* care so I end up asking. Am I babbling?"

"Does it matter?"

He grinned because he understood that it didn't. They were together and that was all that mattered.

"You know, I have the best of all worlds here in Punkin Hollar."

"How's that, son?"

"I have lots of friends, several of them really close and nobody as an enemy. And I have this phenomenal family thing with you. I get along with everybody. I get looked up to for my tennis playing and there is no pressure to be great in everything – to be the best at whatever I try. I always felt that from dad. Mostly the kids just do things for the heck of it – for the enjoyment. I have a special girl and two great models in you and Maude as to how I should go about being a good boyfriend. Tabby and I know we won't be together forever, and that's okay – there is no pressure about it. We talked and in some ways, it is like we are practicing with each other for something even more wonderful to come later on – not that we aren't enjoying what we have. We're both becoming pretty good kissers, I think."

"You are wise beyond your years, Jason. Heck, at moments like this you are wise beyond MY years!"

The boy smiled but didn't comment. He knew he could trust that his Grampa was telling the truth even if he didn't fully understand it. Regularly hearing that he was smart and capable and, now, wise, heightened his feelings of self-worth without assigning him any sort of accompanying and overwhelming responsibility.

"Sometimes I feel guilty that I like this new life better than my old one. That is still a point of confusion because when I ask myself how I'd have things if I could have them anyway at all, I still find myself saying I want my life to be back with my parents the way I *thought* my parents really were."

Albert nodded and countered with his own thought.

"Part of *me* says I'd like to be handsome like I'm told I was as a teenager, but I'm not and I really like my new look with the longer locks and full white beard."

“Two things. First, I can’t imagine you fuming over how you look, and, second, I think that’s different from my deal.”

“I’m sure you’re right on both counts. My real point is you have set up an irresolvable conflict because you have no choice between now and your past. The choice you do have is how you are going to grow your future.”

“Thanks . . . again. You know I’ll never be able to repay you for all you are doing for me.”

“Oh. But you will.”

“What?”

“There are going to be many opportunities coming to you during your life when you will have the chance to be helpful to others – maybe even to help some folks make life changing modifications in their beliefs and the ways they go about living. You do those things eagerly and unselfishly, and any debts you leave behind will be paid in full. In one of my books I referred to it as ‘generational pay back’.”

“See! There it is again! If what you say is so, I can I tell you I better get to looking for those opportunities right away or I’ll never get things even.”

“From what I hear about you from the folks here in town, it appears you are already well into living that kind of helpful life. Folks like you. Folks already know they can count on you. Folks are comfortable in your presence. It’s not about when you are going to start – you are already well into the process.”

“Did I tell you I love you?”

“In a hundred ways every day.”

“I think there are several kinds of love.”

“Oh?”

Albert was always eager to hear the young man’s ideas and unique take on things.

“The love I had, *have*, for my parents was, *is*, what I’d call *cool love*. It’s genuine love but it doesn’t have the feel of the second kind. That’s *warm love* like we have where even when things aren’t great or going smooth you still feel that warmth that you know nothing can ever take away. Cool love comes and goes, I don’t mean it ever leaves completely but there is something less constant about it – *ebbing and flowing*. Warm love is always there – constant

– like, if you were of a mind to yell at me about some dumb thing I did, I could just stand there and take it, all the while my warm love would still be in place, reassuring me about myself and us. Does that make any sense?”

“Be sure you write that down. I believe it is profound. Ninety-nine percent of the people I’ve known haven’t had a clue about what you just said and, so sadly, without it life just can’t come close to being complete.”

“You and your wife had it – warm love – I’ll bet.”

“We did.”

“Probably too early to know about you and Maude, huh?”

“Probably so. I’d say definitely leaning in that direction.”

“I’m happy for you – about you and Maude. I guess I’ve never said that – I usually just joke about it.”

“Thank you. I’m happy for you and Tabitha, as well, and I guess I’m in the same boat as you just described.”

They walked on in silence until they arrived at the lake.

“Let’s head over to the right. There is a rise, see, up there. It’s not as tall as Fireplace Hill but it allows a really great view of the village looking back over the lake. Someday, I want to paint it. I haven’t done any painting since we got here. Mom was a great artist. Sometimes just she and I would go out into the county and draw and paint for a half day at a time. She’d fix a picnic. It’s those memories I’m trying to keep in the front of my mind about that life.”

“I do believe you have it figured out. I’m proud of you, you know. It has been such a difficult time and I have had so few resources with which to really help you.”

“You’ve been here. You’ve loved me. You’ve made me feel safe. Maybe most of all you have showed me how to smile at myself and my . . . what do you call them . . . *foibles* – my shortcomings and quirks and uncertainties. Those things were points for unpleasant lectures and discipline in my home.”

Again, silence as they headed along the ever-narrowing trail. It wound gently up the slope. Ten minutes later they were atop the rise and Albert understood why the boy was so taken with the view. The people moved around the lake below like a parade of colorful jelly beans. Sailboats sped along as if skimming above the water as the steady easterly breeze grabbed their sails. Row boats moved

lazily in unpredictable, apparently aimless, patterns. They just seemed happy to be moving more or less forward. Albert could relate to that.

Mike and a small group of ten year olds, scouts perhaps, approached and passed them. They called greetings back and forth and waved.

Albert's phone rang. It was the special agency ringtone. Agent Baxter was returning their call. The conversation was short and to the point. Albert and Jason were to bring the material they had and meet him back down the county highway at the abandoned gas station where they had picked up their car. Baxter was out of the area but could be there by midnight. It was set.

Unexpected anxiety overtook both of them and with it came their old friend adrenalin. They laughed at things that weren't really funny. They hiked further than Albert's old legs should have hiked. Their hearts beat rapidly even in the absence of any really demanding physical activity. Jason babbled on and Albert nodded back like a simple minded, white-bearded, bobble head.

At noon, they tried a new café on the east edge of town beside the lake – the Jack-O-Lantern. It was decorated as if Halloween – and pumpkins – had overtaken the place. There were witches crossing the high ceiling on brooms. There were live, black cats roaming the premises. There was the animated Headless Horseman, silhouetted against the huge, orange, harvest moon at the rear. Cider and gingersnaps were served like peanuts or breadsticks at other restaurants. They ordered the Boo Burger with Scarecrow Fries. It came on an orange bun with a jack-o-lantern face branded into the top.

