



# TOMMY POWERS

AND THE  
**The Sage**  
of the  
**Calibrators**

A magical experience for 10 to 15 year olds

by David Drake



**TOMMY POWERS  
AND  
THE SAGE OF THE CALIBRATORS**

**Book One in the series of four.**

**A teen age, non-violent, superhero,  
Adventure/fantasy, for 10 to 15 year olds**

**By  
David Drake**

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Mysteries!**

It is a mystery to me why my mother and father left me cold and crying in a wooden crate at the wharf the day I was born. It is a mystery to me why five great Wharfies (poor people who live near the docks and piers) unselfishly took me into their lives and are raising me like I am their own.

There are lots of mysteries in my life. I love the unknown. It gives me energy and purpose and stretches my mental powers. I love to stretch my mind. I'm not given to just taking other people's answers for the big questions in life. I prefer to sort through the facts and arrive at my own conclusions.

My first twelve and a half years of life have been just about the best any guy has ever had in the entire history of mankind. You could find kids who would disagree, I'm sure, but that's just because they haven't been lucky enough to walk through life in my shoes (or on the soles of my rock-hard, bare feet in the summer time!).

I've been told that I tend to get overly enthusiastic about things and that my imagination often leaves the real world in its wake. I have to plead guilty to both, I suppose. I love life and all the grand possibilities it provides me. Sometimes I sing even when the words don't fit and the tune is uncertain. I dance and twirl and jump and roll just because I love to dance and twirl and jump and roll. I've been called uninhibited – I pretty well say what's on my mind and play out the urges that overtake me.

Oh, I would never intentionally say or do anything to

hurt other people or to make them feel bad about themselves. I must admit, though, that on occasion words do find their way out my tongue with very little guidance from my brain.

Having 'good' manners and fitting in socially have never been high on my list of priorities. I can't imagine ever doing something just so somebody else will like me. I like me and I know that I'm a good person so I don't need to make others think I'm any other way. It would be a dishonest relationship right from the beginning. I'm me and they can choose to like me or not like me. Some will. Some won't. That's fine. I sleep well at night knowing I've been the real me all day. I don't see how I could do that if I went against my natural tendencies.

I lick my plate and knife clean – it makes it easier to wash them up. I roll up my pancakes and French toast and dip them in the syrup – way easier and faster than knifing and forking them. At our table, the slurping sound from the straw hitting bottom in a drink is just a happy tune that signals it's time for a refill without having to interrupt the important conversation of the moment.

My life with my Wharfies – and you'll meet them all in time – is filled with wonderful conversations. We talk about ideas – the eventual fate of the Universe, strategies to end war and famine and human suffering, how we can learn important, helpful answers for today's problems by examining history, what steps we can take each day to improve the world – things like that. Yorka – who is the oldest Wharfie in my family and came from Russia thirty years ago, as a lad about my age – says that big minds, minds that make a difference in the world, talk about ideas. Little minds, minds that can't get beyond who did what to whom and how life is unfair and is going down the toilet, not only don't help the world but they contribute to mankind's misery and society's disintegration.

The six of us live at the ocean's edge in a huge, single room loft high above a boat repair shop. Behind us spreads the dingy city and beyond that the grassy, green, hills of the country dotted with small towns framed by farms and parks. I like the waterfront. I suppose that's because I've grown up here – it's what I know. It's comfortable. I like the sweet, heavy scent of the water and the way the musty, pungent

smell of the century soaked wooden pilings tingles the lining of my nose.

I like to fall asleep listening to the water lapping up against the rocks along the shore. When it presents a soft, regular, monotonous, rhythm, I know the next day will offer pleasant weather. When its beat is harsh and irregular I know to expect wind or rain or snow, depending on the season. Sometimes it's nice to know what lies ahead. Other times it's more fun to have the future spring upon me like a grand surprise out of the darkness.

I like to sit at our huge window facing out to sea and watch the boats – big and small, low and tall, spotless and grubby – and wonder where they've been and where they're off to next. Someday I may catch a ride on one and live out some wonder-filled adventure. It wouldn't be a liner populated by what I suppose are stuffy people with their noses in the air showing off their tans and sleek bodies saying, "Look at mine; it's better than yours". I'd go for a tug or a freighter with real people living real lives. Perhaps I should take a liner, though, so I can come to a better understanding of how those huffy folks have come to be that way. I can only imagine the looks I'd get licking my plate or peeling down and going for a skinny dip in the pool. I shudder to think that my worth as a human being could ever be judged from something like that. Of course, I may have misjudged them. I'd find that out, also.

The north edge of the city is only a ten-block walk, so I get up into the woods often. There's a school along the way – private, I think – and sometimes I stop and chat with kids when they're outside. I get on well with some of them right off. Others stand back and look at me as if I'm all things bad. I wear what I can find to wear – never been inside a Wal-Mart in my life. What I have seems fine to me but I can tell many of the kids can't get by what they see – often rolled up cuffs on baggy pants that are too long and a shirt tail hanging down to my knees. The girls seem the most put off that way.

I met a kid a few weeks ago – Gus – I really like him. It appears that, like me, he could care less about all the outside stuff. I'm meeting him after school today and bringing him to the loft. I don't have many friends my own age so I'm really looking forward to it.

There is Suzzy, the daughter of the guy who owns the repair shop down stairs. She's fourteen but really doesn't want me as a close friend. She's always after me to kiss with her. To her kissing boys is more like a sport than a tender means for expressing affection. I must admit that kissing is becoming more and more pleasant as I get older – LOTS more pleasant. I still wouldn't sell my soul for it like many of the older guys seem willing to do. I assume that's an option I can't fully understand until I get there. Like I said, I like mysteries and although I've known about the facts of life for a long time, I've just recently begun to understand about the feelings that go along with it.

I've never chosen to attend school, myself. I understand most kids don't have that option but my situation – unusual as it may be – has lots and lots of perks. No birth certificate means no legal status. No legal status means nobody ever came knocking on our door, looking to drag me off to a classroom.

The idea of a classroom had to have been invented by an idiot. Cram a bunch of kids the same age together in a room to learn. What can I possibly learn from a bunch of kids my own age? They are as dumb about things as I am. I suppose schools would answer me by saying it's the teacher's purpose to do the teaching – as if an adult with a pre-made lesson plan can possibly know what important questions I need answered on any given day. Kids need to be in a place with others of all ages – older ones to share their knowledge and experience and younger ones to be helped and to keep life in fresh perspective. I am convinced; it had to have been an idiot, but I got off track.

I guess having no identity also means no driver's license later on, but here in the city and along the ocean I really don't need one. We don't even have a car.

Otto is one of my Wharfies. He's a teacher – a great teacher. He came from Germany twenty years ago as a young man, twenty-five or so. He's Black – more of a beautiful glistening ebony, actually – if that's of concern to anybody. He keeps me at my studies. I love to learn new things – all of us here do. They all like to hear about what I'm working on – what I'm thinking about – what answers I think

I've found to those questions that are important to me.

Molly – she's about Yorka's age and came from England fifteen years ago – once got hold of a set of school placement tests. I was ten – I guess that's fifth grade age (and, as I indicated, what grade has to do with anything I'm yet to figure out) – and my scores came out like I was a sophomore in high school. I doubt if I'm that much smarter than most kids, but, like I said, I love to learn and that's really what we do here in my family – learn together. One of the great things about that is that I've never been held back – restricted – by only being allowed to learn what some school people decided I was supposed to study each year.

Languages seem to be one of my strengths, of course that's really been forced on me – in a good way. From the day they took me in, Yorka, from Russia, has only spoke Russian to me. Molly only English. Otto only German. Tina is from Mexico – just had her thirty third birthday – speaks to me in Spanish. And Mario from Italy only Italian. I remember when I was about six, I guess, I asked Otto why everybody had their own language except for me. He said that didn't seem fair so we sat right down and selected one for me – French – it was one the other five all spoke, also.

Yorka plays violin and gives lessons to earn money. Molly does sewing for people. Otto tutors several high school students in German and French. Tina makes sack lunches for the dock workers and I help her deliver them most days. Mario sings opera on street corners and passers by put money into his hat. All in all, we make enough for the rent, food, and other necessities of life like clothes, a phone, electricity, water, gas, books, and newspapers. There's not much more that really qualifies as necessities and we only have electricity because the grownups figured I needed a computer. Yorka and Otto need a phone so they can make appointments and it gives me access to the internet. Twenty percent of what we each earn goes into our charity fund – money we give to others who are in need.

I've been rambling but I want you to harbor no misconceptions about me. Like I said: I'm me and that's it. I'm poor and have no desire to be otherwise. I wear whatever I have to wear and I'm grateful for it. I'm probably a social misfit

though I don't get the opportunity to socialize enough to really determine that. My folks – my Wharfies – all say I'm handsome but, although I'm sure they believe that, I'm also quite sure it's not the case. On the few occasions when Suzie and I have kissed recently she has always closed her eyes so I figure that means I'm not all that great to look at during the process. I keep my eyes open. She's really pretty (and very soft).

I bathe every day and keep my clothes clean. I don't shave but they're beginning to kid me about my darkening upper lip. I'm not into hair combing – mine is blond and shoulder length, just the way I like it – but I let Molly and Tina mess over it morning and noon. Sometimes I think it's really theirs and they just let me wear it around town.

Religion intrigues me and I enjoy studying the various belief systems. I'm not sure any of them makes sense to me but I do consider myself a religious person. I once read a definition of religious that I like: "A person is religious if he believes in a set of positive, people-helping, values and regularly strives to live by them." The 'and' in that definition is what makes it work, I think.

I hope when the hormones hit me full blast I won't change in these basic ways – the traits that define who I am, I mean.

I've lived my whole life without a legal name. Some would consider that a big deal, I imagine. I cherish the name my Wharfies gave me. For several years, as a baby, I only had a first name. When they arranged the first letters of their names it spelled out Tommy. Since it was done in that way, it's like I come from them – like I'm a part of them. That's how I feel anyway.

They tell this story about how I came by my last name. As a little kid – two, three, four, I guess – I seemed to know things. I'd bring them objects they were thinking about but hadn't mentioned out loud – a book, a drink, a sweater, and so on. Back before I had words to speak, I seemed to be able to let them know what I needed. They say it was as if I telegraphed an image to them – a bottle, a dry diaper, bath, nap. They began talking among themselves about my 'powers'. That became, our Tommy with his powers and

eventually just Tommy Powers. I like the combination. Tommy seems friendly and caring, and Powers seems sort of mystical and, well, powerful!

Although I continue to feel things, I now mostly depend on language for communication.

Some might call my feelings premonitions or describe them as some sort of ESP. One of them has been gnawing at me over the past few weeks. I can't bring it into focus. It's like the wind is going to change or a window is going to open or suddenly the purpose of my life is going to appear to me. It's feelings – not words – so it's hard to explain out of my mouth or pen.

It set upon me during the evening of the day I first met Gus – the new kid I'm on my way to meet at the school playground. As I got to thinking about it, it came to me that he was on the outside of the iron fence looking in, the same as I was. Maybe he doesn't go there. I didn't ask and he didn't offer. Somehow all that seems related to this feeling. Like I said, I can't bring it into focus.

It's things like this that excite my being from fore to aft. I can feel the tingles in my brain. When I solve a problem or answer a question, the tingles leave with the new insight. That's the down side of learning for me. I love those tingles so I just get up and go in search of a new one. Perhaps it's searching for tingles that keeps me going, fresh, growing.

There is one more thing by way of introduction. You'll have to just learn to live with the words I use and the way I put them together. With seven languages whirling around inside my head (I learned Swahili on my own) things often come out in a strange form – meanings from one and structure from another. Knowing different languages is good, I believe, because each one lets you think about things in slightly different ways. Lots of words can't really be accurately translated, so they allow you to have ideas that other languages don't. But I'm getting off the subject, like you'll learn I often do.

It seemed to grow colder as I walked north along the beach. I wrapped my long, red, scarf one more time around my neck and stretched my too small brown stocking cap down over my ears to warm against the early October chill. My bare

hands returned to the cozy pockets in my dark blue, thigh length, wool, seaman's coat. It had been too big last winter. Fits pretty well this year. By next, I'll have to scrounge up another one and find some smaller kid to pass this one on to. Coats are sort of like friends. Always there when you need them. Reliably warm. Never take offense when you pay little attention to them during the summer.

It's three thirty and I can see Gus just up the street, waiting by the fence, right where he said he'd be. Reliability. One of the truly important traits for a friend. I began waving as he turned and looked down the long block in my direction. He waved and smiled. I didn't know his story and I wouldn't ask. It made no difference. We seemed to like each other well enough to give a relationship a shot. That was enough for now.

"Good to see you, Gus," I said as I got within easy voice range.

We touched knuckles, shoulder high – it's what guys our age do here when we meet. I suppose it's like saying, "I'm feeling friendly toward you." Adults shake hands. Jocks high five. Not sure what girls do. Probably something verbal. Girls' lives seem to revolve around talking (and talking and talking and talking!).

"Got cold today," he said, putting on a shiver as if to verify the fact.

"It'll be warm back at the loft – where I live. We insulated the walls and ceilings ourselves – wadded up newspaper and dropped it down between the outside wall and fishnet stapled to the studs on the inside. It has a black and white – sort of grayish – tone to it with splashes of color from the Sunday funnies. Keeps it warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Never saw walls like it anywhere. It's really a great place to live. If you live in an actual house or apartment it may seem a bit odd at first. There are six of us – five grownups. I don't usually go into the nature of our relationship. Hope that's okay with you."

Gus shrugged as if to say he could have cared less about it. His smile told me that what he did care about was us. I returned it.

I continued talking as we started back down the gently

sloping sidewalk toward my place. For some reason, it seemed appropriate to forewarn him about the arrangement in the loft.

"We each have our own chair, desk and bed. The two women have curtains they can draw around their area for privacy. We pretty well just share everything else."

"You're home schooled, I guess," Gus said.

It hadn't been a question but left room for me to explain if I wanted to.

"Yes. Otto's a teacher. He guides me into areas he thinks I need to learn about. I'd tend to forget math entirely if he didn't nudge me every once in a while. Guess I'm not sure about your schooling."

"I know."

He nodded and seemed to have nothing more to say about it so I let it drop. I'd head for a new topic.

"I've been studying about the theory that instead of there being just one universe there are most likely many thousands of Universes. It opens up lots of interesting questions and answers lots of others, like the irregular expansion rate of our own universe."

He seemed interested but preoccupied – like his mind was really on something else.

"If you'd rather not go up to my place we can hang out down on the wharfs or in one of the empty buildings."

I was trying to get a better feel for what he'd like to do.

"I'm sorry," he said realizing my quandary. "My head is someplace else today. I've been rude, I'm afraid. I'd really like to see your place and meet your . . . what? People?"

"I think of them as my family. It's strange now that I'm talking about it because none of them are like my parents and certainly not brothers and sisters. Aunts and Uncles, maybe. Not my real ones but . . . it's hard to explain. I guess that's the main reason I don't talk about it – our relationship, I mean."

Gus nodded and I felt he understood.

"I don't speak of my family right off, either," he said. "There will be time to go into things like that later."

Later, I thought. He seems to already be prepared to make this a long-term relationship. Perhaps things were going better than I supposed.

"Like to play ball?" I asked.

"Not much into sports anymore."

Any more, I thought? He's thirteen and talking like his days of being fit enough to play ball are long over.

"Checkers? Chess? Mahjong?"

"Yes. Chess is my favorite."

The conversation went on in that same disjointed manner for the next several blocks. It was how conversation often was between new acquaintances so I wasn't bothered by it.

"There's home," I said pointing.

Gus nodded. He looked at the back of the hand I was holding out – my right.

"Interesting mark, there."

"Came with me as original equipment," I joked. "A rosy birthmark shaped like a many-pointed star – a starburst some call it."

Gus smiled – at my attempt at humor, I assumed. We were soon up the stairs, two at a time, with all the associated pushing and shoving that typically goes on between guys in such a situation. It was fun – a kind I didn't get to share very often. I let him beat me to the top – at least that's my story and I'm going to stick with it.

We entered the loft laughing and puffing, reliving each grueling step one had wrested from the other. I pointed to a row of pegs on the wall beside the door and we hung up our coats and such, then plopped down on the long sofa in front of the wood burning stove. I kicked off my shoes and shed my socks – my usual routine. Gus did the shoe thing but left his socks on.

It was then that I first noticed it. I reached out and took his hand in mine. I looked into his face; my forehead furrowed. Gus suddenly took on a very serious expression. My gaze returned to the back of his hand – there it was – big as life – a perfect match to my own original equipment – an exact duplicate of my rose-colored star.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Questions !**

I held our hands side by side and looked into his face, expecting that his excitement should match mine. Had we been twins who were separated at birth? I could find no other explanation – well there was the one about a race of Xapians, all marked with the star, who came to earth from across the universe to live among the humans but that one departed about as soon as it arrived.

Life had taught me better than to believe that the first possible explanation of any mysterious event was likely to be correct. The tingle level in my brain hit an all time high as Gus nodded and began to speak.

“I know the answer but I am not at liberty to just say it right out. I can tell you that it represents something very special. The marks indicate a bond that spans centuries. You and I are not the only ones who bear them. One of us is born each generation somewhere in the world.”

I figured that he must have been putting me on so I gently confronted his illogic.

“But you and I are both about thirteen so how can that be – just ONE every generation?”

“Things are not always as they appear, my friend. I have told you what I can here. The rest must be revealed to you in the proper place and at the proper time. Until then, it is not to be spoken of.”

Before I could besiege him with questions, ever-smiling Otto entered the loft from the stairway. Otto defined the gregarious (outgoing) German and he was immediately at our

side.

“So, introduce me to your fine looking young friend.”

“Otto. Gus. Gus. Otto.”

“Gus? German? Short for Gustoff maybe?” Otto asked perking up at the idea of having one of his lineage in the place.

“No, Sir. Actually, it’s Greek, if anything. It started out as Sagacious, but that being more than most can or want to handle, it soon got shortened to Gus – and yes, I realize there is no Gus in Sagacious, but that’s the story as it was told to me.”

My heart was pounding with excitement and had apparently marked me with a rosy complexion. Noticing, Otto reached out and felt my forehead.

“Look feverish. Feel fine. I’m glad. That way you can go for your weekend with Gus as planned.”

I looked at Gus. I had made no such plan. I had certainly not discussed it with any of my family. I assumed it had been somehow perpetrated by Gus – no, I figured that pulling off something that large would have called for the full-fledged Sagacious.

I smiled up at Otto and nodded.

“Yes. Glad I’m not ill. Wouldn’t want to miss this . . . weekend.”

“Have you packed,” Otto asked.

Gus came to my rescue.

“Tommy and I are like two peas in a pod when it comes to size. He can wear my stuff while he’s up there.”

“You have my number, I believe,” Gus continued addressing Otto as if one adult to another.

“Yes. 587-1726.”

“Good memory, Sir,” Gus said.

It was my experience that Germans liked to be flattered and my new friend seemed to know just how to poke all the right buttons on Otto. I figured that, although it wasn’t really my style, the best strategy was to shut up and follow the lead being set by Gus.

“Tina left snacks to fortify you for your hike up to the woods.”

“Great!” I said, standing to go get the goodies.

“You stay with your friend. I’ll fetch the treats.”

He left to the kitchen area at the end of the loft that was opposite the window and couch where we were sitting.

“Fetch?” Gus giggled. “A German using the term fetch?”

“It’s Molly’s word. She’s English through and through. Stay around long enough and you’ll get an ear full of such ethnic crossovers. You should hear sweet, beautiful, fragile little Mexican Tina shouting a commanding het! with the best of the Cossacks.” (Het is ‘no’ in Russian.)

He laughed out loud.

“What a wonderful place in which to have grown up. I’m sure you will miss it.”

Whoops! Two alarms went off there. To have grown up indicates my growing up had ceased and miss it indicates not continuing to be here. My tingles were beginning to show the stress of suddenly growing anxiety. There would only be a minute before Otto returned.

“You know I have a hundred questions,” I said, not at all sure where to go with the conversation.

“And you’ll have them all answered in time. You know you can trust me, right?”

I hadn’t considered the concept of trust between us before but as I sat there looking him in the eyes – I did, there was no doubt about it.

“Yes, I trust you completely.”

That response seemed to have had two sources. The first was that I had been taught to trust people until they proved to me they were untrustworthy. It was how we lived our lives. But the second was a feeling that arrived at the moment I made my reply. Perhaps it was part of the bond Gus had mentioned.

Otto returned with a tray.

“Sandwiches cut into fourths and chips – how English of Tina, wouldn’t you say? Ham salad and PB&J the way it looks. Milk in the pitcher. I assume the paper bags are for you to use if you wish to take any or all of it along.”

Gus and I reached for sandwiches at the same time swatting off each other’s hands and giggling. He suddenly seemed thirteen again. Fifteen minutes later it was clear that the bags would not be needed. I slipped back into my socks

and shoes, noticing that Gus was already wearing his. I had not seen him going through the motions but again I didn't ask.

I whispered to Gus as we got into our coats.

"When will I be back? I always tell them when I'll be back."

Otto called out from behind the newspaper he had been perusing.

"See you about nine, Monday morning then. Have a wonderful time. Auf wiedersehen!"

As we clamored down the steps I wondered to myself just when the revelations were to begin. Immediately when we hit the street? After we arrived at his place, wherever that might be? As a part of ghost stories around a campfire on Witches' Mountain? I really didn't know about any Witches' Mountain but my mind had a tendency to become overly dramatic when no one was peeking inside my head.

"After we arrive at the cabin," came his answer to my as yet unasked question – well unasked in the sense that I had not spoken it out loud to him.

"The cabin. How nice. In all my twelve and a half years I've never stayed in a cabin."

It had been one dumb thing strung after another but what was, was.

"No need to be nervous about all this, pal," Gus said, putting his arm around my shoulders. "We're just two friends about to spend some happy time together."

I relaxed. He was right. I had become a bit tense – a bit as in tight as a spring in a newly wound alarm clock.

It was hard to know what to say to Gus. He certainly was not just the kid I met hanging out at the school ground. I was coming to realize that meeting had very likely not been just been a coincidence. There seemed to be some bigger plan involved. Had he been watching me, following me, spying on me and my family? If so, for how long? Had he seen Suzie and me kissing? What else had he seen me doing?

"I said, relax! Tell me about yourself. What's really fun for Master Tommy Powers?"

We continued to walk up the gentle grade to the north. He kept his arm around my shoulder. His touch was in some

way reassuring.

“Well, I enjoy reading – most any kind of thing; history, science fiction, mysteries, science. I made a telescope when I was nine and I’ve been mapping the craters on the moon – just to verify for myself that NASA’s map is accurate. I love to swim when the water’s warm enough – needs to be above sixty to be much fun. Wood sculpture – hammer and chisel on a walnut log is great fun for me. Kissing is rapidly moving toward the top of my most enjoyable list. You into kissing – girls, I mean, of course.”

He smiled and nodded. I was coming to see that he did a lot of that.

“Kissing makes the world go ‘round,” he said. “I sure do understand what you’re saying.”

It had not been a satisfactory answer to my question but he seemed to have some reason to be evasive about certain topics. Since I trusted him, I’d just accept that for now. Some guys our age weren’t into kissing yet. That was okay. Nothing wrong with that. Maybe I was pressing my early maturing into the situation inappropriately.

“May I ask how far the cabin is from here?”

“You know the woods beyond the little white church with the tall steeple?”

“Ya.”

“It’s back in there.”

“Really? I’ve been all over that woods – Lancaster Woods I think they call it up there – and I have never run across a cabin.”

It came out sounding like I was questioning his truthfulness and that was not my intention, so I rushed on hoping to deliver damage control:

“Of course, I may just walk in circles in there when I think I’m covering it all, you know.”

We walked on in silence for the better part of a block then I tried again.

“You like living in the woods?”

“Yes. A lot. I love the little animals, and tree climbing has always been near the top of my list of favorite things to do. There’s a pond – fed from a hot spring so it’s warm the year ‘round. The turtles forget to hibernate. You can swim in it if

you like. I do sometimes. Swam every day when I was younger. I enjoy reading, too. I paint some. Always thought working in wood would be fun. Maybe you can give me some pointers.”

“Sure. That would be great! Sometime I’ll bring my tools along.”

He didn’t answer. It made me think my comment didn’t fit into the plan and exactly what I meant by ‘the plan’ I had no idea!”

“If we detour a block to the west we can hit Amy’s Bagel Stand. You like Bagel’s?” he asked.

“Sure. Love them. What’s a block or so when you’re starting out on a new adventure? Let’s go for it.”