They relaxed as the ugliest of wart-adorned witches served the meal and flirted with Jason. They enjoyed the quartet of ghosts that sang haunting melodies – such as, *I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with Boo*. There were scurrying hunchbacks that kept the water, coffee, and soda filled. It was what they needed – complete escape from anything that resembled the real world. The owner convinced them to do one of their locally known and always appreciated routines with dulcimers conveniently provided. They chose, *Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better*. They played. They sang. They cracked their inane jokes. Most of all they relaxed and enjoyed the applause, begging off from an encore using the excuse

of being just ‘punkin tuckered out’. The owner picked up the check – never a bad thing.

They returned to their apartment and showered away the dust and sweat then went downstairs to help. The crowd in town had swelled beyond its typical size so their help was welcomed. They remained until closing. The four of them collapsed after what turned out to be an exhausting day.

“I vote we have pizza delivered,” Jason suggested, the concept of food not yet having entered anyone else’s thoughts.

At just about that moment, Mike entered, carrying two pizzas – one large and one medium.

“The smaller one is for the older stomachs and the big one for us young bucks,” he announced.

“And into which category do you place me?” Kate asked playfully.

“Well, unless you’ve been very well disguised of late you’re no buck, and unless Albert can down a chicken veggie all by himself, I’m thinking that would be the . . . less young category.”

“Nice save,” Jason offered, passing the smaller box on to the less young generation with a continuing smile.

They locked the front door, pulled the shades, and moved into the book room at the rear. Jason went upstairs and brought back cold sodas. They gathered around the reading table and enjoyed good food and good company.

Jason kept looking at his watch.

“Got a hot date, later?” Kyle teased interpreting Jason’s returning anxiety as impatience.

“If doing crosswords with Grampa can be classified as a hot date, then absolutely.”

“Beautiful view from there on the rise, isn’t it,” Mike said directing the comment at Albert in reference to the morning meeting.

“It certainly is. Who were those youngsters who had you in tow up there?”

“Just some kids who need a guy in their life sometimes. They are great. Keep me young so I can keep up with Kate, here.”

Three sets of eyes moved silently back and forth between Kate and Mike. They got nothing more.

By nine they were ready to go their separate ways. Everyone

noted, but didn't comment, when Mike gave, and Kate readily accepted, a peck to her cheek before he left.

"I'll clean up," Albert said. "You all go home. Thanks for your good help today. You ran circles around me."

"And when Grampa says *he* will clean up we all really know who he's referring to," Jason said, garnering the final laugh of what had been a very comfortable hour."

Back upstairs, and fully unbelievable, Jason immediately fell asleep on the couch. Albert collected the material for Agent Baxter and placed it in a large brown paper envelope, leaving it on the kitchen table.

His phone rang – not his agency issue but his old phone. It was on his dresser in his bedroom. He picked it up and looked at the number. He didn't recognize it nor did he recognize the area code so he turned it to silent. Under no circumstances would he have answered it but it piqued his interest and was more than a bit unnerving. 'Somebody probably misdialed,' he told himself, writing it off as coincidence. However, it had not been turned on since he had left the city that night so many weeks before. How could it have suddenly come to life? He supposed it might have been jostled in some way. Rather than returning it to the dresser he slipped it into his pocket so he would have immediate access in case it rang again.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN: Midnight Rendezvous

There was actually very little preparation for the trip: Pick up the envelope from the table, put on light jackets, and make the trip south on County Road 13. It was only the fourth time they had used the car since arriving. Albert calculated they should allow half an hour to navigate the twenty miles. Accordingly, they were in the car and headed down the alley at eleven thirty.

“It will actually be good to see Agent Baxter again. I wish Lora would be along. I never got to thank her for being there for me during all those first hours when I was so sad and terrified. She has a very reassuring way about her – like the sister, aunt, grandma, Mother Teresa I never really had.”

“I doubt if she will be there. It should be a very routine affair. We wrote a good, concise, narrative covering everything we did and what we found. We numbered the pieces of evidence to correspond with the references in that description. Pretty straight forward, I’m thinking.”

“I’m suddenly hungry,” Jason said.

“Of course, you are. You’re awake.”

It provided grins and a chuckle. Most of the initial anxiety had eased as the day progressed. The pizza time with Mike and the folks from the store people had probably helped the most. It felt like being among good friends. From Jason’s perspective, it could have

been improved by Tabby's presence but he understood she would have been an outsider in that setting. Sometimes being the youngster among adults made him the center of attention. Sometimes it pushed him into a corner. That night it had included him as an equal with the others. He thought he could get used to that.

With no moon, there was nothing but the headlights to brighten the night as they wound in and out of the several wooded areas.

"I guess most woodland creatures sleep at night," Jason observed. "None seem to be out tonight."

The gas station was dark. That should have been no surprise having been abandoned as it had for a decade or more. Still, somehow, it seemed unsettling there in the dark in the middle of nowhere. They pulled to a stop in the same general area as the car had been sitting originally. There was no other car.

"I guess we got here early," Albert said struggling to read his watch in the darkness.

"Actually, we are on time almost to the second," Jason said referring to the lighted clock on his phone.

Two sets of headlights appeared heading toward them on the highway from the south. They entered the lot and stopped heading in toward the blue Chevy. One man got out of the first car. Its headlights remained on. Those on the other went dark.

"That's probably Baxter," Jason said. "Shouldn't we get out and greet him?"

"I'd prefer he make the first move. He's in charge of this get together."

"It does seem to be Agent Baxter," Albert said and he rolled down his window and spoke. "Agent Baxter there in the darkness, I assume."

"Agent Baxter it is, Albert. Good to see you. Let's get right down to brass tacks. Come and join me in the back of my car."

"I assume that invitation includes Jason."

Baxter leaned down and looked inside. He broke a smile.

"Didn't see you there. Of course, both of you."

Agent Baxter sat between them. The dome light clicked on. They didn't recognize the driver. Albert handed over the envelope. Baxter removed its contents. He looked it over quite thoroughly,

taking several minutes.