Gus was an intriguing mixture of kid and . . . something other than a kid. It was hard to define. . . . Adult, I guess is all that’s left?

“Gussy!” Amy called, arms extended to wrap around him as we approached her stand. She was perhaps thirty-five though at first glance looked older. Her attire resembled a street person. Her movements had the grace of a prima donna.

“Like you to meet my new friend, Tommy. Tommy this is my old friend, Amy the Bagel Lady.”

“Good to meet you, Amy.”

I stopped at that, finding that my bagel-related conversational skills were severely limited.

“Fresh onion – your favorite,” she said, looking at Gus as she lifted two from a wide mouthed jar. “Onion okay with you, Tommy?” she asked hesitating through her smile before wrapping the second.

“Onion will be great!”

I reached for my wallet. She pushed air in my direction with her palms.

“I already made more than enough for one day, Sonny. These are on the Bagel Lady.”

“Thank you. You are very generous. I like your philosophy. It’s mine as well and that of the folks I live with.”

“People. Nothing more important than the people around you. Money can’t buy people or love or caring and what else is important?”

She threw up her hands as if having said all there was to say on the subject.

Gus had an easy-going style. He leaned across the counter and kissed her on her cheek – not a quick, meaningless peck - but a kiss that lingered long enough to say, ‘I love you Amy and thanks for being my friend.’

We returned to the sidewalk and made our way north. Amy called after us to button up our coats. Gus raised his hand acknowledging her suggestion, though he did not turn back toward her.

I suppose the two of us were an interesting contrast in motion. Gus kept to a steady, easy stride. Mine increased and decreased with the tempo of my conversation. I tended to skip and twirl. He kept to an even course. I looked this way and that, taking in everything that came into view. Gus pretty much looked straight ahead. Occasionally he looked in my direction while he spoke to me but more often his gaze was steady front. My conversation reverberated with the highs and lows of emotion while his was pleasant and expressive but more subdued. I imagined that onlookers took him for the more mature of the two of us. That was fine. I would not have either one of us change one whit (another Molly word – whit).

It had been a good forty minutes by the time we finally crossed the lawn behind the church and broke the edge of the woods. I had noticed it before, of course, how after just a few yards into the trees, the sharp, harsh, noise of the city faded and gave way to the soothing natural sounds of birds and rustling leaves. And there was something else. The dirt of the city was, well, dirty! But the dirt there on the floor of the woods seemed clean and refreshing. Perhaps because it was natural and belonged there.

There was no trail but the way seemed obvious. We walked side by side without a need for him to take the lead.

The cabin was just that – a log cabin. It looked to be just one room – strange, I thought if it housed a family. There was a stone fireplace chimney at one end, windows on each side of the plank door, and wooden shingles – ancient in look – atop the steeply slanting roof. Perhaps a sleeping loft up there, I thought, trying to make sense of it.

“What a wonderful spot,” I said overcome by the beauty

and comfort of the setting. “I can’t imagine how I’ve missed it all the times I’ve been up here.”

Instead of entering we walked around back. The pond he had referred to was some fifty feet from the back door and itself about fifty feet from end to end. It was a wide oval which wore a narrow edge of sand encompassing it like a glistening frame. There were rustic, wooden chairs and benches placed around its edge.

Rabbits hopped the grounds in starts and stops, sniffing out the clover patches, and squirrels peeked out from behind the trunks of trees as if thinking it prudent to determine our intentions before resuming their playful antics. A multitude of wildflowers lent spots of color to the soft greens of the grass.

Whoa! Clover? Wild flowers? Green grass in late October there along the northern Atlantic coast! I didn’t think so!

“The warmth of the pond,” Gus explained, again, without my asking the question. “It’s the best explanation I have for you right now.”

I’d take him at his word. I found myself eager to meet his parents. He had said it: “Things aren’t always as they appear.” I had the feeling there was more of that to come.

Curiously, rather than approaching the back door, we returned around the side of the cabin to the front.

“I’ve always thought that front door should be painted some wonderful color,” Gus said, stopping and contemplating the entry. “What do you think?”

“I like color. You’ll remember the upstairs door to our loft is red. Red sort of shouts out, ‘Hey! Here we are! Come join the fun!’ I imagine this setting calls for more of a sage green. Something that whispers gently, and invites the weary traveler in to rest and eat.”

I was there so I know what happened next – otherwise I would be skeptical. The time aged, gray planking of the door gradually took on a green tint – sage green if I’d ever seen sage green.

“What the?” I began, finding nowhere to go with the question. I reached out and touched the surface as if that would be of any help.

“Very good. Powers is an apt and appropriate name for

you, my friend.”

Still stunned and puzzled, I followed him inside turning around as if keeping the door in sight might somehow answer my obvious question.

The interior looked like a cabin. It was furnished like a cabin. It did not look like the place that thirteen-year-old, Gus Sagacious Whoever, would live with his family.

“I know you have many questions,” he said as he closed the door behind us. “Sit. There’s hot chocolate on the table and marshmallows if you like. I prefer hot buttered toast myself – on the plate under the napkin.”

“Oh, I have questions, alright. Like what’s going on here?”

It wasn’t pointed and its lack of specificity combined with its unintended confrontational tone would render a satisfactory response difficult. I had nothing better to offer. Shoes off, I poured us each a hot chocolate and sat back on the big sofa, my feet tucked beneath me. I figured things were in Gus’s court and I’d wait it out. Well, I’d wait it out if that didn’t take longer than sixty seconds.

He began, not with an answer but with a question.

“What do you know about your background?”

It seemed a strange question for one kid to be asking another but what did I have to lose?

“Not much, really. I was born at an early age of mixed parentage – one male and one female – as they say.”

Gus smiled appreciating my attempt at humor. I continued.

“My Warfies tell a pretty short and to the point story. Molly was on her way home from the library about seven o’clock on the evening of March ninth, twelve years ago. She heard me crying and followed the sound to a small wooden crate on a bench at South Pier. It was covered with a new, blue, wool blanket. I was inside, lying on my back, nestled into a goose down pillow fitted with a white, silk, pillowcase. There was string still tied around the umbilical cord at my navel – I was clearly only hours old. She carried me – crate and all – to the loft. I’m told there was never a moment’s hesitation on any of their parts – I immediately became a member of their family.

“The next day a physician friend of Mario’s looked me over and pronounced me fit and healthy and did whatever doctors do to give me a pretty good looking bellybutton. It was the last time I’ve been to a doctor for anything.

“A month or so later Tina suggested I needed a name. It was agreed that going through life as Baby Goo Goo just wouldn’t do.”

Gus smiled. I continued.

“They say that it came to them at the same moment – to arrange the first letters of their names into one for me. I’ve been Tommy ever since. Years later they added the Powers because I seemed to have some mental telepathy thing that impressed them. I was also approaching the age where other people were going to inquire about my last name.

“I assume that one or both of my parents had blue eyes since I do and it’s a recessive trait. Probably at least one also had blond hair. The other was probably brunette, since my skin tends to wear a natural tan even in the winter – Native American, Latino, or middle eastern, maybe. I’m fairly smart, I think, so I imagine they were, also.

“No note had been left in the little wooden box with me. The pillow and blanket were local purchases. The crate had carried jars of olive oil from Europe, so maybe there is an Italian or Greek connection. That’s the sum of what I know and what I’ve come to surmise about my background.”

“And you wonder . . . ?”

“I wonder how I came to have been left for someone else to raise. I want to believe it was because my parents were unable to – for some reason – but that they loved me so much they saw to it I was found by my Wharfies – folks they had pre-determined would provide a fine home and environment for me.”

“What makes you think that was your parents plan?”

“That wharf is isolated once the workers leave at the five o’clock whistle. The only folks who ever tread the boards out there later than that are my Wharfies. My parents knew, alright. I’m going to believe they were in the shadows and waited to see me into safe hands. I have to trust they did the very best for me that they could, considering their circumstances – whatever those were – and I love them for

what they did.”

“You have taken a very positive position on all that.”

“That’s how my family operates. Negative thinking never moves things ahead, never initiates happiness, or improves the welfare of others. It never contributes to the long-term wellbeing of the human species. Negativity is almost always based in pure old selfishness. I believe that getting to be this human being that I am, is the greatest thing that could ever happen, and I want billions and billions who come after me to be able to have the same experience. So, every day I try to do something that will help us live on, as a happy, productive, ever-improving species for a long, long time.”

“That seems like a big order for a twelve-year-old.”

“Twelve and a half, and no, it isn’t – no offense. Neighbors help neighbors. It’s that simple. If every neighbor in the world saw to the welfare of just the two neighbors that live on each side of him, then everybody in the world would be well taken care of. There would be no famine or run away disease. There would probably be no wars because it seems absurd to think folks would go about killing neighbors they’ve grown to love.”

“If it is that simple why has it not happened? Are there dark forces at work that want to see mankind destroyed?”

“At this point in my development I believe there is only one dark force in the world and that is selfishness – self-centeredness – wanting lots of stuff for yourself with no thought about your possible responsibility to other human beings. I know of people who make a hundred thousand dollars a year – or more – and could easily live well on half that. They could use the rest to help the less fortunate and to fight disease and hunger and such, but they don’t. They spend it all on themselves. Unforgivable, according to my beliefs. Clearly not according to theirs.”

“You are a thinker, aren’t you?”

“Yes. It’s probably what I’m most proud of about myself – a thinker who tries to see as many sides to issues as I can search out.”

It didn’t sound like a conversation between two kids. Suddenly, I didn’t sound like a kid either. The tingles in my

brain raced from thought to thought and I noticed that at some point the anxiety had fallen by the wayside. I felt calm and comfortable in circumstances where nobody should feel calm and comfortable. Nothing about my immediate situation seemed reasonable. Suddenly, Gus, himself didn't seem reasonable. Perhaps my imagination had taken control of my mind and gone off on some mystical tangent from which I was unable to return. Bessie, the candle lady, had warned me repeatedly that it could happen if I didn't keep a bridle on it.

The sofa was real. The cocoa was real. I popped a marshmallow into my mouth. It was real. So what was going on?

"Yes. What is going on?" Gus said, pretty well proving to me that he was privy to my thoughts. "The time has come for you to understand – to understand what is going on now and what will be going on for the rest of your life."

It sounded ominous – scary. I wasn't entirely sure I was ready to hear what he had to tell me. I hugged myself across my chest as if for protection.

Gus leaned his head back slightly, closed his eyes, and furrowed his brow, clearly engaged in some intense mental process. The walls of the cabin rippled before my eyes – they heaved and swelled and receded. I gripped the arm of the sofa and looked around. The ceiling bent and twisted, cracking open and rolling back into blackness. I stood, slowly backing up, witnessing it all in absolute awe. Suddenly I was no longer inside a simple log cabin but in the great room of a gigantic, rustic, mansion, three or more stories high and covering an acre if a foot. I walked to the nearest window and looked down into a foggy valley far below. I was high on a mountain top. Where? How? Why?

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**Answers!**  
**(Well, some, anyway.)**

Gus walked to my side and put his hand on my shoulder as I continued to look outside at the endless, steep, rocky, cliff below and the clouds drifting by at eye level.

“We are in Calibration Hall. It is a place where time stands still and any point on Earth is but a blink away. All Calibrator Tyros begin their journey here. I did, myself, many centuries ago.

I had just about had it with this blind trust thing and the unexplained mysterious goings on. I’m sure my tone implied that.

“Centuries ago? You’re thirteen! That’s like only thirteen percent of one century. And Calibration? As I recall that means to adjust some function in a precise way. Tyro? A novice, a beginner? And suddenly set down here in this huge old mansion that appeared out of thin air. I just don’t get it Gus. Am I still asleep? Is Mario about to awaken me with a blustery aria from *The Barber of Seville*?”

“I understand your impatience and your wonderment. Just trust me for a few more minutes. Can you do that?”

“I suppose. What’s a few minutes in a place where time stands still?”

I folded my arms. It was intended to be sarcastic but I wasn’t very good at that and it came out sounding humorous.

If I had been of fairer skin, he would have seen me blush. We both laughed. It felt good to laugh. That time I was the one nodding and smiling.

I'm well aware that my mind has a blatantly bizarre, bent, and for a split second it considered the possibility that Gus's smiling and nodding thing may have been contagious. He continued.

"Let me begin the explanation while I show you to your quarters."

"Quarters? I have quarters?"

He smiled but didn't respond to my comments. We walked across the huge room filled with rustic chairs, sofas, tables, and such. Near one end was a massive stairway. The dark, bare, wooden, steps were fifteen feet wide and a full eighteen inches, front to back. The substantial railings appeared like low fences, there to protect its momentary guests against unseen dangers. There were twenty-two steps to the landing at which point the stairway narrowed and split left and right, turning back out over the great room. Twenty more steps and we were on the second floor. I figured that at a standard eight-inch rise per step that meant the room below was nearly thirty feet tall. Gus had been speaking as we climbed.

"You will understand about my age, presently. Each generation produces one, new, Calibrator somewhere in the world. I was born on a small island in the Aegean Sea, off Greece. It's like a quadruple recessive gene. We all carry the star. But more about that later. While the mother is carrying the child, she gets a sense of the remarkable nature of the baby within her. She is moved to find a home for it that will guide its growth in an unselfish, altruistic, manner and that can nurture its mind in every possible way. Only a few mothers have found that place was to be with them. It is an exceptional act of selflessness on their part. Yours clearly found a perfect home for you."

Okay, so, maybe if I'd just shut up, I would receive the answers. We continued down a wide hall lined with many identical doors, each one as if standing at attention.

"Calibrators are born with exceptional minds – not in ways that can be tested, but in ways that are hidden, buried

deep inside. Those skills and attributes lay mostly dormant for more than a dozen years. During that time, there are other traits – love, compassion, integrity, purpose, self-esteem – that must be developed so the powers will be properly utilized and channeled.

“On the day of the youngster’s thirteenth birthday, the powers blossom. The experience is akin to the eruption of a volcano or the head-on crash of speeding locomotives. Unprepared for the experience, the youngster would lapse into irreversible insanity. That is why, at twelve and a half, Tyros are brought here – so they can be trained and prepared for the extraordinary event and their life beyond.

“Each Tyro – right up to the moment of transformation – has the option to stop the change – to have the powers removed and live out his life as a regular human being. A few have done that and there is no shame attached to such a decision. But you need to know about the other possibilities first, so you can make a wise decision in that regard. Wisdom is the ultimate blend of knowledge and experience – well taken. Here at Calibration Hall you will receive both so your decision will be wisely proper for you.”

Sometimes his pattern of speaking was as strange as my own. Still, I figured I understood well enough what he had said.

We stopped before an unmarked, wooden, door. It looked just like the dozens of other doors we had passed. If it gave entrance to my quarters, how was I to ever find it again? Gus spoke as if in answer to my question.

“You need to choose your color – a color that feels like the person you are – that flows from your personality and your goals and values.”

“Now?” I asked uncertain of the timeline he intended.

Gus stood back and nodded.

“Yes. Now. It can be changed at the time of your Confirmation, though it seldom is.”

I had no hesitation.

“Blue. Light blue. The color of my eyes. It is soft, and like the sky above, never-ending. It may not seem strong like red or orange, but my strength has always been subtle. I’m a thinker and a planner, not a fighter.”

“Then blue it shall be. Fix your door!”

“Fix my door?”

I didn’t understand.

“Like you fixed the cabin door. Give this one your color.”

“I fixed the cabin door? I thought you were pulling my leg out there. Like it was a trick or you had . . .” I had nowhere to go with the thought so I stopped. I faced the door and closed my eyes – why, I have no idea. In my mind’s eye, I conjured up the image of a large vat containing blue – not blue liquid, not blue steam or smoke, just blue – and directed it to flow onto the door.”

“Very nicely done,” Gus said, clapping, slowly and softly, well before I had the courage to take a peek.

I was amazed! I was pleased with the hue. I was so confused I didn’t know where to begin with my questions.

Gus pressed on the old, black, iron latch and pushed the door open. I was met by a black nothingness. There was no room. There was . . . nothing. I looked over my shoulder into Gus’s face, surely a question on my own.

“What do you want it to be? Big, small, wood, marble. What view do you want from the window?” Mountains, plains, ocean, forest? It is yours to build. Close your eyes and assemble your dream room.”

I followed his suggestion, after all, the color thing had worked. My room would be open and large with braided rugs and big, soft, comfortable furniture straight from the Salvation Army Thrift Store in Uptown. There would be a huge window along one side with a magnificent view of the ocean, which I had learned to love. There would be a desk and books and my telescope if that were allowed. I had heard new nuns had to leave everything behind but didn’t know if that applied here. Candles and lanterns for light at night; I loved the smell of a lantern. Oh, and a bed. Not too big, but soft and easy to make up mornings.

“I’m ready,” I said, my eyes still closed, then added. “Is this it or do I get to add stuff later on?”

“You can change it a thousand times a day if you like,” came Gus’s replay. I could hear the smile and hint of excitement in his voice.

I opened my eyes and there it was. Everything I had envisioned plus something extra.

"I didn't paint it with exactly that view out the window," I said.

"How is it different?" he asked.

"Well, I saw it as just the vast ocean, greenish blue and glistening in the sun. But the angle is different and there – along the lower right side – is the wharf with the Boat Shop and our loft upstairs. It's a really nice touch but I'm not sure where it came from."

"Some of our wishes we can state. Others remain hidden from our thoughts. It must have been a powerful wish to have made itself surface in this way."

"It's been my life and its people have been my world. When you put it the way you did I can fully understand why it popped up. I'm glad it did. Will I be able to watch them come and go?"

"Your stay here will be like a tiny moment in time to them although to you it will be six, very full, very strenuous, very rewarding, months."

"Six months. Six months without kissing Suzie?"

I hung my head.

"I guess that was just plain selfish, wasn't it?"

"I'd say that was just plain normal and remember, I didn't say there would be no attractive young ladies here."

Suddenly my life brightened. Attractive young ladies. Maybe my time holding Suzie close and mingling germs from mouth to mouth had just been practice for something even greater.

"Are you going to ever enter your room or do we just stand out here in the drafty hall?" Gus said chiding me a bit.

I crossed the threshold with just my right leg, cautiously planting my foot on the floor to make certain it was really there. It was.

We entered. I bounced on the chair and sprawled out on the bed. I quickly ran my eyes along the books on the shelves. Most were familiar – like old friends. I went to the window and looked as far as I could see. I was beginning to understand it probably wasn't real, well, not real in the sense I was used to having things real, anyway. It didn't seem to

matter. I turned to Gus ready to move on.

“What’s next?”

“Our conversation needs to continue. There are many things for you to learn here at the outset of your life as a Calibrator.”

“Beginning, perhaps, with a little more about just what a Calibrator is?” I suggested.

“Yes. The very best place to begin. Sit, if you will.”

I looked around the room – my room – and decided on the sofa. I hated shoes and sox so was soon out of them and had snuggled myself into my favorite, comfortable, feet tucked under, position. Gus took a chair across a bulky coffee table from me.

“The human mind is a marvelous creation,” he began. “We can think of it as having various parts or functions. By paying attention to one or the other we can accomplish specific things. We can choose to remember. We can choose to create. We can choose to learn. We can choose to solve problems or to engage dozens of other functions.

“We also all choose a spot along our mind’s Integrity Path. That spot determines how we relate to right and wrong. Most people understand the difference – right moves mankind in a positive, growth producing, peaceful direction while wrong does the opposite, being hurtful and damaging, with the power to eventually destroy our species through selfishness. You will define the concept more precisely and personally as you go along. I bring it up at this point to help you understand the concept of calibration. Think of it as fine tuning a radio to get rid of static or block stations whose signals interfere with the one you want.

“People fine tune their position along their Integrity Path every day. Many become so comfortable within the hurtful zone – selfishness, hatred, and such – that they stop trying to grow toward something better – altruism, selflessness, caring, loving, helping. The Calibrator has the power to enter other minds and restart that fine-tuning process – calibrate it.

“Everybody has the entire Integrity Path within his mind. That means everybody has the potential to choose living their life toward the ‘Right’ end of the path or the ‘Wrong’ end of the path – the good end or the bad end – the loving end or the

hating end – the helpful or the hurtful end; however, you may characterize it. Many less stable folks find themselves running up and down that path from one place to another depending on the situation of the moment. Some people – say loving fathers at home – may run almost to the opposite end of the Path every morning as they arrive at work, ready and willing to hurt their competitors, or even cheat their employers or steal from the business. Then at night, they run the path in the other direction, arriving home at the loving father position.

“A person who has achieved a state of Integrity, consistently lives his life high on the positive end of the Path. He has developed a set of positive, people-helping, values and every day he does his best to live up to them – to implement them in his daily encounters with other people.”

I understood immediately and indicated that to Gus.

“It’s what Yorka and my Wharfies taught me. It’s neighbors helping neighbors. It’s helping the selfish learn the value of becoming altruistic – being constantly helpful – being a model of what is right and good.”

I sat back and thought for a moment then asked:

“So, Calibrators can go inside people’s minds and move them from a lower place to a higher place along the Integrity Path?”

“It’s not that simple, though you are grasping the general principle – and understanding the general principle is all that is necessary at this point.”

“Let me just make sure of one thing,” I said. “Calibrators are good guys, right?”

Gus smiled. Calibrators are very good guys, but you are already a very good guy, Tommy Powers. Your studies here will enable you to further brighten the world and the lives of its people. It will help you battle the bad guys in our world, not by defeating them, but by helping them want to change – to join us good guys. A defeated bad guy is still a bad guy. A bad guy turned good is a new teammate to help us work for the betterment of all men everywhere.”

I interrupted.

“And so, by bad guys you really just mean regular people who have for some reason got comfortable at the wrong spot on the Integrity Path.”

“Excellent. You are a quick study, Tom.”

“If it’s all the same to you I’d rather be called by the whole thing, Tommy, otherwise some of my most loved ones get left out.”

“Forgive me. I certainly should have understood that.”

“So, what will I be studying and stuff like that?”

“There are four levels of Calibrators and one’s rank, if you want to think of it in that way, is determined by his proficiency – skill level. Beginners, such as yourself, are Tyros – but you know that. The next step is Practitioner followed by Master and finally Sage.”

“And at each level we become able to do different kinds of things?” It had been a question but reflected what I thought made sense.

“That’s correct. Let me give you just a few examples. It may seem complicated and hard to understand but with time I promise it will become clear.”

“I nodded. I was hooked. I suddenly understood this was indeed what my mission in life should be.”

“Calibrators have five, major, Powers. One is called Mind Seep. At the beginning level – Mind Speak – it is possible to transfer your ideas into another person’s mind – not change their ideas but to add new ones into the mix that is already there so they can be considered. These seeped ideas remain only temporarily so may need to be re-seeped into the same mind numerous times.”

“Like when as a baby, I could let my family know when I needed things.”

“Yes. Exactly. You have undoubtedly been doing it all your life without being aware of it.

“At the middle level, Practitioners can Mind Read, that is, read the positive thoughts of others – never the negative, however, just the positive. And, at the highest level the Master Calibrator is empowered to do Mind Fix – seep an image or concept into another’s mind that will stay there forever. It may not become the guiding concept but it will always be there making its point.

“Like a conscience,” I observed.

“In many ways, yes.”

He continued.

“Those are the three steps of Mind Seeping. I will cover the powers of the Sage later.

“Then there is Place Leaping. It, too, develops in three stages. Near Jumping allows a Calibrator to move himself instantaneously through space to any spot he can see from where he stands – but never beyond his range of vision and never through solid matter. At the highest level is Far Jumping which allows the Calibrator to move anywhere on earth and remain there indefinitely. In between is Limited Far Jumping in which the Calibrator can move to any spot on earth, but only for a matter of minutes after which he is automatically returned to the place from which he started.”

“I’m ready!” I said excited at the prospect.

“Probably not,” Gus said, “and that is in no way meant as a put down. But all these powers must be used thoughtfully and to do that takes years of training and practice.”

I nodded, feeling a bit foolish for presuming I was ready. I got swept up in the excitement of the process and the grand possibilities I sensed.

“The third power is Visioning. There are two aspects. The first is the ability to cloud other people’s minds temporarily – to confuse them or momentarily turn off one of their senses – like sight or hearing. It is called simply Mind Clouding. The second level forces hidden memories to surface in their minds and is called Mining. It is the skill that takes the most training and caution because it has the most devastating potential – some memories are buried because to remember them would cause mental collapse.”

I swallowed hard, suddenly beginning to feel the tremendous responsibility that came along with the powers.