“You have indeed stumbled onto something big. You did the right thing, calling me directly. You will both have to come with us.”

“I don’t understand,” Albert said, clearly questioning the directive. “You have all the evidence there. I’m sure nobody who is involved has any idea we discovered their operation.”

“Well, you are certainly right about that. I guess now is the time for the explanation.”

He said something indistinguishable to the driver as if in a foreign language. The back doors clicked locked. The driver turned to face them. He was brandishing a Beretta. Albert and Jason looked at each other across Baxter.

“This had to happen at some point but I had hoped not for several more months,” Baxter began. “The agency you have been working with, my agency, is not the FBI but the Russian equivalent of the CIA. It has been our plan all along to take Jason captive. He will make a fine item of exchange for one or more of our people held prisoner here. Three of our other sleepers were taken down by the FBI as a part of their investigation of Jason’s parents. We want them back. It is that simple. Once we have the boy well hidden, our government will make contact through diplomatic channels. We will set a deadline. If it isn’t met the boy will be killed and his body delivered to a US Embassy. Your government says it doesn’t negotiate but I can assure you it does. The chance the boy will have to be hurt is minimal.”

“Hurt? You call killing me, *hurt*?”

“Sorry. That’s how it is.”

“What about Grampa Albert?”

“I’m afraid he is of no use to us and does pose a serious threat to this operation, so he will be taken to Canada and his body sunk to the bottom of one of the many lakes.”

Tears began to flow. Jason’s for Grampa. Albert’s for Jason.

“This is clearly non-negotiable,” Albert said. It was faintly toned as a question.

“Sorry, but that’s how it is. I must say, none of us had any idea you two would end up being such a team of super-sleuths. Albert, it was assumed you would busy yourself writing and Jason

would get socially involved like boys his age do. Your discovery, if put into the hands of your FBI, would destroy our major pipeline for removing agents who are on the verge of discovery here and certain kinds of operatives from other countries with which we share common interests. It has taken years to establish.

Punkin Hollar was, in fact, in Jason's future either way. The plan was for his family to be brought here on the 23rd – unfortunately that was the day *after* the federal agents moved in. They were to be transferred from this location and eventually taken back to Russia. We chose this place to relocate the two of you in order to make your removal as simple as possible.”

“I am sorry Albert. I truly like you but in my business, we do what we have to do you understand. Had you not made your discovery, your life would have probably been spared. We would have snatched our Jason Package and left you alone. As it is we have no choice, you see.”

“I *knew* I was the *package*,” Jason said. “Why the delay?”

“You were on ice, so to speak. You were going nowhere. We had a parade of other agents who needed to leave immediately. So, they took priority over you. Also, these sorts of negotiations take careful preparation. That becomes time consuming.”

“Am I to get a new face job from Gustoff?”

“If for some reason, we have to move you *out* of Canada, then yes. That has to be part of it. From Canada, we use commercial transportation and the facial recognition programs used universally these days at international airports would very likely spot our people and you. There is no alternative. I promise our good Doctor will make you every bit as handsome as you are right now.”

“If I live to get the surgery.”

“Well, yes there is that.”

“How could you have seemed to be so helpful and nice and compassionate before and now you're just a cold-hearted bastard – in the *second* use of the term?”

“In this business, we are what we need to be. I'm sure you can't understand that. There are guys on your side who are every bit the cold bastards I am.”

“Does your mother know what you've grown into?”

Agent Baxter chose to ignore the comment.

With the attention focused on Jason, Albert made a desperate move. He slipped his old cell phone from his pocket and eased it to the floor between the seat and the door. When they got out he would see that it dropped onto the ground. It was the only good clue he had to leave. He wondered how long it would take for the search to get underway.

“I have a note here for you to sign, Albert. It will be left for your shop manager. It states that you have been called away on a family emergency and that you will contact her in a few days to explain. By then you will be well hidden in the holding area, or more likely already in Canada. You need to sign here.”

“And if I refuse you will, of course, hurt Jason.”

“You learn the ways of our business quickly. Anywhere down under the typed message.”

Albert took the pen and signed: *Allbert* Thompson. Baxter folded it, put it in an envelope and handed it forward. Now there would be two clues. Would anybody put them together?

They were moved into the second car and driven north by a set of never identified, well dressed, weapon brandishing, men. It soon became an unfamiliar route, circling as it did on a grass and dirt road way west around to the south of the landing strip and then north to the other end of Fireplace Hill. There was another hillside door and they were taken inside.

Almost immediately the tunnel from the entry widened and became higher. They passed through a second door into what appeared in every way to be the interior of a large home – all underground. The spacious living room area had half a dozen doors off to their left, the north – probably bedrooms, or holding cells in their case. There was another door at the far end, which they were sure connected with the gated stairwell in the Wax Museum. Somewhere in all of it there would be a surgery room and the green door exit to the landing strip.

They were thoroughly searched and the cell phones confiscated along with their belts, shoes, watches, coins, and Jason’s pocketknife. They were placed in the same room. Albert wondered if that would continue. Without further explanation, the guards-in-residence left and locked the door.

Albert leaned down and whispered into Jason’s ear.

“Microphones and hidden cameras.”

His years of concocting mysteries was quickly becoming an asset in their current life and death situation.

Jason nodded that he understood. Most likely the ploy was to leave them alone together in a wired room and from their conversation learn just what further information they might have as well as be able to squelch any plans they might concoct together.

“I suggest we try to sleep,” Albert said. “At least lie down and rest. No telling what lies ahead for us.”

“I can’t sleep,” Jason said.

“Even so, I *really* think we should try – get whatever rest we can.”

Jason caught the imperative and would go along, prepared to see what Albert had up his sleeve.

The room – it could have been in a luxury hotel – was set up for a single occupant so there was one double bed, a love seat, several upholstered chairs, floor lamps, a small table with two chairs, and a TV – which Jason soon discovered was nonfunctional. There was a full bath.

Albert took a place on the bed. Jason moved in close his back to Grampa like they had done those first nights in the apartment. Albert drew his precious grandson close. That had two purposes. To reassure and comfort the boy *and* to get his ear close enough to Albert’s mouth that he could whisper to him in tones that would hopefully be too low to be picked up by microphones.