“The fourth Power is Invisibility. Again, there are three levels of skill. At the first level the Calibrator can make himself and anything he is touching invisible – first for short periods and with practice for longer periods. At the middle range, objects can be made invisible, again for longer times with practice. At the highest level – and one to be used only after the most thoughtful consideration – is the ability to make other people invisible.”

It was overwhelming. Was I really to acquire those

awesome skills? There was one more Power for Gus to describe.

“Time-X. It stands for time expansion – the expansion of time for the Calibrator and no one else. Right now, for example you and I are under the power of Time-X. Time will expand to give us however long we need to prepare you for your confirmation – if you choose to go through with that and you’ll learn about the options later. As far as your family is concerned virtually no real time will have elapsed.”

“I suppose that power comes in stages also.”

“That’s right. Beginners learn to expand seconds and minutes into hours. Next, hours into days. Finally, days into months and years. There is one caution when calling upon the Power of Time-X. Once the process of time expansion has begun it must run its course. It cannot be stopped or reversed.”

“So, you’re saying if I decide to call off my Confirmation – and it sounds like that is an option – I’ll still have to hang around here for six months?”

“Technically, yes.”

“Technically? It seems to be a strange word to use in the midst of all this magic.”

“None of this is magic, Tommy. All of this grows from the powers present in the deepest recesses of the Calibrator’s human mind.”

“Sorry. Okay. But still, technically?”

“The Sage has authority over all the powers. He can intervene if it is his sense that is necessary.”

“Do I ever get to meet the Sage – I take it from how you speak that there is only one Sage.”

Gus stood.

“Come. I will take you to him now. It is time.”

It was a strange, chilled, feeling that overtook me. Just hours before I had known nothing of any of this but now it was the biggest thing in my life. The day before sage had been something in a jar on Tina’s spice rack. At that moment, however, it represented the most humongous force I had ever encountered.

Gus stood and held out his hand. I followed his lead and we walked together. We crossed the hall and entered a

golden door. I hadn't noticed it before. Somehow, that didn't surprise me. Inside was a huge room, like something out of a gladiator movie where the king meets his loyal subjects. At the far end of the room was a large, throne-like chair on a slightly raised platform. The room would be called stately or elegant and not at all what I had expected considering how rustic everything else was. We walked directly toward the big chair and stopped some ten feet away.

"Stay here," Gus whispered in my ear.

He climbed the three steps to the platform where the chair sat, and stood there facing it. Then, as my young friend began slowly turning back toward me, his shoulders broadened, he grew taller, his jeans and pull-over melted into a beautiful, floor length, robe in a rainbow of colors. By the time he was facing me straight on, his face had aged. It was bearded – very long and gray. His cheeks and forehead were lined and his eyebrows bushy and unbridled. He smiled and I knew Gus was in there somewhere.

"I am Sagacious, Sage of the Calibrators. I am all ages. I am your friend, your teacher, and your confidant should you accept me in those ways. Excuse the subterfuge – appearing as Gus and all – but quite frankly when I walk the streets looking like this people just don't take me seriously."

He looked around the great room and shook his head.

"And excuse the lavishness of this place. It's an embarrassment! I must take time to cozy it up. The previous Sage was just a little full of himself and, well, you can see what happened. The place is only used twice every generation and frankly I tend to forget it's here 'til it's time to receive a precious new Tyro like yourself, Tommy Powers."

He grew silent as if to give me an opportunity to reply but I had nothing to say. Very honestly, I was just pleased my pants were still dry.

///

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Training Begins

"We need to continue talking," the Sage said looking about the room and shaking his head, "But this is a terrible environment for new friends to get comfortable with each other."

He beckoned me close and leaned down, placing his large, gaunt, hand on my shoulder.

"Did you like the cabin, Tommy?"

"Yes, er, Sir. I felt very comfortable there, considering the frankly bizarre novelty of the situation that was unfolding."

I hadn't been sure just how to address a Sage – never having met one before – so I went with, Sir. He turned me around facing away from him and we were immediately back in the cabin – or the cabin was back around us – or however it worked. We sat where we had been sitting before – well, where Gus and I had been sitting before. The hot chocolate had been refilled and the aroma of hot buttered toast filled the air.

"There are just several other basic things I need to relate to you before you begin asking your questions," he said, settling himself into the big chair – one that had swallowed Gus but seemed to fit the Sage perfectly."

I nodded silently, content in hearing that my time would come.

"Once a Calibrator always a Calibrator – it is an eternal commitment so it is not to be entered into lightly. If that sounds like a marriage vow, I suppose it is in a way. As physical beings, we Calibrators age – as you can plainly see

by looking at me. But, as Calibrators, we always remain thirteen.

When we use our powers, we are always returned to age thirteen. It is why I had you face away from me in the reception room just now. I thought it would be confusing.

"Calibrators don't live forever but we do live on across many, many centuries; none of us can be sure just how long. We're a fairly indestructible lot although I caution you about being downright reckless like jumping off tall buildings or laying yourself across tracks in the path of an oncoming train. You say you've never needed to consult a doctor so you can begin to understand what I am saying.

"A Calibrator can appear any age at or less than his own physical age. You, for example, will soon be able to appear like a newborn or a five or eight or ten-year-old, but not a fourteen or 367-year-old."

I nodded, understanding the limits, but baffled at the underlying concept of shifting ages.

"Your powers are only to be used to benefit others. A Calibrator could, for instance, seep a few minds and soon be the wealthiest man on earth or the most powerful man on earth or have any young lady as his wife. But that is not how it is. We meet our own basic needs – the kind of needs you have been used to having met in your life with your family – you call them your Wharfies, I believe."

I nodded, confirming the Wharfie thing, although I was more interested in what happened if a Calibrator did use his powers selfishly. The Sage heard my thoughts – an idea that made me very uncomfortable, by the way.

"It's a question every Tyro asks and my answer is always the same. No calibrator has ever done that. In fact, I'm quite certain none have even ever considered doing it. Selfishness is not a part of us, you see. We are givers not takers. We are builders not destroyers. We are participants not observers. We are helpers not users. I will provide you with the underlying reason, later.

"The basic approach of a Calibrator is not to force his will on others or to change them without their consent. Our approach is to provide alternatives – options – and give people an opportunity to make comparisons so they can make

their own, studied choices based on facts and information rather than mere unfounded opinion. Many folks have come from environments where more appropriate alternatives were never presented – were never present, perhaps. Some families teach hate toward another group so the child who grows up there has never really had a chance to look at other options for relating to that group – compromise, separation, understanding, forgiveness, love, and so on down the list of positive alternatives. When we provide alternatives, we force confusion upon our subject. Confusion can be good because it forces people to examine the alternatives in ways they haven't before.

"Let me try to say it another way. We are not dictators telling others – even the most destructive beings on earth – HOW they have to believe and behave. We are not even teachers who, too often, I've found, just present material to be learned without ever relating it to the possibilities of an improved society. We are Facilitators. Facilitators set up circumstances so their students must consider possibilities and learn how to make appropriate decisions.

Your Wharfies are fine examples of facilitators – they have presented you with a wide range of opportunities and have encouraged you to examine and evaluate carefully and thoughtfully before making choices. When you were younger and had less background knowledge and less wisdom, they offered more direction and set tighter limits for you. As you grew in knowledge and wisdom those restrictions were relaxed more and more. Their hope for you is that once you reach adulthood you will have been so well prepared to manage your own life that you will never again need them. Want to be with them and enjoy their company? Yes! But actually need them to direct any part of your life, no!"

My natural bent is to have my say, and without thinking I followed it. I felt the need to restate what I was pretty sure he had been saying.

"So, learning the powers is just a tiny part of becoming an effective Calibrator."

"You have heard me well. And there can be only ONE kind of Calibrator and that IS an effective one."

"I don't know if I'm up to that kind of responsibility."

"You're not even thirteen yet, Tommy. You're not expected to be up to that kind of responsibility yet."

Some part of me really understood that. I had learned it before. All my life I had only been allowed the kinds of responsibilities that I was ready to undertake successfully. Sometimes, after I had gone to bed at night I heard my family talking about what next steps I was ready for. They thoughtfully planned together how I was to be raised. I was beginning to appreciate them more and more. His silence made me think I was expected to respond.

"It's why this place exists – a place for me to learn and practice and improve until I'm ready."

"Exactly," he said nodding his typical, slow, deep, full nods.

"In other words, it is like a good family – a successful family would be a better way of saying it, I suppose."

Again, the Sage remained silent, letting me gather my thoughts. I was getting the feeling that things moved along at a pretty unhurried pace in this place. I liked that. I also understood I was entering a new family. I didn't understand how it worked or who it was. The Sage heard my thoughts.

"Is that your next question?" He asked.

"I suppose so. By the way, this thing about you knowing everything I'm thinking is very uncomfortable."

"Let's deal with that first, then. A Calibrator never invades areas of thoughts unless he has good reason to believe it is necessary for the eventual growth and improvement of the other person."

"So, when I'm thinking about boy-girl stuff you're not listening?"

He chuckled out loud and it went on long enough that I became infected and laughed with him, though not really understanding why.

"What?" I asked at last.

"Tommy, my son. In most ways, you are a teenager. And teenage minds spend a tremendous amount of time and energy thinking about what you call boy-girl things. If they didn't our species would have died out eons ago! With those thoughts zapping around your mind so often it is virtually impossible for me to avoid them. Those are the thoughts you

are supposed to be having. Someday you may be hearing my own."

"You think about boy-girl stuff at your age?"

He leaned in my direction and his tone became confidential as he whispered. "I'm only old. Not dead!"

I suppose it should have been reassuring that such pleasures continue well beyond the time I figured they'd be long gone. Actually, it just added an area of discomfort to the relationship. I'd have to work on it.

"I'll make you a deal," the Sage said in what I thought was a very un-Sage-like approach. "We'll just talk about girls and boy-girl things when I'm Gus. How will that be?"

I nodded. I thought I could learn to live with that. Guys talk together about that kind of thing. It did raise another important concern.

"Marriage?"

"Oh, Yes! I was married for nearly all of my first three hundred years."

I gulped. "To the same woman? Another Calibrator?"

"No. There were six wonderful ladies in my life – one at a time, of course. Calibrators are always male. It doesn't seem fair, perhaps, but Mother Nature often has ways that don't seem fair – hurricanes, earthquakes, disease, human deformities. There will be time to examine that topic more completely later on. Just remember, the Calibrator genes cannot continue to circulate throughout the human species without children like you."

I nodded. So somewhere in my past had been at least one Calibrator. How cool was that! My basic question had been answered. Marriage and all that went with it was still a possibility – like a requirement, it now appeared. I was nowhere near ready to think about marriage but now I understood what options there would be for me when that time came.

"Seems like I have a humongous number of things to learn. I'm ready to get started."

"You already have started, of course, haven't you?"

Realizing he was right gave me a warm, deep down, feeling of belonging. That place was becoming my place.

"There is one – no two – more questions," I said.

The Sage listened.

"The family thing. We sort of skipped over it and went right to the romantic stuff. Then, second, you said there would be girls?"

"The family thing. Yes. Well, when you are confirmed you will be the 125th Calibrator in our family. We trace our line back three thousand years. They married very young in the early times."

"And all of you are still around?"

"All but two of us. It's why we don't have a good handle on the life-span concept."

"Wow!"

I sat back again, unable to really conceive of how long three thousand years would be.

"They all drop in from time to time. This is our home and our home base, but we spend most of our existence out among the people of the earth, doing what we are here to do."

"Pardon me for saying so, but considering the lousy state of things in the world today, I have to wonder how effective you guys have really been."

Again, my tongue had talked before my mind had thought.

The Sage just smiled and said:

"An alternative question – an option – you could ask would be: "If the Calibrators had not been so very successful, would there be any human race left at all?"

"I feel embarrassed for having said what I said. You're indicating that it is a huge job even for such a talented group of beings. Please excuse my one-dimensional thinking about it."

"Options! Devising options and alternate possibilities will become a large part of your initial training. Our job usually comes down to learning how to examine issues from all possible points of view before taking action or forming opinions."

"I was impressed by how you defined Wisdom, earlier," I said. "You said wisdom depended on blending knowledge and experience well taken. By 'well taken' I assume you mean leaning well from the experiences you have. Learning what works and what doesn't work and what may need to be

improved upon even if it does sort of work."

"That is what I meant. A person can't make good decisions if he is ignorant of basic facts that play a part in the problem or area being considered. Here's a simple example. Jimmy may think that reading the chapter for the first time just before taking the test would be a good idea because all the information would be really fresh in his mind. If he had taken time to learn the facts about how learning really takes place he would never have used that approach because those who have studied learning have found the 'all at once approach' fills the mind with too much new material and it becomes easily confused and scrambled. If Jimmy had known how learning takes place best, Jimmy would have read the chapter a week before and then gone back and turned each fact into a question he could review several times before going in to take the test. That is how learning really takes place most efficiently. Jimmy had made a bad test preparation decision because he hadn't taken the time to learn the facts about learning. He was proceeding according to opinion or unfounded speculation and not fact."

"I guess I'm fortunate that I've always loved to learn new stuff. You never know when it might come in handy."

"One of the saddest things is that many people never ask the most important question: Could there be a better or different or more useful way? They just assume the one way they know about is the only way, or at least the best way without really ever examining alternatives."

"It's like an excuse not to look any further."

"It can be that for sure. Now, you said there were two questions?"

"Girls. Where are they?"

It didn't seem a humorous question to me but clearly did to him. His laughing soon had him jiggled back into the form of Gus.

"Okay! Here's how it is," Gus began. "You'll probably go to classes here in basic subjects like history and science and such. There will be girls in those classes, too. They are the children of the Calibrators – I suppose there are about a dozen kids your age so chances are at least half will be girls."

"Okay! When do classes start?"

"The Sage will determine that. He'll let you know."

"But you're the . . ."

"At this moment in this place I am Gus, your thirteen-year-old pal and I hope to soon make that your best pal! I have grown to like you very much."

"That will be really cool. I've never actually had a best friend my own age."

"Well, Pal – soon to be my best friend – let me show you some stuff you're going to be learning to do."

"Great. Go for it!"

"Okay. Notice carefully that now I'm here, but . . . now . . . I'm on our lap!"

He bent over in laughter as he got off me. It had been a humorous place to pop onto, I suppose.

"That's near jumping, I assume," I said both impressed and bewildered.

"Near Jumping. Right. Now, see that spot about three feet out from the south wall and six feet down from the ceiling?"

"Out there in space?"

"Yes."

"Ya. I see it."

"Watch this!"

An instant later, there he was just hangin' out on mid-air at the spot he had indicated.

"You can do that?"

He looked down at me silently, his arms folded, a frown forming on his face. I tried to recover from my idiotic question.

"Well, yes, I suppose you can since you're there. That's about the coolest thing I've ever seen. More!"

There was a knock on the door and I went to open it. There he stood grinning from ear-to-ear.

"Far Jumping, I guess – jumping further than you can see, which clearly includes penetrating solid objects like walls."

"You have picked up the terms quickly."

"Thank you."

It had been another dumb thing for me to say but it didn't seem to bother Gus in the least.

"Come out here with me," he said holding out his hand.

He backed up a few yards and I walked to him. He made that twirling motion with his finger and I turned around. I then saw that we were outside the huge Calibration Hall rather than the little cabin.

"See that small, pointed, roof over the window up in the attic?"

I looked.

"Yes. The dormer."

"I love to sit up there and look out over the valley. Want to take a look?"

"I figure I have a lot of studying and practice to do before I'll be able to get up there."

"Well, since we are soon to become best friends I figured I'd just . . ."

He reached out and put his arm around my waist. The next thing I knew we were both straddling the roof.

". . . I'd take you along with me today," he said finishing his sentence as we emerged up there some eighty feet above the ground, and like a zillion feet above the floor of the valley below.

"Wow! I seem to be saying that a lot. I got this problem, I'm afraid."

"What?"

"My imagination takes hold of me sometimes and I have to really struggle to reenter the real world. I'm guessing that I've just gone way too far this time and I can't get back."

"Perhaps a little side trip will help solve that one. May I?"

I assumed he was asking my permission to take me on the little side trip he had just mentioned. I nodded. A split second later we were back at my loft. Tina had just entered and was speaking to Otto who was still in his chair reading the paper.

"Tommy and his friend get off, okay?" she asked as she hung up her coat.

"Yes, they did. Surprised you didn't meet them at the bottom of the stairs. They gobbled up your snack like they hadn't eaten in weeks."

"I'll miss him these next few days. It's the longest he's ever been away from us you know. By the way have you seen

his telescope?"

"No. He probably loaned it to Mr. Houseman again. I think I heard Tommy say his grandchildren were coming for the weekend."

"Enough?" Gus asked right out loud.

"Shhhh!" I whispered, "They'll hear you."

"No. We're invisible to them. Go ahead. Walk up to her and tap her on the shoulder."

"That's an impish thing to do, you know," I said laughing into my hand at the prospect.

Ten seconds later I tapped, she turned round and round looking for its source, then stopped content to just rub her shoulder.

"Okay. Now look in your bed to make sure you aren't asleep and dreaming."

My bed was convincingly empty. A moment later we were back in my quarters at the Hall.

"Convinced this not just your imagination?" Gus asked.

"Yes. I guess so. It is confusing. I suppose you remember how it was at the start."

"Yes. I do understand. It will take a while to have it all feel right. I'll leave you now. Dinner's at eight in the dining room – first floor rear – you can't miss it. Huge double doors. Rest, clean up, read, get comfortable in here – whatever you want to do. Dinner is in your honor so you'll sit up front with the Sage. Afterwards there will be a dance in the great hall. It will be lots of fun. I'll introduce you around to the other kids."

"I love to dance but I really don't know how to do any official dances – the waltz maybe and the two step – but nothing like the kids do today. Never having had TV I'm really not up on stuff like that."

"You'll do fine, believe me. Until later then."

He disappeared before my eyes.

He was right; I needed time to get accustomed to everything that had happened to me over the past however long it had been. Apparently three or so hours there at the Hall but only a few minutes back at the loft. I decided on a nice long, warm, shower.

One problem. There was no shower. I had left it out of my room design. It presented a quandary but not for long. I

had created the room. Certainly, I could create a shower. How would I design a really great shower? It would be about six feet square and have a full length outside window so I could look at the grounds and trees and sky. It would have water jets coming from all directions and it would have no bothersome door but still would not splash water out on the floor.

I sat back, closed my eyes and saw myself standing in the middle of it all. I felt the warm water, like a gentle spring rain, began dropping onto the top of my head. I opened my eyes. It was just as I had envisioned it. There was one more problem, however. I had forgotten to remove my clothes and they were soaked through by the time I finally struggled out of them. I'd deal with that later.

It took nearly a half hour before I'd finally had enough. Hot water was at a premium at the loft. It was supplied by solar heated tanks on the roof so showers were limited to ten minutes, tops.

I dried off on a towel that appeared the moment I reached for it. I needed dry clothes but I had no idea what kind of things were worn by the people there. I should have thought to ask. Gus dressed like I dressed so I tried to think myself up a pair of jeans and a tee shirt for starters. They didn't appear. I wrapped the towel around my waist and stretched out on the bed to think.

The next thing I remember was hearing Gus's voice and feeling his arm shaking my shoulder.

"Hey, Lazy head. You're going to be late for dinner. I figured it would be well for me to come and check on things since everything is so new to you."

I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

"Dozed off, I guess."

"Looks like it," he said, smiling.

"Clothes, I guess is the first order of the day, or evening or whatever it is," I began.

"Yes. I forgot to mention that, I guess. You'll wear loose, green, slacks and shirt with a green, rope, belt from now on until you are confirmed. It is the way Tyros dress."

"Shoes?" I asked wiggling my toes.

"Sandals. Pretty comfy. I think you'll like them. The

greens are only required on dress up occasions like meals, rites, and such. Your other things will be fine most of the time."

"And you – as Gus, I mean. What do you wear?"

"It's a lot like your outfit but in the Crimson color of the Master Level."

He took a step backwards and suddenly was dressed as he had described.

"Lose the towel and we'll get you fixed up."

Before it hit the floor I was fully clothed. Green was not my favorite color but it felt right. The pants and shirt were baggy. I liked clothes that didn't bind. The sandals were soft soled and matched the rest in color.

A full-length mirror appeared on the back of my door.

"A little house warming gift from me to you," Gus said. "Step up and take a look at yourself."

I turned this way and that in front of it.

"Thanks, Gus. It looks great. I'm finally beginning to feel like I belong here."

A moment later I found myself standing all alone in front of a set of huge, wooden, arched, double doors. Slowly they swung open. They creaked as if seldom used. The area inside was dark – pitch dark. I took several steps – slowly, cautiously, thinking once inside, my eyes would probably adjust and let me see.

Could this be some kind of test? It could have been a set up to force a choice between trusting that the darkness would be safe in my new home on the one hand, and being wise enough not to enter without first determining it was safe on the other.

I went with the first option and took the final step that put me past the threshold. I felt myself falling, tumbling through the blackness of space. Had I made the wrong decision? Was my life as a Calibrator – as anything – to be over before it had really begun?

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Introductions**

Part of me assumed I should be frightened – I suppose terrified would better reflect my state of mind. Part of me, however, continued to trust in my new relationship. All of me continued hurtling through the blackness of space – down, down, down! Around and around! Head over heels! At one point, I wondered if I would hear the splat as I hit whatever was at the bottom of this hole that I was clearly navigating so unskillfully.

Apparently, I had closed my eyes somewhere along the way because when I heard the chorus of voices shouting, "Surprise!" I suddenly opened them. I was back at the set of big doors. The blackness ahead of me had transformed into what I could only assume was the Dining Hall. Dozens of tables and a dozen folks standing behind benches at each one. There were little kids, children, and teens all dressed like little kids, children and teens. There were adults, old folks, and a few who I could only describe as ancient.

"Welcome, Tyro Tommy!" came their sing-songy, group, greeting. They applauded as Gus approached me, offering his hand and smile.

Apparently, the new guy had just been initiated. I just waved and nodded, figuring anything less than yelling wouldn't be heard and that seemed inappropriate.

I found my smile formed easily in response to their friendly gesture. I shook my friend's extended hand and he moved me toward the front table. It had two places set. I assumed the green plate was mine and the gold, for the Sage.

I was right. Gus evaporated and the Sage appeared, already seated at his place. The others continued to stand.

The Sage leaned slightly in my direction and whispered to me behind his long, narrow, hand.

"They are waiting for you to sit."

I sat. They sat. The plates and goblets were suddenly filled. The clicking of utensils and the buzz of happy conversation echoed through the hall. I gazed out over the group.

"So many new faces," I said, trying to initiate small talk with the Sage. "How will I ever learn all the names?"

Upon reflection, it had been a rhetorical question. The Sage must have sensed it and didn't respond. Either that or a Tyro was not supposed to address the Sage unless first addressed by the Sage. That's how I understood it was in boot camp but I had been given no direct instruction about it here.

The food was regular food – meat, potatoes, veggies, bread and butter – jam if you wanted it. I didn't. For some reason, I really wasn't the least bit hungry – a totally foreign feeling for me at meal time. The Sage sensed my quandary and responded in his quiet, unhurried, baritone, voice. As much as it still bothers you for me to hear your thoughts just let me remind you that in terms of mortal time – the time back at the loft – it's only been a few minutes since you gorged yourself on three sandwiches and a pound of potato chips – not to mention the Bagel a bit later. It will take a day or so for your system to adjust to Time-X. We don't require folks to clean their plates here."

Again, it was accompanied by the smile of my friend.

"By the way, they will expect you to say a few words after dessert," he added as if an afterthought, nodding out toward the others.

I had always been able to talk – to anybody, anytime, anywhere – but on this occasion, I had no idea what to say. I fumed to myself about it during dessert – a chocolate-cherry brownie topped with vanilla ice cream and the most delicious red topping I'd ever wrapped my tongue around. Somehow, I managed to stow it away and the process distracted my head from the problem at hand.

The Sage stood to introduce me. It was short and to the point. Considering that everyone knew who I was and why we were there he really had not needed to say anything at all, I suppose.

They Applauded. Whether that had been for the dramatically delivered, six-word introduction – "I give you Tyro Tommy Powers," – from the Sage, or in anticipation of my as yet unspoken comments, I could not be sure. Since I had nothing to say it would be good if it had been for me ahead of time. I opened my mouth and was amazed at what followed.

"Thank you my new friends. All of this is so unfamiliar to me – the idea of the Calibrators, this wonderful old Hall, the Sage, and my new best friend, Gus, who I understand is currently otherwise occupied."