After offering several words of comfort he got down to business.

“I left my old cell phone in the lot back at the gas station. If found it will have my ID data in it. I also signed the note, spelling Albert with double l’s. I can’t believe they didn’t catch that. It may be the English as a second language thing. It should alert Kate that something is not as it should be. She will call the police, I’m sure. Baxter’s boys will lose that several day lead they thought the note would build in. Did you tell anybody about our time on the hill with the telescope?”

“No. Well, I guess I mentioned it to Mike. I told him that we had seen him walking that night and kidded him about having a hot date. It seemed like I needed to explain why we were out so late ourselves. Relating our astronomy outing seemed harmless enough.”

Jason had accomplished that entire monologue without moving his lips. It was a well-practiced skill from his six-month career as the world's greatest seven-year-old ventriloquist. He followed that up with an explanation.

"I can talk without moving my lips."

"Great. Who knew such a skill might play a part in saving your life?"

The boy nodded.

"If we are to be transported by the silent plane we either have just one more day here before the moon returns, or one whole month. At least that's how it would be according to our flight-only-during-the-darkness-of-the-moon theory."

"If it's a month does that mean doc will start cutting on me soon?"

"I doubt it. We can arrive in Canada without that and then be hidden in any one of a billion isolated places up there. If surgery becomes necessary I imagine Doc will come to you. They really want to return you as you are and as soon as possible."

"I'm so scared for you Grampa."

"Giving in to fear will get us nowhere. I'm not close to giving up – for either of us. We need time to think. We need some great ploy. Some fantastic ploy."

They fell silent and soon Jason's steady shallow breathing told Albert the boy was asleep. It had been a strenuous day. That was working in the boy's favor. He was escaping from the terror and gaining much needed rest.

Albert used the time to work on a plan. When Jason awoke, they would begin feeding their captors conversation that would seem appropriate to their situation and most importantly make it appear they were unaware of the surveillance. It was the first step of a two-part plan. He knew that Jason was up to following his lead. Albert dozed off and on. His legs ached and he felt every one of his 67 years. He only hoped he would be around to have similar pains at 68.

From many weeks of conditioning, Jason's eyes snapped open at five o'clock (they assumed). Without thinking he turned over and addressed Albert. Immediately recognizing his surroundings, he spoke in a whisper.

“Grampa. I’m awake.”

Albert opened his eyes.

“I may be, also.”

Jason smiled.

“Now what?”

In a few hushed words, Albert relayed the idea of having some meaningless conversation that would seem related to their plight. It needed to seem like they were not censoring anything. They got out of bed. For the next ten minutes, they carried on a fascinating if meaningless conversation mentioning places and times and fictional characters. They played at worrying out loud about their situation and Albert offered words of encouragement. Jason searched the walls as if looking for some means of escape and offered up several moments filled with tears – not entirely play acting.

Aside from that, Albert had no more of a plan than he had the night before.

At seven, or so they were told, food trays arrived along with two bath towels and two small bars of soap. Those would be removed after they showered. Black jump suits and socks for each of them were laid out on the bed. A basket was left in the room to receive their clothes and towels. They each had the same take on the black suits – *orange* to keep track of prisoners. *Black* to hide them. It appeared they were to be moved out sooner rather than later.

They ate.

They showered.

They slipped into the new clothes.

They transferred what few personal belongings they had been allowed to keep into the pockets of the jumpsuits.

The clothes and towels were removed from the room. Their caretakers were not rude or abusive but would not respond to Jason’s barrage of questions. He paced. Albert sat on the love seat and thought.

“What we need is a paddle,” Grampa.

“A what? And why?”

“You know the saying, ‘Up a creek without a paddle’.”

Albert’s quick smile acknowledged the attempt at humor. Jason eased in beside Albert and scooted close sandwiching one of

his Grampa's hands between both of his own. They sat quietly for a long time. Suddenly inspired, Jason began speaking in a clear, forceful, loud voice.

"I suppose Ralph has plan B well under way by now, don't you?"

Albert understood – well, sort of.

"Shhhh!" he said. "Quiet about things like that."

"Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

Albert squeezed his grandson's hand. It was returned. They might not be able to escape or even get word out about where they were but they could keep their captors both confused and concerned. That just might contribute in some way to a situation changing slip up.

"Well, now that it's out I guess it doesn't hurt to talk about it. Doubt if we can be heard through the thick walls and doors."

In that way, Albert let the boy have his head not sure where it would go but trusted it would be interesting if not, perhaps, helpful.

"Since we didn't call Ralph at the time we said we would last night, he'll contact Sam and let him know we are unaccounted for. Sam's son is a sheriff's deputy. I suspect they began scouring the country side for us well before dawn. I expect to be out of here in time for supper tonight. What shall we have?"

"I'm rather tired of pizza," Albert said. "How about that Chinese place. I have a hankering for sweet and sour pork."

"Sounds good. I love their crab cakes though find them so difficult to eat with chopsticks."

"Remember the fortune in my last cookie?" Albert asked as Jason smothered a giggle into his hands.

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Beware of strangers but know you are being watched over."

"Oh yes. Ironic, I suppose, how true something like that can be."

At that moment, something important developed in the boy's mind. He thought it through for a few seconds then laid his head against Albert's shoulder and closed his eyes, pretending sleep. Albert had the feeling that something unique, if not remarkable, was about to transpire. The former, although still semi-talented, ventriloquist spoke in a whisper.

“They are most likely using wireless bugs to monitor our conversations. That means everything has to be transmitted through the air. What is transmitted through the air is open game for anybody who is listening on the same frequency – electronic eavesdropping it is called. On the off chance we have somebody out there listening, let’s begin providing information for anybody who is trying to locate and rescue us.”

Albert immediately understood. He moved his arm, a maneuver that seemed to have awakened Jason.

“Sorry, buddy, but my arm went to sleep.”