I did a quick glance thing in the direction of the Sage. A chuckle rippled through the audience and there was a smattering of applause at my little joke. I then looked at the Sage. The beard on his ancient face mostly hid its broad, youthful, smile. I seemed to be on a roll so I opened my mouth again.

"I understand that this is my destiny and I take that very seriously. I take all responsibility seriously – my family taught me well about that. I also understand that as I begin my new life I will make mistakes but I pledge here, at this time, that I will study, observe, and practice until I meet all of your requirements and expectations. I thank you in advance for the help you will be providing me and most of all for the friendship I already feel from each one of you here this evening. I look forward to meeting you individually and I will endeavor to somehow remember your names. It seems to me that you guys have the easy part when it comes to that, however."

Again, there was chuckling and applause. I figured I better let well enough alone so I bowed ever so slightly and returned to my seat. Everyone rose to their feet and applauded. I figured I must have done okay. The Sage stood and the room became immediately quiet.

"I'll add just one thing," he said. "As you have just heard, Tommy has a fine way with words. As you have seen he is a handsome lad. As you may have noticed during dinner, his eyes kept moving toward the table of young ladies

over there. (He pointed.) So, I say to you girls, don't wear the lad out. He IS here to study, you know."

Everyone cheered and clapped and laughed. For a Sage, Sagacious was turning out to be a pretty cool old guy. Of course, he was the one and only Sage I had ever encountered so, perhaps, they were all cool.

Sagacious left the room and Gus was almost immediately at my side.

"Ready for the fun?" he asked.

It had apparently been rhetorical because he continued without a pause.

"By the way, you handled yourself very well – right from the moment the big doors opened into the blackness, until you blushed at the Sage's remarks to the girls."

"I blushed?"

"I assume so. I sure would have. Your great tan really does hide those subtle changes. It makes you hard to read from the outside."

"And from the inside?" I asked, figuring his 'outside' remark indicated he also took 'inside' readings.

"Oh, from the inside you blushed all over the place. Even your liver turned pink! It's reassuring to see you're normal."

I figured he was right and that it was no big deal to be nervous about such things. I also figured he was kidding about my pink liver.

"Time to go into the ballroom," he said. "The introductions will go easy. It will begin with a reception line. You'll get to shake three hundred hands – all shapes, sizes and genders."

I wondered just how we would get into the Ballroom. We walked. How conventional yet comfortable. Gus and I stood near the door and as the others entered they stepped up to introduce themselves. A half hour and three hundred hands later, most of the older folks were gone and it was just the youngsters who remained – those looking to be ten through their teen years. I was pleasantly surprised at how many young people there were.

The music started and they began to dance – slow dance. I watched for a few minutes and figured I could fake

that well enough to get by. A girl about my age approached me.

"I'm . . ." she began.

"Abigail. Yes. I remember," I said finishing the introduction. "I hoped I would see more of you. I'm not very well practiced at dancing but I'd really like to give it a try if you're up to it."

"It's why I came over to you," she said stating the obvious and smiling into my face, her eyes remaining fixed on mine.

"Great! Okay then. Guard your feet at all times."

My first reaction was to want to take all that back and replace it with some suave, sophisticated phrase.

"I love the way you talk and your sense of humor," she said, taking my hand.

On second thought, I'd leave suave and sophisticated for 007.

Abigail – Abby I learned was her preference – was not quite my height and I was barely average for my age. Her hair was long and the darkest, shiniest, black I had ever seen. Her face was – and this is in no way a put down or a complaint – very plain, although her smile and dancing blue eyes were magnificent!

Dancing came automatically – I suspected the fine hand of Gus behind that. From time to time other girls would approach and Abby gracefully gave them my hand. Some were beautiful. Some were not. Some were taller than I and some shorter. They were all soft and smelled fantastic!

I had always been amazed at how soft girls were. I once did some research and found it was basically due to the fact that females have an extra layer of fat just under the skin – something guys don't have. I related that to Suzie on one occasion – thinking I was complimenting her – and she slapped my face and left in a huff. I still didn't understand her reaction but since then I have refrained from disseminating that same piece of information to others of the fairer sex. (Suzie hated that term, as well. I had sooooo much to learn about girls. Perhaps the Sage offered a class!)

I smiled at the absurd thought.

"What?" Abby asked, seeing my reaction.

"Just a private thought – a silly, boy thought."

"Girls have silly thoughts, too."

"Really?"

She didn't elaborate but did lay her head against my shoulder and snuggled closer. We danced together for the next hour, or ten, or eternity. However long it was, it was wonderful. I had never spent an extended time like that with a girl. A few months before I was quite certain that I would never want to. Suddenly that was changed. So many things were changing. But that was good. There were more mental tingles and let me tell you, some of them were surfacing in parts of my 'brain' that had never tingled before. Life seemed quite wonderful.

The music stopped. There was a fanfare of sorts. I was suddenly bathed in a spotlight. Gus entered the ring of light with me and began to speak.

"Tommy here has a hidden talent. I must admit I have watched him doing it when he didn't know anybody was around. He can dance up a storm – solo. I assume we'd all like a demonstration here near the end of this evening, wouldn't we?"

He looked around the room clapping in various directions. The others responded with applause and finger whistles. I did enjoy dancing in the way Gus had described. If he wanted to see more, I'd show him more. I did it for my own pleasure and nobody else had to like it. I did and that was fully sufficient.

Abigail administered an unexpected, gentle, kiss to my cheek and moved back into the darkness.

"Wooo-oo," came the group's teasing response to her gentle peck.

The music began – up beat, loud, and exactly right (of course!).

I danced. I twirled. I did the splits. I whirled on my back. I flipped from front to back and back to front. My arms flailed and my backside swayed. I ended with the splits, my torso and outstretched arms bowing deeply along my front leg. I was pleased with my performance.

Since I had been doing it for my own enjoyment I must admit I was at first startled when the audience clapped and

whistled and stomped the floor. It garnered a second quick kiss from Abby. The lights came up and the event was over.

"Wow!" Gus said, pulling me to my feet. "That was stupendous!"

"I had fun. That's why I dance."

"Tell Abby goodnight. Then, I'll go back to your quarters with you."

He moved toward the door and waited.

Abby and I stood facing each other, holding hands between us.

"It was a wonderful evening," she said before I could think of anything to say.

"Yes, it was. I'm glad you're here. I'm glad I'm here. I'm glad we're here."

Sometimes dumb just continues to get dumber so I stopped. I wondered if there was going to be a kiss – a full blown, wet, heavy breathing, Suzie-type kiss. There wasn't.

"Goodnight then," she said. She squeezed my hand and turned, walking to meet her girl friends who had been standing in the shadows pretending not to be looking in our direction. I was glad it had been a simple, 'goodnight, then' and not the other thing. There was something special about Abby and I didn't want to mess it up by engaging in a frivolous sport. If I ever kissed her that way, it would be out of affection. I had to admit, however, that hand squeeze was more wonderful than I could have ever imagined a hand squeeze could be.

I turned to Gus.

"So. What do guys do in this place after a big dance?"

"We go back to your place and study. Hope that's not a disappointment."

"Not at all. I'm so eager to begin learning I could burst."

"I hope you don't – it would be soooo messy!"

We chuckled.

I was pleased with how I had handled myself that evening, and apparently, Gus was as well.

With arms around each other's shoulders – apparently, the way good friends did things, there – we walked our way across the great room, up the stairs, and down the hall to my place.

"Explain again when I'm expected to wear this green uniform," I inquired as I closed my beautiful blue door behind us. "Frankly, the whole uniform idea turns me off."

"Only to classes, meals and special events. Other than that you can dress however you like."

I suddenly found myself standing there wearing nothing but the towel from earlier. Gus bent over in laughter thinking his little prank had been hilarious. He pointed to my outfit hanging on a peg beside the door.

"This will do fine," I said, "though I prefer baggy jeans and tee shirts. I tried to whomp some up earlier but had no success. I figure since I created this room I should have been able to do a couple of pieces of clothing."

"I must admit, I gave you a little help on the room and shower," Gus said, "although in all honesty, you needed very little boost from me. You have tremendous natural control over your powers."

"And that's good?"

"Neither good nor bad, I suppose," he said. "It's just how it is. But, it will make my job a whole lot easier."

"And just exactly what is your job?" I asked snuggling into my favorite position in the corner of the couch.

"I am your Mentor – your main teacher. I will help you develop your powers and show you how to guide them appropriately. You will accompany me on many of my missions outside the Hall and learn by observing how I do things. We will be pretty much inseparable during these next six months."

"If I get tired of seeing your face," I said, breaking a smile, "I assume you can substitute another one."

Gus chuckled but chose not to respond. He moved on.

"About the uniform thing," he began. "I understand from your upbringing how you must feel, having been raised to be an individual and to think and act independently – away from the herd, so to speak. Let me explain the purpose. You will soon be able to unleash most of your tremendous powers – that will be possible long before you will be able to fully control them. You can't practice using a power without having the power at your disposal, you see, and that presents some problems. Do you understand my meaning?"

"Yes. I do. Having a power or capability doesn't, by itself, make me wise enough to use it well. But I still fail to see the connection to the uniform."

"You will wear it to remind you of your limitations – to help you remember not to try things beyond your level of total competence."

"I see . . . Green suggests 'green'. In other words, wet behind the ears, novice, beginner, neophyte, tyro . . ."

"I believe you have the concept. No need to recite the entire thesaurus entry."

"Okay, then. I can accept that. I can even respect it. I do tend to go off on tangents really easy so it will be a good guide."

"Along that same line, you must understand that a Calibrator never uses a greater power than is necessary to accomplish the goal."

"Example please?" I asked.

"Well, if you can reach your objective by being a good model, then there will be no reason to use mind seep."

"But wouldn't mind seep usually get quicker results?"

"Maybe. But usually time is not the bottom line for us. We have lots and lots of time and we want change to occur as naturally as possible."

"I assume Calibrators are allowed to defend themselves when personal danger is involved."

"Of course, but again with the use of no more power than is necessary."

"The Powers intrigue me, of course, but I have to admit I'm downright frightened by all the responsibility that goes with them."

"That's a good starting place. It will ease somewhat with maturity but it's never a bad thing to carry in the back of your mind. In many ways, it is like the tremendous power a parent has over a child. Raising a youngster is no small responsibility and the parent must use wisdom, knowledge and good judgment in the use of the power he or she has. There, too, careful, thoughtful, modeling is always better than punishment or put downs or harsh words."

Everything he said made sense. It just seemed to be a logical extension of the things I learned from my family. Of

course, it's beyond my imagination how a parent could actually ever set out to purposely cause physical or mental pain to precious little child.

"May I ask how you found me – out of the billions of people on earth?"

"Apparently, the rosy star develops about a month before a baby is born and it possesses a power to emit a . . . we never know what to call it . . . signal, I suppose is the best term. At any rate, we are able to hone in on that signal and assist the parents in adjusting to what they must do. Put a better way, it is as if that signal comes and finds us and directs us to the still unborn child."

"So you know the real story about how I came to be in that little crate on the pier and whether or not my parents really did wait to make sure I was safe."

"Yes. I know all of that. Do you want to me to tell you?"

"No. I like my version. I'll stick with it. Will I ever be able to see my parents if I decide I want to?"

"On your fourteenth birthday, you have that option. You can spend a full day in their presence – they, of course, will not know you are there. We think it is best not to rush into that. If you ever decide you want to know the story of your placement I will be pleased to tell you."

I nodded. It made good sense. Gus was wise. I would make that one of my goals – to become wise like my Mentor. What was it that I had been told about wisdom – that it was a combination of knowledge and experience, well used. I could do that. When I had successes, I would note how they came about, what I did right. When I had failures, I would note how not to go about it the next time, and plan some better strategy.

That was an interesting revelation to me. Failures and mistakes became every bit as important and useful as successes, because I would be learning important new things from both of them. If I had been alone it would have called for a twirling, skipping, hopping dance to celebrate my wonderful new insight. Heck! I'd do it anyway.

It took about five minutes to get it out of my system at which time I fell onto the sofa puffing and smiling. Moving was wonderful. I didn't know how clams made it through life, not

being able to twirl and skip and dance. Perhaps you can't miss what you don't know about. New knowledge doesn't always simplify life.

Gus stood to leave.

"It's been a big day for you. I'll warn you ahead of time that until your system gets used to this state of time acceleration, you may not sleep well. Be patient for a week or two and you'll find that you will gradually adjust comfortably into the new groove."

"Tomorrow?" I asked.

"Begins at six a.m. with breakfast in the dining hall. You will have your classes assigned and find out how we go about the process of learning here at Calibration Hall."

I nodded. I was eager to get started. Gus left and I settled into a reclining position on the couch – one from which I could look out over the ocean from my window. I wondered about my Wharfies and it was wondering more than missing them. I also wondered about Suzie, but that was definitely more missing her, well, missing the 'sport' we had shared together.

Suzie's image soon faded and Abigail's appeared. Despite Gus's concern, I was soon asleep there on the couch, dreaming of long black hair, a wonderful smile, and that unforgettable gentle squeeze to my hand.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### Schedules

It was the pressure on the back of my hand that awakened me. As my eyes adjusted to the bright light streaming in through the big window on the east side of my room, I examined my hand. One of the points on the star was flashing I suppose is the best description – pulsating lighter and darker. I touched it and it stopped. The pressure also stopped.

"An alarm clock?" I asked myself out loud. I looked at my watch. Five thirty. It was time to begin my first regular day there at the Hall. Excitement rushed through my being as I sat up on the side of the couch and stretched my muscles back into life. I was soon in and out of the shower and dressed in green from head to foot – a green hat had been added to my wardrobe on the peg beside the door. It resembled a puffy, low version of a baker's hat. I assumed I was to wear it.

I looked myself over in the mirror.

"Green is good," I said, again out loud.

"It really isn't your color," came a now familiar voice from behind me.

Nobody showed in the mirror but as I turned around Gus materialized, hands on his hips, looking impressive – imposing might be a better word – in his crimson outfit. I supposed it would be many years – perhaps centuries – before I would earn one like it.

"Good morning," I said extending my hand.

He ignored it and put his arm around my shoulder. I did likewise.

"Handshakes are far too formal between best friends, Tommy."

I nodded in agreement and had a question.

"The sun in my window at five thirty in the a.m.? Isn't that a bit strange this time of year?"

"I just imagined you'd want to wake up to sunshine. If you'd prefer moonlight it can be arranged."

"Oh, no. Sunshine is great! Thank you. Thoughtful. Lots of details I hadn't considered, I suppose."

"You really can't consider the details until you know the possibilities. They will be revealed gradually. Don't want to risk overloading your neural circuitry, you know."

It drew a sizeable smile from us both.

"What's with the alarm clock on the back of my hand?"

"Oh, yes. I failed to mention that, I suppose. Each point of the star has unique capabilities. The one to which you refer can be set to remind you of times – time to awaken, time to leave for places, time to do whatever."

"I'm quite sure I didn't set it since I wasn't aware of its existence," I said not satisfied with the explanation.

"It often happens automatically responding to your wishes whether or not you consciously go through the process of setting it. Here in the Hall, those things happen more easily than they do elsewhere."

"And the other points of the star – there must be more than a dozen?" I asked.

"In due time. One point at a time. Be patient.

I sighed, not at all satisfied but willing to leave those kinds of things in my Mentor's hands.

"We better get going," he said. "Don't want to be late for chow."

"Do we walk or jump. I'm having a hard time understanding when we do which."

"Mostly here inside the Hall we Calibrators walk. The vast majority of the people here don't have that ability and it just keeps us all more alike if we do things the regular ways."

"Makes sense. Let's go then."

On the way, I had several concerns.

"I've never had a room to myself before and not that I don't appreciate it, understand, but it really feels strange being

in there all alone. Not frightening, mind you, this is probably the safest place a person could ever be, just lonely. I miss the hubbub that goes with having other people around. Do guys ever have roommates?"

"That can be arranged. When kid's parents leave here on trips for one reason or another, their children are often placed with other families. I suppose we could arrange for some near your age to be here with you."

I nodded. It wasn't what I had in mind but I supposed that would be one way of getting to know a lot of guys pretty well. Apparently, Gus sensed my tinge of disappointment.

"Or," he said . . . at which point we were suddenly back in my room. My bed transformed into bunk beds right before my eyes. Gus appeared sprawled out on his side on the top one, his head propped up with his hand, looking down at me. He continued. ". . . I'm really not attached to my stuffy old place. I could stay here for a while if that was more what you had in mind."

I'm sure I smiled at that prospect, but still, I had a question.

"For a while?"

"Ya. Say we could try it out for a century or so and see how we get on."

"I laughed out loud and nodded and was still giggling when we appeared back in the hall nearing the top of the stairs."

"Sounds like a very good plan. Thank you. May I ask how fast we age – our bodies, I mean, I guess?"

"It seems to differ a bit from one of us to another but on the average, I'd say for every twenty years in mortal time our bodies age about one year. But, of course, you can appear any age you want to be under that. There's one exception. Say you get married when you are twenty in mortal years – you'd still appear to be about fourteen physically here in Time-X – but once married you always have the option of appearing to be the age of your wife. It makes things easier."

"So, on my wedding day I could go from fourteen to twenty just like that."

"Just like that!"

In the dining hall, we sat at a table filled with boys about

my age. They were great kids and enjoyed having a good time. It was like I had always been one of them. The fact that I was a Calibrator and they were mortal clearly made no difference to them. I got poked and shoved for my dumb remarks just like they poked and shoved each other. I even got kidded about Abigail and THE kiss. It was a kind of relationship I had never had – one of those things I hadn't been able to really miss because I had never experienced it.

It made me think about lots of things, one of which was right and wrong. I had pretty much just accepted – absorbed – from my Wharfies their views on that subject. What if all that was challenged here? What if these people had very different ideas about it? I would have to make choices I had never before considered having to make. I had always prided myself as being a seeker of the truth rather than one who spent my life defending things I already believed. When I found new information that suggested I was wrong or my belief was in some way inaccurate, I tried to work the new data into my belief structure – I reorganized things so everything fit. I found it was always changing – maybe not in huge ways but in the little details, at least. I enjoyed being challenged. It was how a person grew in knowledge and insights. Sometimes it was uncomfortable but growth is often uncomfortable.

After breakfast, there were chores. I learned that it was my table's turn to do the dishes. Abigail's table tidied up the dining hall. We looked at each other across the room but really didn't have a chance to talk.

Then Gus took me to a small classroom.

"The Sage will be with you shortly to plan your program of study."

He left and the Sage entered. Although I knew they were the same being, I also realized there was a difference. I was to relate to Gus like one kid to another. I was to relate to the Sage like a student of the most knowledgeable, wisest, most powerful Calibrator in existence. I soon ceased to think of them as being the same entity.

"There are four main areas of pursuit for you here, Tommy. First, will be a continuation of your school studies, much like what you have been doing with Otto. Second, you will learn about your powers and we will help you gradually

coax them to the surface so you can practice using them. I must warn you, as powerful as they will seem to you as they begin to emerge, they will become a hundred times more powerful at the moment of your confirmation on your thirteenth birthday. Third, you will spend most of your time with your Mentor, watching him work, listening to his suggestions and practicing the exercises he gives you. Fourth, and this is every bit as important as the rest, you are to have fun. We Calibrators take our work very seriously but we also enjoy life. There will be time for sports and your art and music, and time for dancing and parties and girls – or should I make that singular – you seem to be taken with one young lady in particular."

"Yes, Sir. I am. Abigail."

I figured that was enough of that, but was pleased the Sage understood how important such things were, to many guys my age – considering it had been perhaps a thousand years since he'd actually been my age.

"Much of your course of study here will grow out of your questions. I sense you have several to begin with."

It appeared we were to have some one-on-one time here at the beginning.

"Yes. I always have questions. Otto sometimes says they wear him out. If I understand it correctly, the powers we have are really all just extensions or developments of the normal powers of the human mind."

He nodded. I continued.

"I need to understand how the Jumping thing and the Time-X thing can come from the regular mind. I have been thinking about it and I just can't make a connection."

"Do this for me now," he began. "Close your eyes and in your mind, return to the loft. You can see the room. You can see the people there going about their usual activities. You can smell something wonderful that Tina has begun cooking for supper. Can you do those things?"

"Yes."

"It is as though you were there?"

"Yes. I even feel the boards in the floor giving and hear them creaking as I walk next to my bed."

"Come back here now."

I opened my eyes.

"So, tell me what you learned."

"That Jumping is an extension of some combination of human memory and imagination."

"Excellent. That is its exact source. It is more than that, but those things are the seeds from which it develops. Now to your second concern – Time X. Lean back in your chair and close your eyes again. I want you to fall asleep and dream about going on a trip."

Apparently, I was immediately asleep. I figured it had to do with the Sage's Mind Clouding skill. It was certainly superior to counting sheep. Fifteen minutes later I opened my eyes and worked myself back into an upright position from where I had slumped down in the chair during my nap.

"Tell me about your experience."

"I see the connection already, Sir, but I will relate the adventure if you like."

"Let's begin with just the connection, then. Give me the short version."

"My dream took me on a freighter from here to South Africa. I worked to pay my fare. It took three weeks. You're saying that in a dream state, the mind normally can expand time – in that case from fifteen actual minutes to three dream weeks. So, Time-X stems from the capacity of the mind to dream and think in a timeless manner."

"You may be the quickest study I've ever had, Tyro Tommy Powers."

"I work very well with your teaching technique – sorry, Facilitation Technique. You lead me to a point where I must take some next step – some next leap. I am going to love this."

I grew quiet – a state that didn't seem to bother the Sage in the least. I then began thinking out loud.

"Mind Clouding uses the mind's tendency to be suggestible – sort of like being hypnotized or impressed by a charming person. Mind seeping is something Yorika does all the time. Instead of making suggestions or demands on me he'll sneak some little alternative into our conversation and then move on before I have a chance to dispute it – reject it. Like once I was complaining about having to study math.

During my ranting and raving about it all he said something like, 'Some folks find math is more fun if it's approached from the history of mathematical thought.' Then he zoomed on to some other topic. A few days later I came up with this wonderful idea – on my own, I thought – that since I loved history I would study the history of mathematical thought. That way I would have good reason to understand the math processes, so I would be able to make sense of it all."

"Yorka nodded, saying it was a good plan that held real promise for handling my predicament. Molly giggled. If it hadn't been for me pressing her about her giggle I'd have never known about Yorka's seeping the idea into my mind and he'd have never taken credit for it, of course. Now I realize he does it often. I have already begun using it on others.

"I must admit the invisibility thing still has me baffled. I have experienced situations in which I have been thinking so hard about one thing that I missed seeing something else that was happening right before my eyes. Or I have been thinking about something so hard I really haven't heard Molly or Otto speaking to me. I suppose it's related to the human ability to focus concentration like that."

"I suppose you are exactly right. This is going to be so much fun, Tommy."

"This what?"

"Watching you develop your powers and learning to use them. Your native powers are so great that your thirteenth birth moment belch is going to be tremendously powerful."

"Belch?" I asked smiling at the strange use of the word.

"It's probably a terrible term, undoubtedly first used by some ancient Sage after belching as the result of the worst sort of jalapeño driven heartburn, but it really does seem to describe what happens at the moment the powers burst full blown into a young Calibrator's mind. Just that fast – as fast as a totally unexpected burp – you will be transformed. It will not be entirely pleasant. It will be marked by a period of extreme confusion – terror even as the change takes place. Light will seem a hundred times brighter, sound a hundred times louder. Your senses of smell and taste and touch will be exaggerated beyond belief. The period of adjustment varies from person to person. Gus and another friend of your

choosing will be there with us – you and me. "

"You and Gus in the same place at the same time? That I don't understand."

"It is a Time-X related process. We can flutter back and forth between one another so rapidly it appears we are both quite solidly in the same place. I have not utilized it yet in your presence. We take things slowly here."

"Fascinating!"

I was dumbfounded.

"So, what's next? I'm eager to press on."

"Gus will introduce you to your Academic Facilitator and you'll get started with him this morning. This afternoon you and Gus will go a fieldtrip. You will accompany him on a mission. This evening the young people have something planned. Not sure what it is. Gus will know. Always lots of fun."

I shook my head, still not fully comprehending how the Sage would not know all that Gus knows and vice versa but that seemed to be how it was.

The Sage left and Gus opened the door from the hallway and motioned me toward him. A few minutes later we were in a classroom. There were three girls – none of them Abigail – and four guys all about my age. The Facilitator (teacher) was addressed as Facil. I wasn't given any other name. Last names didn't seem to be used much in the Hall. Facil had great knowledge but more than that he was a master at helping young people learn. Rather than telling, he most often asked questions, leading the students to find their own answers – to think things through and discover what else they needed to know before they could fully understand something or make a final decision. He encouraged his students to play with options – alternatives to their first idea or response to a question. I soon came to understand that, "Could it possibly be otherwise?" was one of his favorite ways to make me think.