They both stood and began to pace. The search for bugs was on. Within five minutes a dozen were located, inside the shade on the table lamp, on the headboard – it hadn’t really been a very sophisticated undertaking. That undoubtedly reflected the hurried, spur of the moment, preparations as they made ready to house the two of them with only thirty minutes’ notice. It gave them the vital information they needed, however – wireless transmission was, in fact, in play. The nature of their banter changed.

“I don’t know how we missed that secret entrance on the *west* side of the hill behind the Wax Museum,” Jason began.

“I guess we just never ventured that far. When we found the one on the *south* side at this end of the valley I guess we stopped looking.”

“If we hadn’t heard that conversation that came up through the *fireplace* on top of the hill, we wouldn’t be so deep in do-do right now.”

“I guess that wasn’t our lucky night, Jase. There was a new moon that night, right?”

“No. I don’t think there was any moon at all. Remember, we could hear that *silent plane* come and go but we couldn’t see it.”

“That’s right.”

They paused to refuel their brains, both of them pleased with their unrehearsed give and take up to that point. They quickly made mental lists of what information would be most useful to a potential rescue squad. It was Jason who began again.

“You know what I miss most in here, Grampa?”

“What’s that?”

“That old *dinosaur* of a *computer* of yours, what do you call

her, *Tabby*, isn't it?"

"That's right. Old Tabby has been with me for many years."

Albert had no idea what was going on. He figured if he made a wrong turn the boy would find a way to set him straight.

"It's odd, you know, Grampa, how you keep your pencils all lined up in *single file* there beside old Tabby. If you're going to compose on the computer, why do you need all those pencils?"

"Just habit left over from the old days, I suppose. Sharpening them gives me something to do when my creative juices evaporate."

He still had no idea what they had just accomplished but from the smug expression on Jason's face he felt sure the outing had been a success.

Of course, it all depended on the remote possibility that somebody was actually listening in. There was no way to know but they were doing what they could to provide information vital to their rescue. It was better than doing nothing. It made them feel less helpless. They continued for some time. It had become like a game and momentarily took Jason's mind off the probable hopelessness of their situation.

From time to time during that day they rehashed the same facts in case there just might be a listener tuning in late. As time passed they became more adept at the process and added phrases like, 'Being held against our will by Russian spies.' There were other things to catch the attention of even casual, amateur, scanners of the airwaves, hoping to motivate them to contact authorities.

At one point Jason began chattering in Cherokee – he had learned a little for a school project. It was for no purpose other than to confuse them and any linguists they might have handy. Humorously, Albert responded with: "*Mmm, Kemo Sabe,*" a phrase out of his boyhood while parked in front of a radio listening to Tonto respond to his hero, the Lone Ranger. The response evaded Jason's understanding but did not deter him from remixing the words and continuing his Native American diatribe.

The arrival of the lunch trays signaled noon was upon them. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes and white gravy, corn, yams and apple pie for dessert. Not bad fare for prisoners. Jason wondered if it might be Grampa's last meal. He did what he could to put that out of his mind. The trays were removed along with the knife Jason

confiscated from his try and tried to conceal in his sock. He gave it up with a grin and a shrug. It earned a quick smile from the guard – or caretaker, or whatever.

At Albert's suggestion, they napped after lunch. He had no idea what might be in store for them that night, but he believed a little extra rest couldn't hurt. Jason protested, explaining that he couldn't possibly sleep considering their situation. He was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. His mother had made a good observation; chatting and sleeping *were* two of the boy's best things.

Albert rested, though he only napped for short periods at a time. Every noise awakened him. He had never before had to prepare for his execution. It was a horrendous time for him. It might have been worse had he not been so determined to hide his state of mind from Jason.

'What was that thing Jason had said about courage?' he wondered. 'Going ahead and doing something even though it frightens you.' At that moment and by that definition Albert felt all quite courageous. He also came to understand that the mere fact of being courageous really had nothing to do with one's survival in the face of overwhelming odds. He assumed Jason had similar feeling and was working just as hard to keep them hidden from him.

Albert had so many things he wanted to say to Jason but the mere mention of them would indicate to the boy that he had given up and accepted his fate at the hands of the Russians. He dared not do that. If there were only a pencil and paper available so he could compose a list – a final letter to the boy, the joy of his life, his reason for living, his hope for the future. If execution was to be his fate, surely even these bastards would allow him a few final minutes with Jason. He had to hold onto that belief. With that he could continue.

He also convinced himself the government would not allow a child to be sacrificed for adult offences and believing the two governments had to maintain some semblance of trust between them concerning such matters, he believed Jason would be safe – he might be forever damaged emotionally, but physically, he would be safe.

Dinner was served. Albert picked at his food. Jason made short work of his portion. He wasn't used to being confined to a mere three meals a day. Albert claimed indigestion. Whether or not Jason believed that, he finished everything Albert had left. Again,

he kept back a knife. Again, it was confiscated. That time it represented more a ploy to aggravate his captors and demonstrate his resolve than a serious attempt to retain a potential weapon.

They spent the evening mostly in silence, offering occasional material for those possible electronic eavesdroppers. Jason became silently furious that again he might lose his family. That quickly gave way to the deepest sort of sadness surrounding the threatened, and apparently inevitable, loss of his new and much-loved Grampa. They both realized the future was up for grabs, and that it was fully out their control. At best, they would be rescued. At worst . . .

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CHAPTER TWELVE: Do the good guys *ever* win these days?

Late in the evening, the door to their room opened. The man who had been entering and leaving brought clean, black, jump suits, another set of towels, and more soap.

“There will be no showers during the next three days so, if you want to, you can clean up. You have a half hour.”

“Does this mean we will be leaving on *Silent Hawk* tonight at *eleven*?” Jason asked, pulling out all the stops.

The man frowned and looked both startled and puzzled at Jason’s knowledge of the assumed to be secret information. He offered no response and left.

“I don’t like stinking so I opt for a shower,” Jason said.

Albert then took his turn.

The old clothing and towels were removed. Albert and Jason huddled so they could whisper directly into each other’s ears. At that point they saw no reason to try and hide the fact they were talking privately.

“When we are led out to the plane, we can make a run for it into the night and escape under the fence. We are wearing black. Do you think they would risk gunfire being heard?”

“You bet your new black socks they would. We are currently their biggest prize and they won’t give up that sort of a catch without a fight.”