I recall that he once asked me, "Name something that is always wet."

"Water," I said without hesitation.

"Could it be there is a substance that is wetter than water?"

I had no idea but immediately realized I really didn't

know what the word 'wet' actually meant. I spent days researching it. Along the way, he commented, "If you do find something wetter than water, then does that mean water is dry in comparison to that substance?"

He was full of wonderful, thought provoking questions. He led me to think about things I had never dreamed possible and to analyze them in ways I could not have utilized before I met him. But back to the first day I met him.

As the others went about their business, Facil and I worked out a schedule of studies. Back with Otto, I had just begun reading about the Civil War. I wanted to see how it really was – from the human side of it all – so we had collected copies of lots of diaries that the soldiers had kept and letters they had written home. I figured that was a better way to get a feel for it than to memorize generals, and study dates and battle sequences. Facil agreed and we had soon accumulated the same basic information there for me.

I was to pursue the project on my own and feel free to request help when I wanted it. Once a week Facil and I would get together and I'd review for him what I had learned and set out further questions to research. It was going to be wonderful! I had the feeling these people had ways of obtaining information and resources that Otto and I probably didn't. I realized that lots of kids didn't enjoy learning new things like I did. I felt really lucky that way. I wanted to become wise and I understood for that to happen I had to acquire vast amounts of knowledge first.

Facil had the other students tell me about their projects. I wanted to be a part of every single one of them. The morning was soon gone. The other kids left for lunch but Gus and I went back to my – now our – room.

"We need a closet, you know," he said.

"So, let's have one – a big one – right over there in that corner," I said pointing my finger.

It appeared. I figured it had at least been partly my doing.

Gus looked around.

"A bunk, a chair, a shower, a beautiful view, and now a closet. What more do two guys our ages really need?"

He hesitated and then responded to my unspoken

answer.

“ . . . I know, but girls are off limits in boy’s rooms. It may seem old fashioned but get used to it – this is an old-fashioned organization.”

He had heard my thoughts but that was okay. My thoughts were honest and I had no problem with him hearing honest thoughts. They had mostly been offered to be humorous anyway.

"We'll be going into the city so we'll both need street clothes. What we were wearing the day you came be okay with you?" he asked.

"Sure. Probably feel real comfortable after this."

"I pulled at my uniform and grinned."

Gus was immediately into his other clothes.

"You'll have to change the old-fashioned way for a while longer," he said.

It would not be a problem. I was happy to shed the green and slip into my old faithfuls. They were, by then, dry and hanging in the new closet looking no worse for wear. I supposed that was relative since they were probably already fourth hand by the time they came into my possession.

"I brought some sandwiches and chips from the kitchen," Gus said. "I guess I haven't been paying close enough attention to what else you like to eat."

We sat in what had become our regular spots – me perched cross-legged on the couch and Gus in the big chair – and began enjoying a ham and cheese on rye. We made small talk. Gus carefully avoided the topic of the mission and I didn't press. I was learning patience, and was learning that rushing through life was neither expedient nor necessary.

I was full after half a sandwich and a handful of chips. Gus downed everything in sight. As he stuffed his face with my left overs, he again reassured me that I would soon get adjusted to my new time line. I took his word for it and remained amused at how much he could stow away.

"Ready for a walk?" Gus asked at last.

"Ready. You're the boss."

"Well, not really. I'm your Mentor and I'm your friend and I'm your roommate but I'm really not your boss. Calibrators are expected to be their own bosses. You'll hear

more about that as time goes on."

I nodded. I was pretty well used to being my own boss – with limitations related to safety and judgment, of course. My family always made me feel I was capable of handling my life. I was used to generating both successes and mess ups. I understood it was my place to take the responsibility for both.

"Okay, then Mentor, pal, roomy, Gus, I'm ready."

Five minutes later we were back into the woods heading down the gentle slope toward the Church and eventually to the sidewalks that would lead us through the city.

"Sixty-fifth and Alamo," Gus said.

I knew the spot – an unsavory area that I had always avoided. It would be nearly a fifteen-minute walk from the church. I had no idea what to expect. We turned into an alley; a really bad idea I thought. The soot tarnished, rear ends of tall, brick, century old buildings formed a narrow canyon that grew dark even in the light of day as we proceeded in just a few yards. Water puddles filled the numerous depressions in the ancient brick and concrete surface. The smell of week old garbage was unpleasant although it didn't deter the several cats and foot long rats we encountered from eagerly chowing down on it.

"Don't be surprised by anything. I will handle it," Gus said. "You understand. I will handle it."

I nodded. Halfway through the alley a gang of eight, young, thugs jumped out from behind dumpsters and trash cans. Some had knives. One had a length of chain. Two had steel rods. They were big, ugly, and probably smelled, although I hoped I wouldn't be getting close enough to know that for certain first hand. They drew their circle tighter and tighter around us. I must have stopped breathing because I do recall starting again. The leader lunged at Gus, his knife directed at my friend's stomach. I closed my eyes.

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **Powers Demonstrated**

As the knife was only inches away from carving Gus a second, very large, and probably jagged belly button, all movement stopped. Well, not our movement but the gang members appeared frozen in place.

“We have a ten-minute Time-X in place,” Gus said in a matter of fact manner, as if the near catastrophe were a routine part of his everyday existence. “It will give us a chance to get creative, here.”

I pointed around the circle of time-bound young men most of whom were suspended in air caught in mid-lunge.

“It already looks pretty creative to me,” I said.

“These are drug addicts. It is my fifth visit with them. I’m really after the drug supplier. His office is up there.”

Gus pointed to the top floor of one of the taller buildings.

“Why not just go up and get him, then, if you know where he is?”

“There are a thousand addicts depending on him for a fix – or several – every day. If I suddenly removed that supply two things would occur. First, the users would go berserk – crazy. This area of the city would erupt in violence as they fought each other over the trickle of drugs that managed to get in from outside. Second, within a week, there would be another organization in here supplying these young people.

“So, do I get to hear how this levitation circle fits into your plan to get the really big bad guy?”

“Like I said, there are about a thousand who count on

him for their supply. First, I have to work a cure on as many of these buyers as I can. It will prevent the violence when the big guy's gone and it is the humane thing to do – cure the addicts, and dry up the market. Once I have the addicts cured, I can take down the distributor.”

“I see the big picture but I still can't see how this thing here in anyway moves us in the direction you're talking about.”

“It's the fifth time I've visited with these guys – eight of the thousand who I have also visited on at least five occasions. Each time, I set up something that will make them think the drugs are causing them to go crazy – to see and do bizarre, unreal, impossible things. I do a mind speak that ties what they experience to their drug use. So, our job today is to play the crazy card – convince them without a doubt that their drug use is driving them batty – which it is, of course, although perhaps in a slightly different manner.”

“And how will we do that?”

“All the guys who are wearing lace shoes need to have them untied. Then tie the laces from the two shoes together in a hard knot. When they try to walk, they will fall. You handle that. For the ones in boots I'll pull their pants down and fasten their belts tightly around their ankles. It'll result in the same thing. Then we will change coats between the guys so everybody ends up with somebody else's – on backwards. Let's get to work. We have eight minutes left.”

“Quite a prank, but is it enough to make them think they're going crazy?”

“Oh, what I've described so far is just the beginning.”

There were five with lace shoes and I soon had them re-tied, left and right together. I switched four of the coats – not an easy job considering their time-frozen arms were relatively inflexible. We were done with time to spare.

“Now what?” I asked, chuckling to myself at how ridiculous they looked.

“Go over there, outside the circle by the dumpster. When they come back into real time I want you to dance your young heart out there in the center of the alley. I'll mind speak the possibility to them that what they are experiencing may be delusional, and due to the drugs they take. It will be the fifth such suggestion for them and should be the clincher. They

already have been seeped information on treatment programs available for them.

“Eventually they will cut the shoe strings and get their pants up and re-buckled. At that point at least some of them will try to come after us again. I’ll do a dozen series of ten second Time-Stops, which will give us time to move about. From their perspective, it will appear we are disappearing and then reappearing. When I think they’ve had enough, I’ll put them back into a one minute Time-X which will give us time to get out of here.”

“I’m ready to dance, my friend.”

“Good, because here they come.”

They fell. They stumbled. They strung profane words together in ways I had never heard before, though I figured I understood the meaning and realized some of it would be physically impossible. I began dancing as they looked on in disbelief. They cut shoe laces, pulled up pants and removed coats. Then they were ready to come after us.

I danced about twenty feet further into the alley. Gus stood on top of a dumpster and clapped, stomping out the beat with his right foot like a caller at a hoedown.

None to soon, I thought, he stopped them in their tracks and we moved to the other side. They lost us, looked around, and started after us again. It was repeated a dozen times. By the third replication several had sat down, leaning up against a building holding their heads between their hands. Soon several more left, running out of the alley.

In the end, only the leader remained. Gus approached him where he sat in the dampness of the alley floor the fight gone out of him. He patted the scruffy looking young man on the back.

“Most would ask if it’s worth going crazy over,” he said calmly and then motioned to me for us to leave.

A few minutes later we were back in the full light of day on Alamo Street.

“That was mind boggling!” I said conveying my usual unbridled enthusiasm. “It was awesome! It was fantastic! It was unbelievable!”

“You do tend to go on about things, don’t you my friend,” Gus said smiling and placing his arm around my

shoulder.

I figured it was his not so subtle way of saying, 'Enough is enough, Tyro', so I quit. I figured he might have important things to say. He did.

"We're just a block from Amy's Bagels. You up to one?"

"Am I! I'll buy."

"She won't let you pay," Gus said.

"Not even this early in the afternoon?"

"Not a chance."

"Why?"

"Her father is a Calibrator."

"Oh. I hadn't thought about the children. They know about it all of course. So, Amy knows you're a Calibrator. My. How is it all kept so secret? I thought nobody knew about the Calibrators."

"Just the children and they can't tell. A permanent mind-fix makes it impossible for them to reveal anything about it."

"So, they are allowed to move out of the Hall?"

"They first have that option at eighteen. It's a family decision. Most leave when they marry and most marry people they grow up with at the Hall. I'll go into it more with you later on."

"So, Amy is married?"

"Was. Her husband was a Marine – killed in the Middle East. She chose to remain on the outside."

"I'm so sorry. Poor Amy."

It made me sick to my stomach. It was as if I had lost someone as well. I had to wonder how she maintained such an upbeat approach to living.

On that day, we both got Amy's hugs. I liked hugs. There were lots of them with my Wharfies so it was easy and natural for me to return hers – and mean it. That day I held it extra-long.

"Two of your best," I said stepping up with my wallet at the ready. She leaned over to me.

"Don't you know by now your money's no good here? Come often but let me just provide them for you. It makes me feel wonderful inside. You wouldn't want to spoil that by

handing me money, now would you?"

"No Ma'am. I won't take advantage of your generosity but you can count on seeing me often."

We got our bagels. We got another hug. We got loving kisses to our cheeks. We headed back up the sidewalk in the direction of the Hall – well, at least toward the church and then the woods and then the cabin and beyond that I really still had no idea where in the world – even if in the world – Calibration Hall stood.

I had dozens of questions while we walked and nibbled on Amy's wonderful bagels.

"What's the next step against the drug supplier?"

"In a few days, we'll look the area over and see how successful the plan has really been. We have to make sure the victims are taken care of first. It now splits into two parts – two plans really. Both are based on the same thing, though – options. Positive options for the kids and positive options for the bad guys.

"The kids we met in the alley live in an area that provides them very few options. Kids all want to have what?"

"Fun, I imagine is what you're going for," I said.

"And fun means?"

"Getting a thrill. Doing something enjoyable, something out of the ordinary, something that will take your mind off other things."

He nodded.

"And when your neighborhood seems to provide very few options for having fun – drugs being one of the few – you can see how kids become a good target for the dealer. Kids also want to belong – to feel others think they are important and worthwhile. When they don't get such approval at home or school where do they have to look?"

"Other kids, I guess."

"And when those kids don't think you're cool unless you do drugs?"

"You start doing drugs or you do without friends. I see that options are really important. But how do you supply new options?"

"How do we," he said drawing me close with his arm. "Rehab programs supply lots of options and even though they

may seem cool to the kids while they are in treatment, life outside often doesn't have those same options easily available. When you've had a history of failure and have given up on yourself and life by the time you're a teenager, it doesn't take long to give up the search for new options and just fall back into the familiar old ways."

"But if we get the dealers out of the area . . ." I said hoping he would continue the idea.

"There will be others waiting in the wings to slip their greedy, destructive, little fingers in and feed the sickness."

"Sickness?"

"Low self-respect which makes kids believe they have no power to improve their lot or that of their families or neighbors. Life has proved to them they are helpless out in the real world and often they are, because they don't know the rules – the ways and expectations out there. So, they create their own world, the world of gangs where they understand the rules and have purpose and control and power and experience success – of a kind."

"I see," I said. "So, positive options to work them into the real world – as you called it – are the medicine for the sickness. But the options have to be provided because these kids aren't capable of going out and finding them – creating them."

"Right," Gus said, frowning. "It is one of the most disturbing traits of the human species. Don't give a kid a break until he proves he's worthy of it. Of course, until he is given a fair chance he has no way to prove himself."

I understood. "It's one of those, 'Let the other guy give him a chance and if he shows he can cut it then I'll consider him' things. Problem is, if everybody takes that attitude no one ever provides the first necessary chance."

"And it often gets even stickier, Tommy. These kids have never had jobs. They haven't learned the most basic skills, like showing up on time and regularly, and doing like they are instructed to do rather than some way they'd rather do things. So, they don't even last when they are given a chance. The idea of taking pride in one's work – in one's self, really – is a fully, foreign concept to them. It's the same in school. Go because you have to. Pass the tests because you

have to if you want to move from grade to grade with your buddies. But the idea of doing well in order to learn important things seldom enters the equation. How can history ever help in life? How can algebra ever help in life? How can, how can, how can? The schools often don't help in that regard, due to the way subjects seem to be taught.' Too frequently, relevance to real life is never emphasized. So, they drop out as soon as they can get away with it, which, of course, makes them even less able to succeed the real world."

"I learned all those positive traits you mentioned in my home," I said. "Don't these homes provide that?"

"Two thirds are one parent homes – usually mothers who have to work two jobs to support the family. That doesn't allow much family time, you see. The kids pretty well raise themselves – or don't. There are a few wonderful exceptions, of course."

"I am so lucky to have my Wharfies. We are poor as dirt although for us that is more out of personal choice than because we couldn't earn lots more money. But we decide what we need and we work just enough to achieve that. The grownups each work about two hours a day. That way we get to have each other all the rest of the time."

"Stuff isn't worshiped at the loft," Gus said. "Most people worship stuff. They have to own the latest whatever it is – gadgets, toys, fashions, vehicles, vacations and so on. How often have you heard somebody express great happiness about a raise because that means they can now give more to charity? No, it typically goes into more stuff. Poor kids who grow up in a stuff centered culture get really angry when they can't have the stuff they see and want."

"My family worries that so many folks are like that," I said nodding that I understood. "I can't understand how it can come about. Take things like TVs for example. We human beings have the wonderful capacity to entertain ourselves – we can play instruments, sing, dance, read, write, have wonderful conversations, invent, fix things, think thoughts that have never been thought before – and yet night after night millions of kids sit in front of TVs needing to be entertained. They just sit there doing nothing constructive. They don't have to have an original thought. They don't have to think

about how they fit into society, into history, into the future of mankind. They just sit there and say, 'Hey, TV, I'm too lazy to use all this human potential I have, so entertain me. Nothing happens all evening to prove to the kid how skillful or competent he is. It's like his human potential is turned off at the same instant the set is turned on.

"You know, I sincerely doubt if I could actually sit and watch an hour-long program through from start to finish night after night after night. It would drive me wild not to be doing something myself."

"Needing to accumulate all the latest or the best stuff is based in selfishness and lack of self-esteem, I believe," Gus said. "You've learned altruism and self-worth instead. You don't need stuff or external entertainment."

"I see the selfishness part but I'm not sure I make the connection with self-esteem."

"In order to prove how important they are, many folks think they need to have lots of stuff to show off. Since they have failed to develop a deep-down feeling of self-worth, they have to flaunt their riches. It's like saying I'm better than you are because I'm richer than you are. It makes no sense but it's just another kind of sickness stemming from the same sort of things that turn kids to drugs."

I had to tell him:

"It is so great to get to talk with you like this. I can't believe how fortunate I am."

I danced my way into the cabin and after completing a magnificent, thirty second twirl on my right heel, found myself in the great room of Calibration Hall. The several folks sitting there applauded. I bowed trying to make it into a lightly humorous event. Gus clearly enjoyed my uninhibited approach to life. I figured that as long as it didn't harm anybody, it was appropriate.

My problem came with those folks who were offended by some of my behavior because their values were so different from mine. My diner knife licking tendency in public places, for example. I've seen women wince at the sight – they had clearly been made uncomfortable by the act. It sometimes became difficult to know what to modify in the presence of others and what not to. Maybe I didn't have the

right to bring my different set of manners into their social realm, but then why did their social realm have the right to tell me what manners I had to have? It was very confusing and deserved lots more thought.

Back in our room I removed my shoes and sox and stood for a moment looking out the window and down onto the loft. Gus spoke first.

“I have some things to attend to. What’s next for you? The kids have organized a progressive card table party for after dinner. You’ll have several hours in here first.”

“Three things,” I said turning and looking at my friend. “First, I appreciate your gentle way of suggesting I make myself productive. Second, I will do that by getting back to work on my History project. Third, what in blazes is a progressive card table party?”

He smiled. “There will be a dozen or so card tables set up in the great room downstairs. Each one will have some activity at it – a card game, a board game, a craft project, who knows what-all the girls who planned it may have come up with. At the beginning, you will be given a slip of paper with a list of all the tables on it – by number. They will be jumbled up. Every fifteen minutes a whistle will be blown, the signal for everybody to move on to the next table listed on their slip. That way, eventually, everybody gets to spend time with most everybody else. Then the last half hour there will probably be dancing for you older kids.”

“Sounds like lots of fun but it means I won’t get to watch my favorite TV shows this evening,” I said feigning a pout and stomping the floor.”

Gus removed a shoe and playfully threw it at me. I ducked and it boomeranged right back into his hand. It should have called for a tussle on the floor until one or the other of us was pinned or yelled Uncle but it ended, instead, with an exchange of smiles and he left. Next time, perhaps.

I was so excited it was difficult to get down to my reading about the Civil War. I opened the journal of PFC Rupert Platt, age seventeen. It began, “My two best friends – Lindsey, 16 and Billy, 15 – were killed in battle today ...” It got my attention and made me realize my momentary happiness was something those two friends of Rupert’s were never again

to experience. It made me appreciate the life I had and how precious it was – how I needed to protect it. I set my star for five forty-five and settled down on the couch to continue reading.

\* \* \*

Abby invited me to sit with her family at dinner. She had a younger brother, Jesse, and a set of parents (the usual arrangement, I suppose!). Helen taught grade school age children, and Practitioner Calibrator Michael did what Calibrators did.

The conversation flowed easily. Their family shared lots of laughter and had many questions about me, which I gladly answered. Her father was only two generations ahead of me. He and his wife appeared to be in their late thirties. Some quick calculations made him about fifty-three or so in real time – one of the youngest of the Calibrators. Later, I would find a way to bend his ear about all that lay ahead for me. Thoughtfully, they saw to it that Abby and I had time to chat just between the two of us.

I was amazed and impressed at how well I remembered the other kid's names at the party. It was great fun. I had never been at a party with just kids before. On six of the twelve table changes Abby and I ended up at the same one. I figured it was some female-devised, set up, but since it pleased me, I was not about to complain.

By the end of the party I felt the two of us had come to know one another pretty well. We had remarkably similar interests and found it easy to talk between us. Later, we danced all the dances together. Again, I suspected subterfuge, and again, I wouldn't complain.

It was . . . I don't yet know the word to describe how it was to be dancing with her in my arms, holding her close, and talking and giggling softly together. It was partly strange, partly awkward, and partly exactly right. I was not yet ready to give up my times with Gus for a steady diet of Abby – or any girl – but I began to realize how it would be possible for something like that to come about someday.

"Last dance," someone called out, and the lights dimmed as if to provide an extra measure of privacy for the couples on the floor.

“It is allowed that you kiss me, if you want to, that is,” she said, looking up into my face.

“I would like that very much. My kissing experience has been very limited so I’m not at all sure . . .”

She put her fingers over my lips and said:

“Tommy Powers. Sometimes you just talk way too much.

She raised up on tip toes and I leaned down. Our lips met and the rest will remain private between us. I will say that it was a gentle kiss of affection in which power and groaning and heavy breathing played no part. It was much more what I was ready for. It was still a little scary – mysterious might be a better word. I usually liked, mysterious. I certainly liked this mysterious.

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## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **A Rib Tickling Good Time!**

“So?” Gus asked when I entered our room after the party.

“So, what?” I answered pretending not to understand his meaning.

“How was everything?”

“Everything? The games were pretty cool. It’s a super nice bunch of kids. The music was okay and the dancing was fun.”

“Fun? Just fun?”

I slipped out of my ‘greens’ and into a towel – it seemed to have become my choice of evening wear.

“Yes, fun. Remember we spoke about fun earlier in the day – something out of the ordinary that delivered pleasure and perhaps a thrill at the very end when the lights were dimmed and she indicated she really wanted me to kiss her.”

“Hmmm. I just don’t recall that conversation – not all of it at least.”

“It was what you were fishing for, though, right?”

“Me. Pry into your private affairs?” he said pretending to be offended at my suggestion.

The time had definitely come! He was sitting in the big chair, his legs draped over one arm. I took a flying leap and he, the chair and I had soon tumbled over onto the floor. I went for the surprise tickle tactic since he was clearly more muscled and stronger than I was.

I straddled him as he lay on his back and went to work on his ribs. He giggled and squirmed and tossed his head.

He drew up his knees and tried to turn us onto our sides. He succeeded and in the instant I put my hands out to catch myself, he reversed our positions. I was on the bottom. I was being unmercifully tickled. It was wonderful!

“Are you never going to say Uncle?” he asked at last as tears streamed down my smiling cheeks and my belly jiggled uncontrollably from laughter.

“I have no Uncle so guess not,” I said fully understanding I was really in for it after that.

As I fully expected, it prompted renewed effort on his part. My ribs had never been ‘tickle tired’ before but I’m telling you, that night they were.

After a while I looked up at him and managed, “You had enough, yet?” as I continued to flail my legs in the air.

He burst into laughter and rolled off onto the floor beside me. It had only been a truce and we both knew that. There would be another day, another tussle, other times with smiles and laughter between friends.

Gus preferred showers in the evening and I in the morning so he sang his off-key heart out in there for the next twenty minutes. It was wonderful having a friend like Gus. There was one very strange aspect to it all, however. He treated me as though I were every bit his equal and yet he was a Master Calibrator with all the necessary skills and knowledge and wisdom that implied. I was just a brand-new Tyro – the lowest, greenest, rung on the ladder.

When he returned to the room I asked him that very question. His answer seemed so simple.

“We are both human beings – precious human beings. No person is more or less worthy of basic respect and equality than any other. I can’t sculpt beautiful things out of Walnut but you can. Do you put me down because I can’t? I have some knowledge that you don’t have. Do I put you down because you don’t? Of course, not. We are both human beings, equal of respect and love.”

In a flash, I understood because that’s how it had always been within my family. Otto was brilliant. Yorka and Mario were gifted musicians. Molly was probably just an average seamstress but put her heart into it. Tina had not finished the seventh grade but turn her loose in a kitchen and

WOW! I was the kid. Compared to the others, I really didn't know much of anything and yet I, like each of them, received equal respect and love.

"I knew that," I said at last, "but I guess I just needed to hear it in order for it to settle into proper perspective and . . . next time, your ribs are mine, brother!"

We smiled.

"I'm to bed," Gus said. "I like my nightly eight hours. You'll find I keep to a regular schedule that way. Human systems just work so much more efficiently when they stay on a regular sleep, awake schedule."

"Yes. I've studied about it. I tend to be early to bed and early to rise. Most teenager's brains don't work that way. Their brains don't start producing the chemical they need to really get sleepy – ready for a useful sleep – until after ten or eleven and then they need nine or ten hours in the sack to receive adequate rest. Some state up here in the northeast changed school hours to start late in order to accommodate that fact of life and not only did tardiness fall to next to nothing, but grades improved, fights decreased, and the dropout rate plummeted."

"You have more odd bits and pieces of information in that head of yours than anybody I've ever met. Not a bad thing, understand. Just . . . fascinating, I guess," Gus said as he climbed into the upper bunk.

He was right. I loved trivia. I had once spent a weekend memorizing zip codes that rhymed with the towns they represented. [Heavenly Gate, 72108 – not on most maps.]

The night scene out the window was beautiful – a billion twinkling stars and a few wispy clouds slowly inching their way across the face of the full, blue tinted, moon. The uneasy surface of the ocean shimmered in the moon's light. The next day we would have to reposition the bunk beds so we could lay in them and fall asleep watching that wonderful sight. I was into bed and soon asleep.

The next morning I was in and out of the shower before Gus awoke. We hadn't yet made plans for the day so I did some reading until he groaned himself to life on the top bunk.

"Your eight hours just surpassed nine, my friend," I said

kidding him.

"It's your fault, you know," he came back still on his stomach with his fists buried deeply into the ends of the pillow.

"Mine?"

"You young twelve-year-old kids wear us elderly thirteen year olds out in a hurry."

He took a deep breath and sat up, dangling his legs over the side of the bunk, stretching his arms and rotating his neck.

"Studying already?" he asked looking down into my book.

"I didn't know if you and I had things scheduled so I wasn't sure how to plan my day."

"We should have discussed it last night. From now on we'll do that, okay?"

"Good plan."

"Speaking of last night, are your ribs as sore as mine?" he asked gently rubbing his sides.

"Although I really have no way of knowing how badly yours feel, I sincerely doubt if they could be any sorer than mine. I think they actually screamed out loud at me in the shower a while ago. That's the greatest thing, isn't it?"

"Tommy Powers, you do have the strangest take on things sometimes."

He giggled himself off his bunk and onto the floor.

"Gee. We need to get on the stick or we'll miss breakfast," he said glancing at the clock on the wall – a clock I didn't remember seeing there before.

We were quickly into our clothes – green and red – and arrived at the dining room door just in time to be last in line. Most everyone had finished. They were beginning their clean up tasks. Abby was still at her table.

"Am I allowed to go sit with her?" I asked.

"Certainly. There are no assigned seats," Gus answered. "This is our home not some upstate penitentiary."

I walked to her table.

"May I park my tray here?" I said, not really asking for permission and only hesitating a moment before setting it down and taking a seat beside her."

"You look dashing in your green outfit," she said.

Outfit, I thought to myself. That is a much more acceptable term to me than 'uniform'. I felt immediately better about it. From that moment forth it would be my outfit!

"Thank you. So do you – well not dashing – pretty I mean – and not outfit – well, top and bottom – and I'll just stop now. . . . I really had a great time at the party last night."

"So did I," she said. "And thanks for arranging things so we could be at the same tables so often."

"I thought you had arranged that," I said surprised.

At the same instant, we turned and looked at Gus. He waved, twiddling his fingers in our direction and smiling. He would never admit to what he had done.

"People say we look good together," Abby said.

"Do they? I suppose that's a good thing considering I hope we will be spending lots of time together."

She smiled and nodded.

"You do eat in the strangest ways," she said a few minutes later as I dipped my rolled-up pancake into a container of syrup.

"Does it bother you? I didn't intend for it to bother you. Where I come from table things and manners are done differently and I must admit I have been struggling with whether or not I need to just give up my ways and succumb to the less efficient way others do things."

"Oh, I'd never have you change. I didn't mean that. We girls were talking and . . . well, it's just that we've always done things in a certain way without ever considering they could just as well be done some other way. We think it's wonderful how you do things. Please don't stop. None of us here would ever ask that of you."

"You are a very kind person, Abby. I am used to just being myself but I must admit I am not used to having people always accept it as okay."

"The older folks are saying you are a breath of fresh air around this place," she went on.

"Fresh air is good, I suppose," I said not having any good idea how I should respond.

"Mom and Dad danced together in our living room last night. I've never seen them do that before. I even took Jesse a few turns around the room myself. We laughed and had a

good time.”

“You and your brother seem to get along pretty well.”

“I suppose so. We both think of the other one as a pain sometimes but I guess that’s natural. He’s a good kid. If I had to pick out a brother from every boy here, there’s no doubt I’d pick Jesse.”

“Not me?” I said putting on a frown.

She slapped playfully at my shoulder.

“I don’t know how it was where you came from but around here we girls don’t date our brothers.”

So, it had progressed to thoughts of dating, had it? I had to admit kissing her like a brother wouldn’t have been much fun.

“You like picnics?” she asked.

“Sure. Seldom been on a regulation picnic, I suppose. On the weekends my Wharfies and I often take lunch to the end of Pier Ten. It’s a quiet spot. I can swim there when it’s warm enough.”

“Mom suggested that I fix a picnic for the two of us for dinner this evening,” she said. “I know some nice spots. One I really like is down the hill behind an old cabin. There’s a pond that stays warm year-round out back. That sound okay?”

“It sounds wonderful. Let me check with Gus and make sure he doesn’t have plans for me at that time.”

I went over to where Gus was sitting with Facil.

“Abby asked . . .”

“Go! Have fun! You’ll be back in plenty of time for anything we need to do.”

I suddenly realized there was an efficiency to being able to read other’s minds and it didn’t seem to be an intrusion on my privacy at all. Just what else he might have read I chose not to consider.

“Thanks. In a few, then,” I said and I returned to Abby. It was set. At five we’d meet at her place. Her family had an apartment on the first floor, opposite side of the building from my room – in fact, it was about as far as anything could possibly be from my place.

“Well, I have to be off to class,” she said. “It was nice having you here this morning. If you will get here earlier, we

can have more time together.”

I nodded not caring to relate that my near tardiness was not of my making; it would have served no good purpose. She stood, picked up her tray and left to help the girls finish wiping off the tables.

I was very confused as to when boys and girls kissed and when they just said good-bye. I'd take it up with Gus, later.

I checked the chore list posted beside the door and noted that the guys my age had the day off. Gus finished and we walked back to our room together. We had plans to make about the drug guy. I was more than a little intrigued when he said there were positive options we had available to use with him. What could possibly be positive about such a disgusting human being?

It was back into our comfy clothes. I had to ask.

“Do you only have one outfit, too?”

“Yes. Only one. Getting tired of it?”

He smiled.

“Didn't mean that. I have three others back at the loft. Guess that makes me the one with all the extra stuff I don't need.”

“How many kids do you know who only have four sets of clothes? Maybe one in ten thousand – one in a hundred thousand. No. I don't think you've gone overboard in the stuff category.”

“So, where do we begin today?” I asked.

“Mr. George Hanson, the drug supplier in the area of Alamo Street.”

A pile of folders appeared on the sofa next to me.

“The background information on Hanson,” Gus explained, pointing. Go over it while the Sage and I tend to a few pieces of business. I should be back here by, say, nine. I'll respond to your questions and tell you what I have in mind. You be thinking of a plan as well. Remember about the Integrity Path and Options. I'll see you then.”

He left. I picked up the first file and began reading. It turned out to be a tremendous amount of material but I kept at it until I had devoured every word.

Hanson was married and had a daughter about my

age. He had grown up in the slums and through intelligence, persistence, and a willingness to hurt anybody that got in his way, soon ran the drug traffic in a wide area of the city. In the process, he had become a multi-millionaire.

He was a picture in contrasts. He and his family attended Mass together every Sunday morning. He was a major contributor to the church and to the private school his daughter attended – incidentally, it was the one at which I met Gus. He supported his widowed mother and two maiden aunts. He served on The Human Services Advisory Board for the city – the one that assisted the Social Services Division and rehabilitation programs. It was an unpaid, voluntary position.

The police suspected him in dozens of murders and believed over a hundred deaths due to overdoses could be laid on his doorstep. They could make no connection to him, however. As a teenager, he once shot a man for calling him by the wrong name. His temper was now much better controlled and he had become a business man with four dozen street dealers in his employ. You didn't cross Hanson or you didn't ever do anything again.

He was a genuinely religious and loving family man. He was a ruthless, heartless, bad guy. I had read about that strange combination before – mafia families reportedly held to the same bizarre dichotomy.

My plan would call for somehow forcing him to experience how it would be if his daughter got hooked on drugs and see how it affected her and the family. It was a rather shallow plan but it was the best I had to offer. I was eager to hear what Gus had up his sleeve.

The door opened and he stuck his head in.

"I'll be about an hour later than I thought," he said and left. It seemed a very odd exchange but I put it out of my mind.

There was suddenly lots of time before he was due back so I continued reading on my history project. The diaries were bringing home to me the absolute horror of war and, like with the addicts, how families were devastated by the loss of their loved ones. In both cases, the mothers, the fathers, and the young people themselves were totally helpless to do

anything about it. Helplessness must be just about the worst of all possible human conditions. In helplessness, there can be no hope. All that is left is despair – maybe anger.

I really hadn't thought much about those things in my short life. I knew there were kids in my city that went to bed hungry every night because their families had no money for food. My Wharfies and I tried to help. Every week we donated money to local children's relief organizations. Tina packed triple lunches in the sacks of certain dock workers because we knew there were those kinds of problems in their homes. She never charged for the extra, of course.

I once did some figuring and concluded that if every person who could afford to eat three meals a day would give up just one meal a month to the needy, there would be no hungry children in the entire city. It angered me that most people just looked the other way and let the kids cry themselves to sleep night after night.

Now it angered me that there were men like Hanson and that there were so few rehabilitation programs and that there were almost no programs that had a successful record when it came to helping those folks get a good start into a successful life after addiction or prison or other similar problems.

I found myself pacing back and forth in front of the window when Gus returned – at nine, right on time according to his original schedule.

"You'll wear blisters on those bare feet, my friend," Gus said as he crossed the room toward me. "What's up?"

"Sometimes I let myself get all worked up about the injustices in the world. I know getting upset doesn't help. I need to actually get out there and do something about them."

"And you have been – all your life. And you will be – all your life. One person can't mend every problem in the world, Tommy. One person can just help those within his reach."

"It's times like this I wish had longer arms, you know?"

Gus nodded.

"Action, not hand wringing is a good motto, I think," Gus said. "People who do something regularly for even one other person instead of just fretting about it or jawing about it, make a wonderful positive difference in our World. Can you imagine

the magnificent world we'd have if one person convinced just two others to make a difference like that every day, and those two found two who found two and so on?"

"Perhaps that is to be my mission as a Calibrator," I said. "Unleashing the powers within a million million human minds to work on humanity's problems one person at a time."

I stopped pacing. Then it hit me.

"You're back early."

"I don't think so. Didn't I say nine?"

"Originally, but then a few minutes ago, you poked your head in the door and said it would be more like ten."

Gus pulled his face into a thoughtful frown.

"Antipathy!" he said, disgust in his tone.

I remained silent, wondering if that were some Calibrator swear word I'd not heard yet. I assumed he'd explain.

"About once every five hundred years the Calibrator gene seems to mutate and produces an evil being. Antipathy is the most recent. It is as if each of the Calibrator's normal, positive, traits – altruism, compassion, helpfulness, love and wisdom – develop just backwards in them. They only live a few centuries and most of their powers are limited – low level.

Antipathy seems to have a particular hatred for mankind and those of us who work to improve things."

"But he looked just like you," I said surprised though fascinated by what I was hearing.

"The mutant's have one skill the rest of us don't. They can take the physical and mental form of others."

"There's no way to know it's Antipathy then?"

"Just one physical indicator – aside from his generally rotten disposition. His star on the back of his hand does not function, yet it is always there, even when he has taken someone else's form."

"Is he always around here?"

"No. He's been elsewhere for some fifty years. Been doing his evil deeds in the Middle East. He probably found it was easier to destroy the human race where large groups of people already harbor bad feeling toward each other . . . but, more about him later. We still have our work to do.

"Okay then. Back to the problem at hand. What's

next?" I asked.

"Hanson!"

"I know. But Hanson is really not the problem. If people – parents and friends and schools and the government – had been doing their jobs right, there would be no kids who felt they needed to take drugs. The Hansons of the world would have to go into other lines of work"

"And there you have it folks," Gus said holding his fist close to his mouth as if a microphone. "A twelve-and-a-half-year-old lad has just solved one of the greatest problems of the world today. And, if he could do it, you may ask, why can't the world leaders?"

I recognized his attempt at humor with a smile and continued.

"We get right back to knowledge as the basis for the solution. And it's not really just the three R's – readin', ritin' and 'rithmetic. They are only the tools so one can actually begin learning. You know what really irks me?"

"It seems I'm hearing about a lot of things that really irk you."

I ignored the fact he didn't ask, "What."

"I'll tell you. I've read a lot of psychology in my short life and it's clear that for centuries we have known how to raise kids who have the best chance to become mentally healthy, law abiding, helpful, productive, citizens, and yet generation after generation a huge number of parents choose to ignore all that information. They think they can invent a parenting plan from scratch that is better than what's contained in the knowledge and wisdom already documented on the subject over the past hundred years. It's a wonder the human species is still here. Why do people – parents – have to behave in such an ignorant manner?"

"There are lots of reasons, many of them associated with the poor parenting model they learned in their own homes. Also, many people have no idea that the facts are really in on how to be a good parent. They don't know the problem has been solved."

"How can kids go through twelve or thirteen years of school and never learn about that, the single most important piece of information – by far – that mankind has ever

developed? What are schools teaching if they aren't teaching us how to become all that human beings can become? I'm clearly ignorant of many things, myself, but I leave the door open for new information and new sources of information. I suppose I sound like I think I know what's best for everybody and that most other people don't."

"Often, it comes down to one's philosophic bottom line, Tommy. You clearly treasure the human species and believe it is worthy of a safe, continued existence that allows for it and its members to grow and improve and become all they can become given their skills and limitations. Lots of folks don't agree with that philosophic bottom line. They care only about themselves and having a comfortable, safe life for themselves during their own lifetime. They don't care about the comfort and safety of the future generations. They represent what you have described as the Self-Centered, Stuff Gatherers of the world."

"And a Calibrator will present options to such folks so they can see the logic in bending or changing their bottom line," I said, thinking I had seen where he was going with it all."

"He smiled and clapped his slow, steady clap."

"It's a huge undertaking for such a small group," I said, undoubtedly sounding overwhelmed by it all.

"One at a time, Tommy. One at a time."

"I'm impatient. Can I begin with TWO at a time and see what happens?"

It had been offered humorously but it held more than a kernel of truth. Now, I not only found myself battling general ignorance and the Hansons of the World but also the powerful and malevolent (hurtful) Antipathy. I wondered if I would be up to it.

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Plan

I felt better having vented some of my major irritations in Gus's direction. We sat and prepared to get on with the day. I was not sure how I was supposed to cope with Antipathy but assumed Gus would make suggestions when he thought it was time.

"So, how do we nail Hanson?" I asked.

"What are your thoughts on the matter?" he asked in return.

I told him what I'd been thinking.

"Seems to be in the right direction, to me. My plan just adds a little meat to the bones of yours."

I folded my legs under me, leaned back, and prepared to listen and learn.

"Kate, that's Hanson's daughter, is our ace in the hole in all this. You clearly understand that. I've wrestled with this. It's not an easy call but I've decided it may be necessary to help Kate find out what her father does – his drug business. She doesn't have any idea how he really makes his money. His family believes he's an executive in an insurance company. Hanson resides on two very separate spots along his Integrity Path. His family only knows about the positive spot and they have adopted that as their own. Kate will be appalled, devastated to learn of her father's dark side. I dislike using her but I believe she deserves to know the truth plus she is probably our best route for getting to Hanson."

"I hope we can find a way to avoid that," I said.

Gus nodded. I continued.

"Where do we begin?"

"How would you like to finally get to attend a regular school?" he asked, his artificially cheerful tone clearly trying to make it appear better than he understood I would think it was.

"It has never been high on my wish list, I can tell you that, although it could probably be a worthwhile experience. You can't really understand certain things until you have lived them. Sure. When?"

"Today we will enroll you in Kate's school and I'll see that you have classes with her. I'll accompany you as your father."

He made a face, tensing the muscles throughout his body, and was soon sitting there looking very much the part of a thirty-five-year-old father suited up for a day at the office. I assumed it was how Gus had looked at that age.

"Daddy," I said teasing. "About that raise in my allowance."

He was immediately back to being Gus.

"Your job will be to make friends and eventually introduce Kate to some of the youngest addicts her father feeds. Then, when the time is right – and if we still need to – we'll arrange for her to overhear him talking his filthy business with an employee. He'll reveal all the right things – I'll see to his mind."

"I understand, but it may take more than that, won't it?"

"We'll seep some options to her. My preference is for her to threaten to become a user if he doesn't stop. We can arrange it to go all the way – him walking in on her shooting up – with a harmless liquid, of course."

"It might work," I said although like Gus I was really turned off by using her that way.

"I have two more aspects for us to work on. One is to get him to put lots and lots of his money into a trust fund to support the kinds of programs we know must be available to stop the need for drugs in the first place. And then, offer him some legitimate business alternatives so he can slip from bad business to good business. We want his drug business stopped. We don't want to ruin his daughter's life by taking her loving father away from her."

"Most folks would say Hanson should be punished," I

said neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the idea.

"I know. If the problem is solved, though, and there is a virtual certainty that he won't return to his old ways, how does punishment help anything? He's seen the light. He's changed. He's supporting drug prevention and recovery programs. I think society will have won big time."

"I'm not disagreeing. I hate the whole punishment concept. It really only looks back – at what was wrong. It never looks forward to what can be – what good things can begin. People who make the effort to change their lives around should be rewarded for the change not punished for their prior mistake."

"And, the punishment approach chooses to disregard the idea of helping the offender learn how to improve – how to avoid making the same mistake or doing the same misdeed again. It assumes punishment somehow magically shows a person how to do things right, when of course it doesn't. It may indicate what not to do again, but it says nothing about what to do instead – what to do that will be acceptable in meeting the same underlying need that led to the problem."

"Our discussions get pretty heavy, Gus. It's not that I don't appreciate them, but they could really depress a guy in a hurry, you know? All the bad stuff seems overwhelming, sometimes."

"What you are learning here is how to go into the world and make a positive difference – to improve the lot of humanity. In order to do that we can't just ignore the bad stuff out there that's causing the problems. I know how depressing it can be. But, in your mind you have to emphasize the positive side of the equation – that every day you are doing things that really do help change things for the better. That's what keeps us sane, builds our self-esteem, I think – knowing that we are making a genuinely positive difference in the world every single day. It can be a million-dollar gift to charity or a dozen smiles at folks up and down a street. They both contribute."

"I'll keep that in mind. Don't dwell on what's wrong. Dwell on how I am making a positive difference for real people. Got it. I feel better already."

"Well, then, are you ready for your first day at school,

Son?"

"Enroll me, Daddy, but I can tell you for certain I never thought I would hear myself saying that in a million years."

"You're really going to hate this next thing, Tommy."

I suppose I frowned as if to ask, 'What could possibly be worse than having to go to a regular school?'

"This!" he said.

I was immediately re-dressed in a long sleeved white shirt, a blue sweater vest, navy blue slacks, black socks and shoes and the most uncomfortably tight underwear I had ever experienced.

"School uniform, huh?" I said looking myself over in the mirror. "Well, it's for a good cause. Amy at the Bagel stand will have to look twice to know who we are."

"You assume there is a Bagel in your immediate future, do you?"

"The school is in her neighborhood and it only seems polite to drop in and say 'Hi!'."

We were soon well bageled, double hugged and kissed, and sent on our way.

The principal was a stern looking lady – well, woman. I assumed she was also a lady. She spent ten minutes going over the rules – all of them things I was not allowed to do. It seemed VERY strange to me. Just one short sentence saying I was expected to be helpful, kind, and respectful of the rights of others would have more than covered it. It was all I could do not to engage her in a discussion about it.

Gus – that is, Daddy – left. He also left me a pointed mind seep – 'Don't rock the boat, Son. You have a very specific mission here. There will be time later to wreak havoc on their system of mindless regulations.'

It was probably good that he had injected that reminder. I needed to keep focused. The principal took me to what she called my third hour class – 8th grade science. The teacher was Mr. Elzer, a gray haired, frail looking man with gold rimmed glasses and a frown that seemed built into the structure of his face.

"Sit there," he said pointing, and the principle left.

I sat. He brought me a book – fifteen years outdated according to the copyright. I had to wonder how he could

possibly teach the current state of science from such a book. I soon understood that he didn't. We were learning fully obsolete information. I had to bite my tongue. It seemed criminal to me but I focused and kept quiet.

Kate was gorgeous, with long blond hair pulled back into a pony tail, blue eyes, a wonderful smile – which she opened in my direction more than once – and curves in all the right places.

The final ten minutes of the class consisted of a quiz over the material Mr. Elzer had been droning on about. It posed a dilemma for me. Did I provide answers based on the out-of-date book and lecture or the actual answers as science knew them at that moment? In what I thought was a flash of brilliance I did both. For each question, I gave the lecture-based answer and, when it was wrong, I added the correct, updated answer with references to the basic research.

Even with all that, I was the first one done and as I reflected on the simplicity of the assignment I was astonished at how little these kids had learned – ‘been taught’ – up to that point in their school career.

As it turned out, there were six periods in the school day. Lunch followed the science class. Everybody brought sack lunches. I had not been prepared for that but, of course, Gus had. As I stowed my ‘new’ book into my backpack – another strange invention – I noticed a familiar brown sack waiting for me. One of the boys, Jerry, introduced himself and took me to the gym where we sat at tables and ate.

I asked him about Kate.

"Rich kid. Not all that bad, though. Mostly into jocks.

She and Ted are steadies – our school's best basketball player. You'll meet him next hour in PE."

PE, I wondered? It was an unfamiliar term to me. Philosophical Encounters? Physical Engineering? Personal Economics? Party Etiquette? I would just have to wait and see. Asking would expose my ignorance and that would probably be difficult to explain at my age.

After lunch, Jerry – who had become my self-appointed guide – took me to PE, which turned out to be physical education. It was a strange experience. It was all guys, herded into a very smelly, narrow room with benches which

sat between rows of rusted lockers. Everybody undressed. No problem. I had never been modest. Locker doors were opened and they all put on white tee shirts, blue shorts and sneakers over thick white – well, once white – sox.

During the process, a man, who they called Coach, came in and handed me a set of clothes to wear. It went downhill from there. We played basketball – something I had played only occasionally. You could say I got by, but I'm not very good. Needless to say, I was happy to move on to English, fifth period and finally History.

I spoke to Kate and introduced myself, not pressing. It was like seeping her mind – 'Here I am' – and then leaving before she could reject me. After school, Jerry bought me an orange juice from a machine that stood just outside the back door not far from the fence where I had first met Gus. There were several wooden picnic tables there and we sat and talked. Several others stopped to chat with Jerry for a short time and to say 'hi' to me. They seemed like a pretty nice bunch.

Jerry's dad honked and he had to leave. I sat there alone for a few minutes reflecting on my day – a very strange one for me. Kate and her boyfriend – Ted – came out the door and walked over to where I was. She introduced me to him.

"We sort of met, in PE," he said, offering me his hand.

"Basketball really isn't my thing, I guess," I said, attempting to explain my poor performance.

"Hey! It's just a game," he said. "No big deal."

It was a nice gesture on his part.

"Sit," I said, "If you have time. Fill me in on everything I need to know about this institution of learning."

They sat. We talked. Both of them had attended the school since kindergarten. I liked them. They would be good friends. Apparently, they felt the same. Kate invited me to a party at her house the next night – Friday. I got directions. Ted, however, offered to pick me up. I arranged to meet him in front of the church.

"Got a girl," he asked.

"Sort of," I said having been caught off guard.

"Bring her," Kate said. "It'll just be about a dozen of us. We'd love to have her come along."

"No offense," Ted said, "but not knowing you I have to warn you – no booze or drugs or Kate's dad will skin you on the spot."

"That's not a problem here. Would never consider touching the stuff."

"You're okay, Tom. I'll see you tomorrow. And bring suits."

They left. So did I. Gus was waiting for me just outside the schoolyard fence.

"So, how does it feel to be a full-fledged eighth grader?" he asked.

I couldn't tell if he was being serious or joking. I took it seriously.

"It will be an interesting experience. I continue to be amazed that smart people who call themselves educators can actually think this is an acceptable way to help kids learn. I'm not sure if I should do well on the tests or fake it down a bit in order to fit in."