“Okay, so running is out of the question. What’s left?”

He needed a plan. Albert clearly didn't have one.

"There is still time to come up with something. Don't give up. If not here, then on the other end, in Canada. It certainly appears that their plan is for me to accompany you at least that far."

Jason understood it was getting close to the end of the line and that Albert had run dry of ideas. Since bolting into the darkness was all he had, his spirits sank to the lowest they had been. It wasn't fair. They had discovered the plot; they had collected the evidence; they had turned over the evidence. The problem was they had been duped and turned it over to the bad guys, themselves. He had to give Baxter credit. Their game had been masterfully played. If only Albert hadn't fallen for the fake credentials he was offered at his door, but then saying that was like blaming *him* for the whole thing. He wouldn't do that, not after all the man had been willing to give up for him – virtually everything and now very likely his life. If he *hadn't* made that mistake they would have never gotten to be together – to know each other. It was one of those pesky things that couldn't be construed as either black or white, good or bad, right or wrong.

A new man entered. They remained seated – no manners for the enemy. He addressed them in a cool, business-like, manner, and with an accent not present in any of the others. He was most likely the one who was really in charge of the operation – not a field agent who had to pass as American.

"Within the hour, you will be moved from this room to a position behind the exit door, which I am told you already know about. When the bell rings, you – he pointed to Jason – will open the door and the two of you will step outside. Then you – he pointed to Albert – will close the door. The pilot will help you get on board where you will strap yourselves into the rear seats, the boy is to sit on the right – away from the door."

"Any questions?"

Of course, Jason had one.

"Do you offer barf bags on this flight? I tend to get air sick."

Ignoring and clearly unruffled by the comment the man looked directly at Albert.

"Do *you* have any questions?"

"Just the one about the barf bag. I get sick, too."

The man shook his head and left.

“I’m not sure what we just accomplished,” Albert began, “but it sure felt good, didn’t it?”

“It did. I know what’s going to happen.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. As soon as we get to Canada they are going to take you away. It stands to reason that the sooner they get rid of you the safer this operation will be.”

“You may be right – about that being their *plan* – but we are still in the fight, young man.”

“I know. So was Custer right down to the final arrow.”

It hadn’t been a reassuring response. Albert decided not to pursue it. What the boy had implied was very likely going to be the outcome. If only the Russians would have found it necessary to prolong the flight for a month, there would have been a much better chance for them to be found. The timeline was definitely against them. That, of course, was all by design.

They fell silent.

Albert spent some time reviewing his life. Jason just felt the growing sadness eating away at him. Albert was pleased with his life. Jason wanted to destroy the world. Albert had few true regrets. He had maintained his integrity – living his life according to his positive principles of right and wrong. Jason regretted everything – his parents, his old life built on lies, and, at that moment, life itself. Albert believed the purpose of a man’s life was to help improve the human condition. Jason realized the initial purpose of his life had been merely to give legitimacy to his parents pretend relationship so they could pursue their evil agenda.

It was an unvoiced contrast between the wisdom of age and the unavoidable shortsightedness of youth. It demonstrated the perspective of positive possibilities that came with maturity and the impulsive willingness of the less mature to blame ones setbacks on the evils of the world. Neither could have construed the events in the manner of the other – one long past the era of pretending there was value in placing blame outside of himself, and one unable to see his own growing potential to eventually control and direct his own personal destiny.

Both agreed about the power of love and how it had

transformed their lives – for Albert in at least two remarkable relationships and for Jason in his most recent one with Grampa, and eventually – hopefully – growing to include much about his first family.

The door opened and two burley men entered. They were armed. The taller one frisked them. They were directed to follow the other man. The second fell in behind. It had all the trappings of the march to the firing squad Jason had witnessed so often on TV.

Again, the living area was empty of other people. They moved through the door to the east toward the Museum – the one they had seen at the opposite end of the room when they originally entered the complex. It revealed a corridor some seven feet wide and high made of poured cement with no attempt having been made to construe it as pleasant or comfortable. A few yards beyond the door, a smaller hallway turned off to the right. The man in front entered it and they followed. At the end was the door – tall, wide, metal. It was obviously the one they had encountered from the outside.

The lead man positioned them close to the door – Jason in front and Albert behind – then moved to the rear and stood beside his associate. They waited. They waited some more. Eventually the bell rang and although both were prepared *for* it, both were startled *by* it. *With* it came a sense of finality for Albert. For the first time he allowed himself to begin considering just how little time he had left. The flight would take perhaps two hours and then . . .

“Open the door,” came the command from the first guard.

Jason turned his head up and back, looking at Albert. Albert smiled and nodded. The boy turned the knob and pushed hard against the heavy door.

The scene, as it lay before them outside, was not fully what either had envisioned it would be. The plane was there, its underbelly visible in the soft glow of the large illuminated marker in the ground. The ladder was positioned beside the plane’s open door. It was the pilot that confused the scene.

There, in an opened down the front dark leather jacket and black ball cap, stood – Mike. Neither spoke. That followed from a combination of the shock and their good sense. Similar questions rushed through each of their minds. Had Mike been a plant all along, keeping close-up watch over them for the Russians. Had his

relationship with Kate just been an idle lie – a means for staying close to them. Was kind, helpful, good hearted, compassionate Mike really just another bastard? It was so hard to believe but then Baxter and his bunch had also been expertly trained and fully convincing actors.

Mike – sober-faced and unflinching – was standing there, legs apart and arms behind his back as if he had been called to be at ease on a military parade ground. He looked the two of them in the face and hitched his head as if to motion them to move to a position in back of him. They carried out what they believed the order had been.

Once beyond and behind Mike they became aware of the large automatic weapon he had secreted behind his back. With Albert and Jason safely to the rear, he raised the weapon and ordered the two men inside to come out into the open. A dozen, black clad, flack-vested, men emerged from the darkness. One bellied down the guards and cuffed them. The rest made their way in close order SWAT style inside through the door.

Although no shots were heard the voices were loud and angry and it all screamed out at them through the open door.

Mike turned to his friends.

“Well, imagine meeting you here!”