"You're suggesting you are well ahead in the classes you're taking."

"Light years ahead, I'm afraid, and the books they're using should have been shredded a decade ago. The science book is older than I am.

"Speaking of that, I'm confused. When we're out here, like now, are we on regular time or Time-X?"

"It is confusing. This is real time, but when you re-enter the Hall your life gets rewound back into Time-X. When you eventually return to your folks at the loft in six months it will have only covered the weekend to them. You will be back at nine a.m. on Monday morning – in real time – just as I promised."

"I'll pretend that I understand that," I said. "The school calendar is real time and even though I'm participating in that, my time stays on Hall time."

"You got it. No need to try and understand it beyond that at this point."

"Question. I got invited to a party at Kate's. It's a boy-girl party. Do you suppose Abby's parents will allow her to go

with me?"

"You'll have to ask. If it's needed, tell them I'll be on hand with you to handle emergencies."

"Okay. Thanks. Do you have any idea what these kids do at boy-girl parties?"

"Eat, dance, laugh, have fun. I assume it's a liquor-free zone."

"That was made very clear. Ted said to remember to bring suits. Any idea what he meant? Is it formal?"

"Swim suits. I'm sure the Hanson estate has a pool."

"For use in October?"

"Let's go take a look. I've been meaning to do that anyway. There. Into that alley so when we jump out of here it won't cause anybody a problem."

"I feel like Clark Kent looking for a place to change into Superman," I said.

Instantly we were there – sitting on the roof of a mansion.

"The roof" I asked looking around.

"I like to begin on roofs. It gives a great clandestine (hidden) vantage point from which to plan one's next move."

The pool was inside a large, patio-like area that was entirely enclosed in glass. It promised to be some party! The estate was many blocks southwest of the Alamo district. It sat on several, wooded, acres and was encircled by a brick wall some ten feet high. Guards, standing at black, wrought iron, gates, secured the front and rear entrances.

"Seen enough?" Gus asked.

I nodded and we were immediately at the rear of the church. We walked up into the woods toward the cabin. I loved that sudden silence.

"I assume this is the cabin Abby mentioned when she was talking about the picnic this afternoon," I said as it came into view.

"I imagine so. The young people like it down here."

"Down here? So Calibration Hall is up there?" I asked pointing.

"Up there somewhere," he said, smiling.

I pounded him on his shoulder.

"You have been very short on information about that,

you know," I said.

"I know."

It was how he closed topics.

"I guess my main job now is to get close enough to Kate so she will trust me, is that right?"

"Exactly, and without causing any jealousy from Ted."

"I'm quite sure I can do that. People have always trusted me. Molly says it's my eyes. Tina says it's my smile. Yorka once told me it was my unrelenting honesty. I always wondered just what he meant by unrelenting – forceful and constant, do you suppose?"

"It seems that's what you suppose, doesn't it?"

Again, I nodded.

"Going to make your eagerly anticipated grand entrance again?" he asked as we entered the cabin.

"Your meaning?" I asked fully confused.

"The folks at the Hall enjoy your . . . how can I word this . . . your exuberant entrances after you and I have been away."

"I see. Sure. Why not? Just give me a minute to get wound up here."

I got exactly that. Sixty seconds later we appeared in the center of the great room. There were considerably more folks there than last time. They clapped which encouraged me to dance on just a bit longer.

During the applause that followed my bow, Gus and I climbed the stairs. I heard an older woman's voice call out, "We love you, Tommy." I turned and waved.

It made me feel fantastic! I punched Gus again. He didn't let that one go. He chased me on up the stairs and down the hall right to the door of our room. We slid our backs down the hall wall and sat on the floor side by side, puffing and smiling and laughing. I suddenly had so many friends my age. It was wonderful. It made me wonder how my Wharfies were doing.

We struggled to our feet and went inside. I shed my school uniform and climbed into my comfortable clothes. It was nearing five and I needed to be on time for my first . . . date, do you suppose? A date. A two-person picnic. It all seemed the same to me. My goodness, life was wonderful!

Abby, her brother Jesse, and her mother answered the door together. This seemed to be a big event for them as well as for me.

"Afternoon," I said stepping inside. I had decided to wait until after the picnic to ask her about Kate's party just in case things didn't go well between us.

"Give us gals just five more minutes and we'll have the basket packed," her mother said.

"Want to see my room?" Jesse asked.

"Sure."

"I make model planes," he said as he pushed open his door ahead of me. It was obvious. They sat on every available surface. They hung from every . . . you get the idea. I examined several of them.

"You really do nice work – careful, neat. Super!"

"Thanks."

He grinned a cheek busting grin.

"I got a telescope. Probably not as powerful as yours," he said pointing.

I examined it.

"I think we can double its power pretty easily if you want to," I said. "Maybe Saturday?"

"Great. Sure."

"You have a really nice place here. I'm baffled though about why you store your clothes in heaps on the floor?"

"Not stored. Just not picked up. Mom's on me about it all the time."

"Some mothers don't begin seeing their son's as being mature enough for special privileges until after they don't need to be reminded about such things. By the way, we'll need a longer tube for the telescope. Something about double what it is now. Can you arrange for that?"

"Ya. Got just the thing. A cardboard mailing tube some maps came in."

"Sounds like it should work. I suppose I should get back out there and see if I can help. Thanks for showing me your stuff."

I wondered if my awkwardly stated mind seep about keeping his room picked up would have any effect.

I entered the living room just as Abby arrived with the

basket. I attempted to lift the corner of the cloth to peek inside and she slapped at my hand.

"Time for that later. If you don't like what you see you just might not want to go."

"Like there's any chance of that," I said without thinking.

She looked me straight in the face and smiled, holding it for a long time like she was studying what she saw. I liked that – looking at each other that way. Her mother entered the room.

"You kids have fun. I'll expect you back by seven – and that means here, inside this room. It'll be darker than it needs to be after that."

I wasn't sure what she meant but nodded.

"We'll be back by seven. Thanks for your help."

"Scat. Daylight's a burnin' as they say in the old westerns."

Again, I didn't catch the meaning of her reference but I nodded and smiled. My education, as great as it had been, seemed to have left me uninformed about lots of things others took for granted.

There was a path outside I hadn't noticed before. It led down the hill. I carried the basket and she held my other hand. It was nice. We rounded a corner in the woods and there stood the cabin. It was warm enough to shed our jackets. I wanted to shed my shirt as well but didn't know if that would be considered proper in the presence of a young lady, so I didn't. We spread the blanket and set out the food. Barbeque sandwiches, potato salad, slaw, celery with cheese filling, chips, lemonade. Everything I thought a picnic basket should contain.

"What a great spot," I said getting cross-legged comfortable on the blanket.

"I love it here," she said. "I'd like a home near a place like this someday."

"You're looking pretty far ahead," I said.

"I'm a planner. I get the idea you're more impulsive, spur of the moment, than I am."

"Probably. I suppose I need to balance that out somehow."

The food was delicious. Conversation flowed easily.

We shared our hopes and dreams. We sat and watched the sun go down. We lay back on the blanket and she snuggled into my outstretched arm just like I hoped she would – although I must admit I wasn't sure what to do with her once she arrived there.

We wondered together about the stars and the universe and connected the tiny sparkles to make pictures. We kissed. The talking was wonderful. The kissing was wonderful. Best of all, though, was just being close and feeling like we belonged together. I had never had such a feeling before. My 12 ½ year old – rapidly going on 17 – male system didn't seem to know just what it was supposed to do so I did nothing. I didn't want the time to end.

My star blinked and I knew it was time to head back. I thanked her for the time together and we folded the blanket and put it back into the basket. I helped her on with her jacket and put my arm around her waist as we walked back up the path.

"There's a party at one of my friend's homes in the city tomorrow night. Good kids. I'm sure it will be well supervised. A pool – they said to bring suits if you want to. Would you like to go with me?"

"What do you think?"

"Will your folks let you?"

"Since I imagine Gus will never be far away, I think they will," she said.

"Gus?" I tried to pretend I didn't really know what she meant.

"You're a Tyro. He's your Mentor. Believe me; he'll never be far away. You're his responsibility. He takes that very seriously."

It was not at all awkward at her door – the way I had worried it might be. She lifted herself up on her tip toes and we shared a short, pleasant, kiss. She turned, opened the door, and disappeared inside. Six fifty-nine. Excellent planning!

I danced through the great room. I danced up the stairs. I danced down the hall and twirled myself onto the couch in my room.

"You do expend a lot of energy for apparently no

reason at all," Gus said, appearing in his chair at about the same moment. "Have a good time?"

"Yes. A wonderfully fantastic, absolutely stupendous, marvelous, time, not that I'm sure you don't already know that."

"Gus chuckled."

"Remember your first date?" I asked.

"Oh, my, yes."

It was the end of the conversation.

I dreamt of sparkling lights, celery shaped canoes and the wonderful feeling of holding someone special, very close.

///

## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **Mind Seeping Activated**

School would begin at nine so after I finished a lingering breakfast with Abby, Gus said it was time we got to work on my powers. It excited me to hear those words. Changing door colors with help wasn't my idea of powers.

"We will begin with mind seeping. It's not necessarily the easiest but it is the most useful in your current situation."

"My school situation, you mean."

"School and the upcoming party. Not knowing what to expect it is well to have some sort of backup."

It made sense. I nodded. I had hoped Near Jumping would come first. It had more pizzazz! But, I was sure my Mentor knew best. I listened.

"Remember, your powers will be modest until your birthday, but they will be useful."

Again, I nodded, impatient to get on with it and wishing I could fast forward the conversation to the good stuff.

"The oral mind seep you used with Abby's brother was excellent, by the way. When a straight forward oral seep – meaning one delivered with words, out loud – shows promise of success you never go further.

"Find the point on you star that sits at nine o'clock. It energizes your seeping power. Put your finger on it and begin gently stroking it. With practice, you will be able to activate it mentally. Close your eyes and see your star. Rub the point. Feel the warmth your finger produces there. Say to yourself, 'Mind Seep,' over and over again, slowly. See the words, 'Mind Seep,' printed before your eyes. See my face in your

mind's eye. Send an idea into my thoughts."

A moment passed.

"Funny boy," he said smiling. "I don't need to be seeing you kissing Abby. Try something more businesslike."

"The IBM logo. Very well done. Do another."

"The Lincoln Memorial. Excellent! Now something other than a visual image. A verbal thought."

It took me a moment to switch tracks.

"Try love! What a wonderful message to have selected for your first verbal mind seep. Do another! Make it less of an order and more of an option."

He smiled when he received it. I knew he would.

"Many folks prefer Amy's Bagels. She's doing quite well on her own without our seeping advertising messages for her. Your power is amazingly strong, Tommy. I've never encountered such natural pre-teen talent."

I wasn't sure how to react. I could take no credit for it. It was just there, like my looks, my shoe size, my IQ, the length of my nose. So, I decided not to say, 'Thank you.' I took a different approach.

"What's there is there, Gus. I'll do my very best to learn how to use it wisely."

"You are already wise for your age."

I smiled.

"Knowledge plus experience, well taken," I said quoting the now familiar phrase. "I've had my nose in books all my life and I've goofed up so many times I've had lots of chances to learn from my mistakes."

It was true. My inquisitive nature and impulsive tendencies had me intruding on the world from the time I was a toddler. I seldom just asked how things worked. I interacted with them to find out. Apparently, that had been helpful in several ways. Again, I thanked my Wharfies for allowing me the freedom to explore and try, even when they suspected something wouldn't work. Except where safety issues were concerned I seldom remember them telling me not to try something.

Gus had more to say:

"Practice on the folks here for a while until you feel comfortable. Remember, it is options and possible

alternatives that we see not directions or requests. We are not in the business of dictating change. Our function is to make sure the relevant possibilities – options – have been explored. You will need to begin thinking in terms of options, options, options. When you do something out of habit – simple things like brushing your teeth or taking a shower – think about other ways it could be done – other options. When you think about a friend, explore your ideas about him or her and play with other possibilities to see if they hold any merit. The additional possibilities may not be improvements but it's impossible to know that until you explore them.

"Since seeing options to others is going to be such an important part of your life, you must think options at all times.

"I'll give you one more piece of advice, Tommy. I offer it both as your Mentor and as your good friend. As tempting as it may be, NEVER use your mind seeing power to influence your romantic activities. Such relationships must be real and genuine. They must be honest and come from her heart. Any tampering throws all of that out of kilter. It's like lying to her; you'll never know if her responses reflect her honest desires or yours."

"I've already thought that through. In fact, I struggled with it for a few moments there on the blanket last night."

I looked Gus directly in his face.

"That wasn't you who kept me on the right path last night was it?"

"Nope. That was all Tommy Powers, or, should I say, Tommy's Powers?"

He laughed himself silly over it and slid off the front of the chair onto the floor. It was pretty funny, I guess. I still had trouble relating with him when he changed back and forth so quickly from Mentor to buddy. I supposed I'd get used to it. I just sat enjoying his reaction. I had to laugh with him and soon we seemed to just be laughing to be laughing. It was wonderful!

I seeped him an option. 'Some friends don't need words to express their mutual love.'

He seeped back to me, 'Some friends would agree completely with that, loved one.'

We dried our faces. He returned to the chair and

gradually became serious again. I was beginning to understand what the Sage had meant when he said Calibrators treasured fun.

"You'll need an outfit for the party this evening. Do you know what you want to wear?"

"I have no idea what kids wear. I suppose since I'm on a mission it's okay to give in and dress like they do."

"How about if I do some research and put together several for you to choose from after school?"

"Thank you. That will be a big help. But don't move my duds any further in their direction than you have too. I still have my self-respect to consider."

"I will do my best," he said smiling at my concern.

I figured that I couldn't do any better than having Gus doing his best for me. I would not need to think about it again.

School went . . . well, school went. I found my first two period classes were no better than the others had been the day before. Math seemed to be a review of things I'd known since I was eight and Civics was about as dry and boring and I could imagine. I tried to ask questions that would liven it up – 'how such and such applies to kids our age' – but the teacher clearly had no idea how to respond so I stopped before he made a complete fool of himself. It wasn't my intention to make him look bad in front of his students. Before the period ended I had seeped him an option or two about ways the class might be made more interesting and relevant.

At lunch, I sat with Jerry, Ted, Kate, and Tasha, Jerry's special interest. They would also be at the party that evening. At one point, it seemed appropriate for me – as the new guy – to ask about dress for the party. Turned out jeans and T's – as they called them – were to be the uniform of the night. I relaxed and hoped Gus had heard.

They were more interested in me and my background than I was prepared to share. I winged it and kept things as close to the truth as I dared – adopted, home-schooled, my interests and things like that. I figured I'd be alright until they wanted to drop in on me and my family. I'd call on Gus if that happened.

I must admit I was nervous about the party. It was to begin at seven and would be over at eleven – four hours with

kids my age doing whatever it was kids my age did when they got together as couples. I expressed my concern to Abby and asked for her help. I had stopped at her place after school and we were sitting on the sofa in the living room.

"Of course, I'll help. Think I'd not?"

"Well, no. I didn't mean it that way. It may seem odd but I've really never spent much time with kids. I can see that it's left me lacking in social skills but it was never a problem until right now."

"How are you getting on with the kids at school?" she asked.

"Seems to be okay. They don't laugh and point and make fun of me."

"That's not why I meant, silly."

"I know. It really does seem to be working okay, I guess."

Abby didn't know why I was attending that school but she was used to those kinds of mysteries. She seldom knew what her father was up to. It was a part of her life, and she just seemed to accept it.

"It's jeans and T's for guys. I assume you know what goes with that for girls," I said.

"I think I'll be able to find something."

She smiled and patted my hand. I could really get used to hand patting. It seemed to increase my respiration rate dramatically. I had read about the phenomenon but still, it seemed odd. Otto, perhaps because he had never been married, wanted to make sure I had all the facts of life information well before I was in anyway interested in it. Perhaps now that I was, I needed a quick review.

"And a swim suit," I added eventually.

"I got that taken care of," she said.

I realized that although Gus and I had discussed clothes we hadn't talked about a swim suit – something I'd never needed before. At the docks, I swam in cutoffs or, when the women weren't present, in my skin.

Her mother entered the room. I stood. It was an automatic response for me because Otto and Yorka always stood when a woman entered the room.

"I'm not sure what you did with my son," she began,

"but the one you left in his place the other day is keeping his room picked up, clean clothes on hangers, and dirty ones in his hamper."

I pointed to my chest.

"Me? I just talked planes and telescopes.

She gave me a quick peck on my cheek. Abby looked confused. I was not inclined to comment further but I chalked one up for oral mind seeping.

It was time for dinner. I was still in my school uniform.

"I'll meet you in the dining room," I said. "Need to get out of these duds."

"See you there, then."

She walked me to the door. I jogged up to my room. Gus was there.

"Got your clothes," he said pointing to the spread on the back of the couch. "Blue jeans and T-shirts in white, blue and black. I threw in new socks and a pair of shoes with soles that are more appropriate for dancing than what you have – just in case there is dancing."

"Cool!" I said holding up the shirts. I've never had a real choice like this before. I think I'll go with the blue. Oh. We forgot about the swimming suit."

"Now would I forget about that?" he said, pulling a sack out from behind his chair.

He tossed it to me, smiling. They were light blue, boxer style.

"Thanks, Gus. These will be fine. I should have known you'd take care of things. I need to get changed for dinner. I'm sitting with Abby. I hope you don't feel like I'm abandoning you."

"Let's see," he said playfully cradling his chin in his hand. "The choice between being with a thousand-year-old man masquerading as a thirteen-year-old boy, or a pretty young lady your age who can't keep her hands off you. Hmmm? Which seems more likely?"

"Thanks. I didn't mean . . . Well, thanks."

I changed into my greens and we walked down stairs together. I had a question for him. It was beginning to seem that I always had a question for him.

"This school work they have me doing is taking me

nowhere. I need to get back to doing things that are meaningful. I'll keep on with my project for Facil but I'm wondering if I shouldn't be starting something else."

"We'll talk about it in the morning. There may be things that are more important to your education right now than traditional subjects. I want to move you rapidly into the use of your powers. As potent as they are, you need lots of practice to get them regulated before number thirteen arrives."

I understood – well, in a general way. I'd let him take the next step in terms of my education. My next step was in the direction of Abby who was already seated. Dinner was served family style, the food set on the table in bowls and platters, which were passed around, allowing each person to serve himself. It was how we did it at home.

I was on the list to dry dishes, so after eating we went our separate ways. We arranged to meet at her place at 6:30. We'd walk to the church to catch our ride with Ted.

He was waiting as we walked up. His father was driving and Ted got out to greet us. Abby and I slipped into the back seat. Ten minutes later we were at Kate's house – mansion, whatever. It was a quandary for me. Nobody needed a place that big and lavish in which to live. It was wasteful of space and money and energy consumption. Yet, I found myself now living in a similar place. Like I said, it was a quandary I would wrestle with later.

Ted entered the front door without knocking and the rest of us followed him inside. It was extravagant in every possible way from the Italian marble entry floor and columns to the crystal chandeliers and the huge rooms with twelve foot, ornately painted ceilings. There was more but that imparts the general idea.

A man, Hanson I assumed, was there to greet us. He administered a long, warm, hug to Ted and shook hands with me. Ted introduced us and then led the way through the house to a back door that opened into the enclosed patio, which Gus and I had seen earlier in the day. We seemed to be the last to arrive. The others were already into their suits enjoying the water or sitting around tables piled high with food. Kate showed Abby to the girl's dressing room while Ted and I got ready in the guy's.

So much for worrying about clothes, I thought to myself. I'd been there a total of three minutes and was already out of them. We were soon back in the pool room. It seemed anything went for guy's swimwear from knee length baggies to Ted's skimpy tank briefs. Mine seemed to fit comfortably in the middle. Abby had a two-piece dark blue suit. She looked wonderful! It was the style all the girls wore.

"Race you to the other end," Ted said to me as we stood near the diving board. It was a challenge but sounded friendly.

"Sure, I said shrugging.

We didn't wait on any formalities. It was each guy for himself. We were on the move from the second we hit the water. The kids cheered – mostly just to be cheering it seemed since no one appeared to care who won. We touched the other end at the same moment. Apparently, that was good. Winning seemed very important to these guys and the fact that I had tied the best swimmer in the school gave me some instant status. It seemed strange. How could being a good swimmer have anything to do with my basic worth as a person?

I paddled back to where Abby was sitting on the edge of the pool, her feet playfully kicked water into my face as I approached.

At that point the guys all picked up their dates and threw them into the water. Another really odd move I thought. I reached my arms up and helped Abby slip in beside me. I supposed it wasn't a very macho move, but like I have indicated, the men in my life taught me to respect women and treat them well. It wasn't that they were fragile, they were precious. They were the mothers of the human race and that made them very special.

Kate's mother and father put in appearances from time to time – to let us know we were being watched, I assumed. It was fine with me and the others all expected it. Jerry showed me how to dive from a diving board – I had only ever dived off the pier. Before long I was doing back flips – not good ones but I eventually managed to go in feet first rather than slapping my stomach on the surface. It was great fun.

They were nice kids. The girls accepted Abby from the

moment she arrived and I got on very well with the boys.

There was fried chicken, ribs, and sandwiches. There was a make your own ice cream sundae bar, a taco bar, and a salad bar. Every soft drink I'd ever heard of seemed to be available as well as juices I'd never heard of.

Kate, Ted, Abby and I spent quite a bit of time together eating and talking and having a good time.

"It's really nice to have some new blood in our group," Kate said at one point. "I love the rest of these guys but we've been together since preschool. It's like there's nothing new to talk about or do. I'm really glad you two are here this evening."

Evening was soon over and it was time to leave. We dressed and thanked Kate and her parents. Ted's father, along with a half dozen other parents, were waiting in cars out front.

Ted's father was reluctant to just drop us off at the church that late at night. I had another flash of brilliance.

"My dad should be along any minute. He always meets me when it's late like this."

I knew Gus would get the idea, and almost immediately 'Daddy' came strolling around the church to greet us. I introduced him to Ted's father and Abby stood quietly by, smiling. The three of us headed back around the church and the car pulled away.

"Thanks, Pop!" I said slapping Gus on the back as he re-Gussed himself.

"You're welcome, Son. Quick thinking, by the way. I'm afraid I was a step behind you on that one."

We climbed the gentle, winding, path up toward the Hall. Gus went on ahead thoughtfully giving us some private time. It had been a wonderful evening. It could have been just as wonderful sitting on a park bench talking or playing catch or chase or twenty questions, but I had to admit it had been very nice.

"You looked fantastic in your suit," I told her as soon as we were alone.

"You too. Those baggy clothes you usually wear really don't do your great physique justice."

"It's the body I got. I can take very little credit for it," I

said.

We enjoyed a few minutes together away from the prying eyes of others and then I dropped her off at her apartment. I had a question for Gus as I walked in the door to our room.

“Not a single kid asked me about the star on the back of my hand. I can’t understand that. I was prepared with the birth mark story but never once had to use it.”

“While you and Ted were changing, it occurred to me that it might pose a problem so I fixed their minds not to see it. I didn’t have a chance to explain.”

It was a fully satisfactory explanation. I donned my towel and stretched out on the couch.

“It was a really great evening, you know. I wished you could have been there with me. I know you would have had a good time.”

“I appreciate your thoughts. I did fine. Did you try the ribs? Mmmmm. They were delicious!”

“The invisibility thing?”

He nodded.

“I’m glad you were there. How did the kids impress you?”

“A good bunch.”

“How did Kate’s parents impress you?” I asked.

“A good pair of parents – concerned, helpful, caring, loving.”

“And yet he’s the guy we are going to take down.”

“But that will be the he that resides at a very different place – a disgusting, hurtful, place – on his integrity path, remember.”

I nodded. It was fascinating and amazing how one person could be two such different people. I suddenly hated the idea of having to involve Kate in the plan.

“Can you sleep?” Gus asked.

“I suppose. It’ll probably take a little while for me to come down. . . . I kissed her again, tonight – not at the party but on the path later.”

“I noticed there was no kissing at the party.”

“It was nice not to have to. I was worried about that when I heard the term ‘boy-girl party’. I’ve heard things and I

was afraid there might be stuff expected of me I wasn't ready for."

"And you would have let a situation like that force you to do those kinds of things?"

"Oh. No. Never. Surely you know that!"

"I do. I'm just puzzled by why you were bothered by the idea, then."

"I wouldn't have wanted to let Abby down – if she had other kinds of expectations."

"Perhaps you and she need to have a long and honest talk about such things – your expectations of each other and the limits with which you each feel comfortable."