“Please! What is going on,” Albert asked – his tone suddenly desperate, pleading for an answer, his sense of resignation being teased by a confusing glimmer of hope.

“Here’s the brief version. I’ll fill you in more fully later”.

As he began he offered his hand to Albert and then to Jason.

“Special Agent Mike Madison at your service. I’ve been around to watch over you two and coordinate our FBI’s surveillance of Miguel Carter – a recently identified for hire, Russian, sympathizer. We have been right with you, Jason, since the moment you were removed from your home by the Russian agent called Baxter. I’m sorry we had to let it play out like this but we had both the elements of your safety and national security to balance.”

Jason had one question that had to be dealt with immediately. It had to come before ‘thank you’. It had to come before ‘good job’. It had to come before his sudden questions about his and Grampa’s future. In the end it formed more as an accusation than a question.

“So you used Kate just to be close to us. You will break her heart you know.”

“I appreciate your concern and I would expect nothing less from you, Jason. Hear me out – again the abbreviated edition. I love Kate. I have asked her to marry me. Once this operation is cleaned up I have resigned from the Agency. I rather like being a handyman. I genuinely hate being a Special Agent. I used to believe that fighting evil and doing good in the world were the same thing. I have come to see that although both are necessary, they really aren’t the same.”

Jason went to him and administered a lingering bear hug. It was understood to be both an ‘I’m sorry for doubting you’ and a ‘thanks for being here for us’. Still, he needed to verbalize it.

“I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“I’m glad you were so willing to protect Kate. What else could you have thought?”

“Did any of what we did help you find us?” Jason went on pulling back to stand close to Albert.

“Pal, without your help, the whole operation could have collapsed.”

“Like what things did we do right?”

“It started right from the beginning with Albert’s cell phone left behind and the double L in the signature.”

Those had been all Albert’s doings and Jason looked up at him with clear admiration patting him on his back

“From there on you continued to do most everything right. The information you fed us via the wireless bugs allowed us to plan the actual operation which is unfolding in there as we speak – entrances, interior design, and such. And being able to specify the exact time you’d be leaving allowed us to be in place, as you saw we were. All of that was ingenious on your part. We had been monitoring the airwaves just as a general procedure ever since we followed you here to town – a place, which, quite frankly, we hadn’t known about. We got nothing in the way of radio signals. It was a tight, expertly designed, operation here. It was intended for the long run. They were very careful right up until you unexpectedly forced their hand and they had to begin innovating on the fly. And then, that marvelous dinosaur computer thing was super-ingenious.”

“Yes, about that,” Albert said looking back and forth between the two of them. “I’m still in the dark.”

Mike continued to explain. Jason continued to grin.

“Since it was a plain reference directing us to something in your apartment I went there immediately. I had kept a key. I focused on what I assumed were two other clues – *single file* and *Tabby*. They were such odd and out of place references I was sure they were somehow significant.”

“I’m still in the dark here, guys.”

“Just listen, Grampa.”

“Yes, *Grampa*. Just listen,” Mike repeated, playfully.

They all chuckled. Albert shrugged and twirled a finger hoping to speed things along.

“Dinosaur had to refer to that monstrosity sitting on your desk. And that *single file* thing was great. I figured I needed to search that old computer for a file – a single file – and I further figured that file was labeled, *Tabby*, the name you gave the computer. By following those clues I had all your evidence in hand within five minutes. An excellent job, from start to finish. You guys dredged up things we had no idea even existed.”

Albert pulled Jason close, leaned down, and kissed the top of his head.

“I really can’t believe you named the most secret, most important piece of data in our lives after your girlfriend,” Albert said.

“Well, it was the first thing that came into my almost teen boy mind and I wanted to make sure I wouldn’t forget. I’m thinking that during this time with you I’ve caught just a bit of your forgetfulness thing.”

It was worth a second squeeze and a second peck to his head. Elation is not always unveiled as a boisterous demonstration.

“So, what of all that actually led you to locate us?” Jason asked.

“Well, all of your clues plus my business card.”

The other two turned furrowed brows toward one another. Mike went on to explain.

“That large, raised, gold, crest on the card actually contains the agency’s latest micro GPS – global positioning device. We’ve

been tracking you everywhere but into the shower and to bed.”

“So that’s the real reason you said you didn’t want us to give them away to anybody else.”

“That’s right. We needed them to stay with you.”

“There is one big thing I just don’t get,” Jason said. “If I got traded back to the United States, you know I would have immediately blown this whole operation, so why were they going to kill Grampa because he might do the same thing? That just doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t. It was an elaborate scheme right from the beginning – a plan ‘B’, so to speak, researched and set in place as a contingency in case what *might* happen really ever *did* actually happen.”

“My parents getting found out and then having to be killed, you mean?”

“Yes. That. It would never have been their intention to kill you, Jason. That was just a stage-setter to maintain your focus and cooperation. You were, well as harsh as it may sound, bred to be an ace in the hole if ever needed.

Let me try this another way. First, suddenly without family, you had to become closely and permanently attached emotionally to some third party – Albert, who was selected for his special qualities that would insure that kind of a relationship. Aside, perhaps for his celebrity and well known compassion and charitable work we are not at all certain why he was chosen. His eastern European background certainly lent some legitimacy to the claim of blood relationship. The sad fact is, guys, you are not relatives.”

Jason looked up at Albert and said, “We are in the only way that really matters, aren’t we Grampa?”

“We certainly are.”

Mike continued.

“Second, they had to make you believe that very special, irreplaceable, person – Albert – was going to be killed solely because of his relationship with you – that it was your fault, which would result in tremendous feelings of guilt and loss. By in that way making you believe that Albert was soon going to be killed, they forced you to, shall I call it, *pre-experience* his loss and feel the anguish and terror that would overtake you when that, if that, were to

actually happen.

“To enhance your attachment and feelings of guilt, he would be taken from you in some dramatic fashion, probably in Canada. Before the trade took place, but after it had been finalized, they would have let you see him – maybe even be reunited for some short period – so you would know for certain that he was still alive. They would then make the crucial threat that all of this had been building toward. If you tell the US Agents *either* anything you had learned about your parent’s activities or contacts, *or* about the new Silent Hawk operation, Albert – by then the most important person in your life – would die a terribly painful death. They would have most likely forced you to watch film of similar deaths. The original plan was probably to allow you at least six months together so the necessary emotional bond between you would have been established. By bringing you to Punkin Hollar they accomplished two things: An immediate and easily accessible escape route out of the country if that should become necessary, and it placed the two of you in just about the last place in the world anybody would ever look for you – a lazy little, crime free, tourist trap, with very little local news coverage, in the isolated outback of north central Wisconsin.”

Jason tightened his hold around his Grampa’s waist. The new, as yet unspoken, reality began to sink in.

“This means Grampa and I will have to move again, doesn’t it. The Russians know where we are now. We can’t be safe here any longer can we?”

“No, you can’t be safe here. Yes, you will be relocated tomorrow night. In the meantime, you will be taken to a place of safety and guarded like the proverbial gold in Ft. Knox.”

“We’ll never see you and Kate and Freddie and Tabby and Maude again, will we?”

“No, you won’t. And, we can’t let you say goodbye. It might tip our hand in some way. The best I have to offer is that you will have some pretty fine Punkin Hollar memories to keep with you forever?”

Tears rolled down the boy’s face. He nodded thoughtfully.

“I sure *will* have some great memories – a town full of nice people like I didn’t know existed anywhere, kids who really liked me, a best friend, my first girlfriend, my first kiss, and lots of other stuff.”

He wiped at his tears with the backs of his hands and did his best to put on a happy, determined, face. He looked up at Albert.

“We’re going to get through this, you know, Grampa. We have each other. And like we talked about, even more than that, we’ve come to trust and love and need and depend on each other. Which reminds me, you know that list of questions I said I had about puberty from the waist down. I’m ready for us to talk about them, now.”

Albert smiled and nodded. He also had a list for the boy – all the things he wanted to say to him at that moment when he had first accepted that his own hours were numbered. He figured he would save them for a special occasion – perhaps at his grandson’s, soon to occur, very private, just-between-the-two-of-them, real and actual, thirteenth birthday celebration.

*Clearly the beginning of an
awesomely humongous,
wonder-filled,
new adventure!*

**FOLLOW THEM IN THE NEXT BOOK:
BLUE SHADOW**

DICTIONARY

Some words used in this book that may be unfamiliar to some of the younger readers.

This, of course, is how we all grow our vocabularies and the richer our vocabularies the higher the quality and the more accurate thinking we can do.

A CAPELLA – without accompaniment, like sings along, or works alone

ADMONITION – caution, warning, scolding

ADRENALIN – body chemical that quickly produces strength, energy, and anxiety

AFFIRM – confirm, verify, prove

AGITATED – nervous, restless

APPALACIA – Poor sections of the Appalachian Mountains

AROMATIC – smells great!

BAFFLED – puzzled, mystified, baffled

BANTER – talking back and forth between folks, often humorous.

BEAU (pronounced bow) – boyfriend (old fashioned term)

BOGUS – false, fake

BREACHING – to break into

CANINE – the long sharp teeth at each side of ones smile.

CLANDESTINE – Secretly, undercover.

CLARIFICATION – making something clear like an idea or a word

COMBINE – A huge machine that cuts wheat

COMMITMENT – promise to do something

CONJECTURE – guess about, speculate about without proof

CONSTRUE – take to mean, interpret to mean

CONTEMPLATE – think about carefully

CUISINE – great food

DAUNTING – very, very difficult. Scary, discouraging.

DEMEAN – put down

DIATRIBE – ranting or carrying on about something

DILIGENT – responsible, good worker, dependable

DIODE – An electronic device used to convert alternating current to direct current.

DISCREDIT – dishonor or damage someone's reputation

DISECTING – taking apart, looking at individual parts

DISINCLINED – unwilling, reluctant, doesn't want to.

DISSEMINATE – distribute, send out

DO-SE-DO – a set of moves in square dancing or folk

dancing

ENCRYPTION – coding, like a secret language

FEIGN – pretend, make believe

GAZEBO – Covered outdoor sitting area

GEODE – Hollow rock filled with crystals

HAUGHTY – conceited, snooty, stuck up

HIDEOUS – ugly, revolting

HORMONES – Chemicals the body produces that make older boys and girls begin liking each other in romantic ways.

HUMANE – caring, kind, gentle, helpful to other people

INANE – dumb, stupid, silly

JEOPARDY – danger, threat, hazard

LINGUIST – a person trained in various languages

MELDING – becoming like one thing, joining two things

together

MEMORABELIA – objects from the past

MONIKER – name, often a nickname or assumed name

MONUMENTAL – huge, large, awesome

NOCTURNAL – nighttime, or night-loving

NOSALGIA – pleasant memories of pleasant times

ORNATE – fancy

OPTION – a choice or alternative

PEDIGREE – family background, parents, bloodline,

PERIPHERY – edges, around the outside, encircling

PERSPECTIVE – the way you see or think something really

is

PIQUED (pronounced peeked) – heightens, like catches ones attention.

PLAUSIBLE – could happen, might be

PLIED – pursued, worked at it

PLOY – a trick, a scheme

PONDER – think deeply about

PUBERTY pubescent – The point at which children begin becoming young men and women

PURPORTING – to claim to be something you may not be

QUAINT – old fashioned, charming, rustic, simple

REGIME – government or those in charge of a government

REITERATE – to restate or state again

RHETORICAL – a question so obvious that really doesn't need an answer.

SEMBLANCE – appearance, likeness, low quality copy

SILICONE – A substance used in microchips and plastic surgery

SORTIE – raid, maneuver, attack

STRADIVARIUS – A maker of highest quality violins a long time ago. Those still around are worth LOTS of money.

TENACIOUS – really sticking to some task or idea

THESAURUS – A book listing synonyms (words that mean the same as other words)

TRANSITION – moving from one thing or place to another

UBIQUITIOUS – everywhere present, everywhere you look there it is

UNILATERALLY – a one-way decision without anybody else's input

UNITARIAN – a church of freethinkers who follow their own beliefs rather than those set-in place by some religious group

VESTIGES – remains, what is left over

VETTED – Did a *complete* background check on somebody