"Yes. Thank you. Such a simple solution. I knew there was a reason I kept you around."

"If my ribs weren't still so sore, little buddy, you'd be rolling on the floor right now," he said smiling.

"I love you Gus. I've wanted to say that out loud for a while. You are a very special person in my life and I thank you for your friendship. You'd be just that special even if you were plain Gus the paperboy or the kid on the corner after school."

"Thank you, Tommy. There is no greater gift than love. I hope you know I love you as well. We are going to make a fantastic team, you know!"

"It seems to me we already are," I said.

He nodded. I was ready for bed. It had been a long and eventful day.

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## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **Time Passes**

During the next several weeks lots of important events took place. All of my five basic powers had been activated and I spent a big portion of my time with Gus learning how to use and control them. Jesse, Abby's brother, often let me practice on him.

Although Jumping was the most fun, Gus pointed out that it really contributed the least to a Calibrator's typical mission. I became quite proficient with Mind Speak and even Time-X. Visioning was more difficult – clouding minds and causing confusion. It was closely related to Invisibility – at my level of proficiency meaning to make myself invisible for short periods.

To become invisible, it was necessary to seep a specific visual image cloud into another person's mind – one designed just to block out my image. I had seen hypnotists do it on stage with oral suggestions – becoming all quite invisible to their subject. In groups, of course, that same cloud had to be seeped into everybody's mind. Gus could do a crowd of thousands in a split second. I was still struggling to do a half dozen in ten seconds.

It is a two-stage operation – my physical being and the clothes I'm wearing along with anything I might be carrying. There were some humorous moments at the beginning when I'd do the clothes first and find myself standing there in my skin wondering what Jesse found so funny. I now have that under control.

Things gradually changed for the better at school as well. Much to my amazement, Gus was able to show me some

basketball moves that immediately made me a contender under the hoop. Ted was good about offering constructive advice, also. He understood that it was not my desire to become a great player. I just didn't want to embarrass my teammates since the outcome of the games seemed to mean so much to them.

I had trouble with the concept of winning. When you won, somebody had to lose and when they lost they typically seemed to feel bad, so, winning – it seemed to me – was just another way of making other people feel bad. It was a very strange and bothersome concept.

I seeped a few options to some of the kids from wealthier families and several days later brand new science books had been donated. The Civics teacher responded to my seep – 'Certainly there must be a way to teach Civics that is more relevant for kids' – by devising a really interesting unit.

The Monday morning of my second week at the school he presented us with a shoe box, which contained nineteen slips of paper (there were nineteen of us in the class), each having the title of a City official on it. Mayor, Director of Human services, Garbage and Sanitation Supervisor, and so on. We each drew one and it was then our assignment to find out what that job entailed, how it was funded, the chain of command and the most pressing current problems the department faced along with its plans to solve them. Each day in class we would share what we had learned. The students were enthusiastic.

We had the option of trading slips that first day if we wanted to. With a little boost from my early skill in Mind Speak I worked it out so Ted was Mayor and Kate was Director of Human Services – it put the rehabilitation and social work services under her. Jerry became Police Commissioner and Tasha, Chairperson of the Finance Committee – it allotted money to the various departments and programs. I headed up Children's Programs, a division under Kate's Human Services Department. It would give me reason to work closely with her. The others kept what they had drawn.

It was my plan to guide the assignment into the area of drug trafficking, addiction, prevention, and rehabilitation – eventually tying the problem to Hanson.

By Wednesday night, when I entered my room and related it all to Gus I was quite pleased with myself. He was as well. That made me feel good – like I really was a part of the Calibrator Team. I continued to speak as I changed for dinner.

“I heard some gossip, today. The kids at school do know what’s going on out on the streets even if they don’t participate. Word is that a new drug supplier is working the neighborhood – Anton Pathé is the name I was given. French, I suppose. His price is half that of Hanson’s.”

Gus put it into perspective.

“Stupid move on his part. I figure he’ll be found floating off Sunrise Beach before the week’s over.”

More than that, he thought it smelled fishy (the Anton guy, not the beach, although!).

“I’ll do some checking around about Mr. Pathé,” Gus said.

“By the way,” he added, “The number of self-admissions into local drug rehab programs reached an all-time high this week. I think we’re making substantial progress.”

“So, Hanson’s sales were down, even before Anton Pathé came onto the scene. That should be causing a double dose of anxiety in that tenth-floor office of his.”

“I imagine it is,” Gus agreed. “It may be too much.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Hanson will be hard enough to deal with if things just remain as they are. If a turf war breaks out it’s going to make things all the more difficult for us.”

It was a real concern for him. I knew that for sure when Gus skipped dinner to go out and snoop around. I offered to help but he felt it best to do it solo. I tried to put it out of my mind.

Almost dressed, I slipped into my sandals, adjusted my hat, and left the room. Nobody was in the hall so I jumped to the end. It continued to be a thrill every time I did that. Still, there was no one was in sight, so I jumped to the top of the stairs. That would be it for the time being. I hurried down the steps and arrived at Abby’s door just as she and Jesse were leaving for dinner.

“I was looking at the rings of Saturn last night,” Jesse

said, immediately commandeering the conversation. “You really whomped up some horsepower in that thing. Did you do that with physics or Calibrator stuff?”

“Textbook physics, Jesse. Not even a trace of ‘stuff’.

“Good. I gotta live my life without the stuff, you know, so I like to keep to the regular ways.”

I detected a hint of sadness that being a Calibrator was not going to be a part of his future. His smile returned immediately.

“I’ll go on ahead,” he said. “Give you two some smooching time.”

He took off on a trot and giggled himself around the corner. There was no smooching but handholding was good. I told her about the new Civics project and she seemed excited for me. I didn’t ever mention my Calibrator activities to her. Gus had said nothing about it but I really wanted my relationship with her to be as much human to human as possible. Perhaps it was another thing we needed to talk about. The chat we had about our romantic expectations of each other had gone very well. We agreed that hugging, hand holding, arms around shoulders and waists, and short bursts of affectionate kissing would be comfortable for now.

My thoughts had raced ahead on occasion to explore the possibility that she and I might marry someday. Gus said that once I was married I could choose to appear my wife’s age. It was the period leading up to marriage that was my immediate concern. She’d be fourteen and then fifteen and eventually nineteen and twenty while I remained thirteen the whole time. It seemed to me that would present problems. She’d be dating a little kid and how would I explain her to my friends – me, dating an older woman or her to her friends (robbing the cradle). It wasn’t like it hadn’t been faced before, I guessed. I’d have to discuss it all with Gus.

He’ll say that I was too young to be thinking about marriage and that there will very likely be many girls in my life before I find the true love of my life.

I chuckled. I must have come to know Gus pretty well in the short time I’d known him. I supposed that if I knew ahead of time what advice he’d give me, I probably didn’t need to even ask him. I would, of course.

As I arrived at school Thursday morning there was a big yellow school bus parked in the street. I soon learned that the principal had arranged for it to take the Civics class to City Hall for the day. Appointments had been made for us to meet with our real-life counterparts and get our project underway.

After home room, on the way out the back door to the bus, we passed the Principal, standing erect, her arms crossed, and projecting more the appearance of a warden than a lover of children. I lagged behind and when the others were out of ear shot I spoke to her.

“Miss Stout, I just want you to know that I think this is the coolest thing I’ve ever known a principal to do. Thanks.”

I didn’t give her time to respond. The way her jaw dropped I doubted if she could have. Never having had any experiences with principals, I hadn’t been lying – it was the coolest thing I’d ever known a principal to do.

The girls sat on one side of the bus and the boys on the other according to the instruction of the driver. And I thought the Calibrators were old fashioned!

We had been caught off guard by the fieldtrip so on the way we scrambled to get lists of questions in order. I’m afraid I directed them a bit – mind speak – in the direction of my mission. I justified it to myself by thinking it just added a uniting focus that would bring the project together.

My contact was Mrs. Marsh the chief social worker in the Children’s Services Division. After some rather meaningless small talk on her part, I got to my questions about parenting classes, juvenile and family court services, drug prevention programs, and after school and weekend activities for kids in troubled neighborhoods.

“You have fine questions, and I can tell you what our plans are, but this morning I received a memo from finance saying close to ten million dollars is missing from our account. If it isn’t found, much of what you are asking about will have to be shut down.”

“How could that much just suddenly turn up missing?”

It probably wasn’t my place to have asked, but like I’ve said, my tongue tends to self-engage without the knowledge, cooperation, or consent of my brain.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she said. “It has to

be an accounting error. I haven't received any of the particulars but I'm expecting a visit from an account manager at any moment. I'd be happy to have you sit in on it. You might as well see how things really work around here."

We chatted on for several minutes. The Account Manager arrived. She was a snippy sort and introduced herself as Ann Tipp.

"It appears to have been funneled into unauthorized travel and training activities," she said handing over a folder, which contained a dozen or more pages filled with figures.

"That can't be. I personally authorize every penny that comes out of both of those funds," the Director said.

"Yes. I am aware of that," Ann said. "It is why you can expect a visit from the city attorney this afternoon – so you can explain why you should not be relieved of your position and prosecuted for embezzlement."

Ann stood, glared in my direction, and left. There was something about her eyes. I couldn't place it.

"Well, I'm afraid I'm going to have to call our day off for now. As you can see I have other pressing matters. Here's a folder of material I put together for you. It lays out our budget, current activities, staffing, organization and projected new programs. Give me a call next week and – if I'm still around – we'll set up another meeting. I'm really sorry about all this."

I stood and shook her hand thanking her for the time we had and for the printed information.

Since I suddenly had lots of time on my hands I decided to snoop around and could think of nowhere better to begin than with Ann Tipp. Invisibility would give me the best vantage point, I decided. It would be a major test of my abilities since there were dozens of people everywhere I looked. I took a minute to focus my concentration and began walking to the Accounting Department.

Apparently, I was doing well, because I had to dodge folks as they walked toward me – we would have collided if I hadn't sidestepped them. So far, so good. Ann was nowhere to be seen. She was not in her office cubical. I sorted through the papers on her desk. From the signatures on forms I found, I gathered she had just recently begun working there – her name began appearing about two weeks before. Odd, I

thought, having a new person deliver that piece of news to a department head.

I materialized and walked to a secretary's desk in an open area.

"Excuse me. I'm Tommy Powers and I am here to see Ann Tipp for a school assignment."

"I'm sorry. She's ill today and won't be here. Would you like to speak with someone else, perhaps? Several are in."

"I have another person to see. I may be back. Thank you for your help."

Something was very wrong. I had just seen her right there in the building!

I ran into Kate in the hall. She should have been in her meeting with the Director of Human Services.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Strangest thing. He cancelled my appointment because of some financial emergency – missing funds in his Rehab Division or some such thing."

I sensed a pattern.

"Same thing down in Children's Services," I said. "I guess we'll have to try again another day."

She nodded. "He gave me the name of somebody else I could talk with so I think I'll try her. See you later."

She turned down a hall to the right and I continued toward the main entrance.

I thought to myself. 'Gus, if you are around it would be a really good time for us to get together.'

"I was just thinking the same thing," he said appearing beside me.

"You hear what's going on?" I asked.

"Yes. All of it. What's your take?"

He often asked that even when he already had something figured out.

"Subterfuge!" I began. "Somebody is out to cut services or at least cause chaos and mistrust within the Human Services Department."

"And that would . . .?"

"That would, close rehabilitation services and parent-help programs for starters."

“Which would . . . ?”

“Which would put the addicts back out on the street without any positive options.”

“And who would be the big winner if that happened?”

“Hanson . . . and/or that new guy Anton Pathé”

It hit me all at once.

“Anton Pathé and Ann Tipp. Those could sure be aliases for Antipathy!”

“Gus smiled.

“Excellent! Yes, I think our old nemesis is back at it right here in River City, as they say. He’s up to his old tricks doing the only thing he can really do well – raise havoc and pit person against person.”

“That was it. His eyes,” I said. “Ann glared at me as she left the office and I knew there was something about her eyes. They were the same eyes I saw when Antipathy appeared at the door to my room impersonating you. It seemed strange then, too, but I had no reason to tune into it, I suppose.”

“Your running into him today works both ways, you know,” he said.

“You mean that now he also knows we are somehow involved.”

Gus nodded.

“What time does your bus leave to go back to school?”

“Two thirty. Almost five hours from now.”

“Let’s use some of that time and drop in on Hanson in his office – invisibly, of course – and see what’s going on there.”

It was further than I could see so I had to depend on Gus to take me with him. We entered a men’s room so as to not be seen evaporating, and were in Hanson’s waiting room a moment later.

It was plush and in that way reminded me of his mansion. Raised voices – too muffled to be understood – could be heard coming from his inner office. We were soon inside.

Hanson was pacing back and forth behind his desk in front of a wide, floor to ceiling window. In front of the desk six men were seated. Hanson was furious about something. We

were soon to understand.

“Sales have dropped every week for the past two months,” he said. “They’re only a dribble of what they were. What’s going on?”

They looked at each other and finally the man on the right end spoke.

“It seems like two things, Boss. First, lots and lots a our customers just ain’t buyin’ no more. Second, the new guy, Pathé, is undersellin’ us by fifty percent. But he’s only been on the scene about a week so it ain’t all his doin’.”

The others nodded.

“Why are addicts not buying?” Hanson asked. “Addicts buy. It’s what they do!”

“Lots have gone into rehab. Can’t say why, but lots is in day programs – especially the youngest ones.”

“That makes no sense.”

He paced some more.

“There is one thing we can take care of immediately. I want Pathé swimming with the fish by sundown. Bart, Guy – take care of that. Butch, you get a couple more boys and torch the area rehab centers tonight. I don’t want to be able to see anything but ashes when I drive to work in the morning. Is that understood?”

“Yes boss.”

They all nodded.

Hanson flicked the back of his hand at the lot, and they got up and hurried out the door. Hanson sat, slumped, twirling in his chair to look out the window behind his desk. Gus poked me in the ribs to warn me he was up to something. It was his deep, Sage’s voice that Hanson and I next heard.

“Your daughter Kate is soon to be an addict. There is no way you can stop it. It may even be your own men who are selling to her. Seems they’ll sell to anybody in order to meet the quotas you set.”

“Who said that? Where are you? How did you get in here? It isn’t true. I won’t believe it!”

He was still stewing over it out loud, opening and closing closet doors and desk drawers, as Gus and I jumped to the alley behind the building. Gus materialized so I followed suit.

“I will begin seeing options to him after he has a while longer to work up a good fright. You will learn that a person who is experiencing intense emotions is easily susceptible to seeing at any level.”

“Perhaps I need to get back to Kate and see what I can do to keep her pointed in the right direction,” I suggested.

“Yes. I agree. Try going back by yourself.”

“I’m confused. I’m years away from being able to Far Jump.”

“Take it one roof top at a time. I’ll follow along just in case.”

“I see. Okay. Sure. This is the biggest Calibrator thing I’ve ever tried, you know – jumping my way six miles across hundreds of buildings.”

“You can jump as far as you can see. Just make sure it’s a straight shot with nothing in your way and land well back from the edges of the roofs.”

“Okay. I can do this.”

I took aim at a building some four blocks south and was immediately there. It had been a miscalculation of sorts because it was a low building so my next hop was just next door to a tall building. Mistakes like that were good. I learned something important. I lit atop the tall one and set my sights on an even taller one ten blocks away. I was soon in sight of the City Building and headed for the center of the alley that ran along its west side.

It took less than two minutes, start to finish, faster than a copter could have made it. Gus, of course, was already waiting for me on the front steps.”

“What a rush!” I said twirling a few times and doing a short hand stand. “I could be to Canada and back before lunch.”

“Probably not. Your classmates are on their way to the cafeteria in the basement.”

“I’ll join them, then. Thanks – not sure why I said that but it’s how I feel at this moment. Thanks!”

Gus smiled and I ran up the forty-two, wide, cement, steps to the front door – so much for handicapped access from that entrance.

I caught up with my class just as they entered the

cafeteria. I managed a place in line behind Kate and Ted.

“So, how’s things in the Mayor’s office, I asked.”

“Pretty boring, really,” Ted answered. “I get the idea his assistants get to do all the really fun stuff. The Mayor mostly signs papers and practices speeches that others write for him.”

“And how was your side trip?” I asked Kate referring to her second interview.

“Really, very good. I met with the person in charge of all the rehabilitation programs. Did you know there are over 100 community based rehab houses in the city?”

“No. I didn’t know that. Is it anywhere near enough?”

“Apparently not. There has been a run on services the past two months and nowhere near enough professional personnel to handle it. The Director is afraid the quality of the programs will suffer for lack of enough individual contact.”

“I for one would really like to meet some of the kids in rehab – I assume there are kids our age in the program,” I said attempting to guide the direction of her thinking.

“Ya. Me too,” Ted said. “I can’t imagine how terrible it must be to be addicted to something you know is killing you and yet you also know you can’t live without it.”

He shook his head.

We got our lunches and found a table. Jerry and Tasha joined us.

“So?” I asked. “How’s your morning been?”

“Being the Police Commissioner is pretty cool. With one call he arranged for me to ride in a patrol car tonight so I can see how things really work. It will be in the area near our school. He took the time to call my Ma and get her permission. He mostly deals with budget and the supervision of upper lever personnel, captains and such it seems. He keeps track of statistics, too – well, he has a staff with a bank of computers that actually do the work. He showed me a print out that indicated petty crimes – robberies and muggings and the like – are down over eighty percent in the area around the school over the past two months. He has no idea why but he’s sent a couple of undercover guys into the area to mix in and find out what’s going on. He’s a pretty smart guy. Police work is a whole lot more complex than I ever thought it was.”

It sounded pretty cool to me, also, but it was Kate I really wanted to talk with. She took it up as soon as Ted stopped.

“I’m sure I can arrange for us to visit a rehab center. The Director was very helpful. I’ll see about that right after lunch. If all our schoolwork was this much fun I’d come early and stay late.”

Our civics teacher was moving toward a nearby table. He needed to have heard that. I did a ten second Time-X. It gave him time to near our table. Then I asked:

“What was that, Kate, I got distracted?”

“I said if all our schoolwork was this much fun I’d come early and stay late.”

He heard. He smiled. He straightened up and I thought I saw just a bit of a spring in his step. Suddenly he appeared more forty-ish than fifty-ish. It always amazed me how praise, honestly offered, seeps confidence and self-esteem throughout a person.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

### **Watch Out Bad Guys. Here I come!**

By the time we boarded the bus to go back to school several interesting things had developed. Kate had arranged a party for ten kids in rehab – eleven to fourteen. It would be another pool event on Friday night. Five boys and five girls. The mere fact of the party was interesting enough. The fact that Kate and her mother had arranged it without consulting Mr. Hanson made it doubly interesting.

My more immediate concern was having Jerry out in a patrol car on the evening Hanson's goons were going to try to burn the rehab centers. I was eager to get the school day behind me so Gus and I could make plans. He undoubtedly already had some but he always seemed open to hear mine – and I had several.

He was waiting for me at the schoolyard fence. Two blocks and a bagel later we were seated on a bench in a small park just south of Amy's stand.

"Tonight." I said more than a bit cryptically.

"Yes," he answered. "I did some reconnaissance in the area this afternoon. There are four rehab houses close enough to Hanson's territory that we need to be concerned about them. This isn't to be a terrorist undertaking where most any target will do. This has as its purpose the destroying of specific services in a specific area."

"Four! The two of us can't be on guard in four different places," I said.

"I've already put in an anonymous call to the police about Hanson's plans," Gus said. "I assume law enforcement

officials will not overlook such a piece of information when the repercussions of doing nothing could be devastating.”

“So, what’s left for us to do?”

“We need to find Hanson’s henchman – the one he assigned to set the fires. Then, we play a few mind seep games with him.”

I thought I understood.

“Like suggest the cops already know what they’re up to?”

“That’s a very good one,” Tommy. “It should make them nervous but really won’t change much. They may try to be less obvious about their activities, but they’ll still have to show up.”

“We can’t stop a fire once it starts, can we?”

“No. We can put a Time-X on the bad guys to hold them for the police but unless they are caught in the act, it’s going to be hard to put them away for long.”

“As I see it,” I said beginning on the second half of my bagel, “our prime objective is to prevent the fires.”

Gus nodded. “And get Hanson’s men out of circulation for a while if we can. That won’t be easy.”

“Maybe it will,” I said my imagination galloping on ahead at the speed of a tingle. “What if the cops found them with the gas cans, or whatever, waiting patiently at the scene ready to be picked up?”

“You left me way behind, pal.”

“We follow them to each house, invisibly, and then handcuff them to the building – pipes or something – so they wouldn’t dare start the fire or they’d die in the blaze. Then when the police come, making their rounds, they find them there.”

“Intriguing! But as you pointed out there are four possible locations.”

“But, Hanson assigned one guy and told him to get a couple others to help him carry it out. Even if there are only two and they work separately, each taking two of the houses, it’s just one a piece – one for you and one for me.”

“I don’t know, Tommy. As skillful as you are I’m not sure I’d feel right about letting you fly alone yet.”

I didn’t respond. It was not my place to disagree with

my Mentor but I certainly wasn't going to reinforce his statement by agreeing with it. Suddenly I had the solution.

"I understand that; therefore, we have the ever-useful, Plan B."

Gus shook his head as if afraid to ask. I smiled my broadest grin to reassure him before I started.

"That's your con-man's grin," he said. "I've seen it before. I always lose once that gets turned on."

I ignored his attempt at humor and went directly into my explanation.

"We first determine if they are working separately. If they are, we put one into a time hold thingy. Then we work the other one together. Once he's all locked up – so to speak – we return to the other one and do the same with him."

"That should work," Gus said, "And it covers us for one more possibility we haven't discussed."

"What's that?"

"He may engage the assistance of two or three others so all four fires can be coordinated to begin at the same moment – providing bigger problems for the firefighters."

"You're something else, Gus. The wisest, brightest person I've ever known."

He smiled into my face. "The Sage may be all those things. I'm just a thirteen-year-old kid enjoying a bagel with his best friend.

It raised two things within me. One was the wonderful feeling of knowing I had a best friend. That, I had determined during my time at the Hall, is just about the grandest thing there is for a human being.

The second was an unrelated question and since our strategy session seemed to have drawn to a close, I felt free to ask.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you. How does a Sage come to be a Sage? Not well asked but you understand?"

"Yes. I waited to discuss it, knowing you'd eventually ask. Each Sage – and there have only been three – has two main responsibilities. The first is to be the best leader possible. He makes all final decisions in matters of the Calibrators so he must be wise beyond measure. He

determines when others are ready to move from rank to rank. He trains all Tyros. He keeps the assemblage of Calibrators focused on the critical areas of concern in each era. Those are his main administrative duties.

“The second responsibility is to replace himself when it becomes clear that a wiser, more skillful Calibrator has come upon the scene.” He paused and looked directly into my eyes. “I am quite certain that someday – perhaps a dozen centuries from now – Tommy, it will be the Sage’s wonderful privilege to step aside for you.”

I gulped and frowned and felt like I was going to throw up. Had it not been for the thought of wasting that wonderful bagel, I would have. As I was growing up I’d only ever really been responsible for myself. When I messed up it was no big deal, I apologized or started over or fixed it. My responsibilities were pretty simple ones. I was in no way ready to consider being responsible for saving the human race!

Gus had ‘heard’ all that of course.

“It isn’t like it’s going to be thrust upon you tomorrow and you can always decline.”

After a long silence, I nodded.

“And you told me that so I’d understand my destiny – my goal, my eventual purpose in life – or at least one of my options.”

He nodded ever so slightly, apparently understanding that since I already knew the answer no response was required. Suddenly I didn’t feel like a kid anymore – not even like a kid with super fantastic powers. It was at once the most wonderful and most terrible thing I had ever experienced.

I was used to lying in bed at night wondering what I’d become when I grew up: a teacher, a scientist, an artist, a writer, a male stripper (a guy’s allowed some fantasies, isn’t he?). But now, it seemed, my wondering was over. I really didn’t like that. Wondering was among my very favorite activities in life. I had never been one to hide my feelings. My displeasure showed. Gus put his arm around my shoulders.

“Is that the arm of my best friend, or the Sage who just ruined my life?” I asked.

It had been a rude, uncalled for thing to say and I

wished I could take it back; that, of course, can never be done. He pulled me close and leaned his head against mine.

“I am all of what I am, dear friend. Live with the idea for a while. Time puts things into perspective. And don’t forget you have at least a century left in which to be a kid – something most humans don’t get, let me tell you – and the prospect of not one beloved woman in your life but who knows how many? You still get to go to sleep every night knowing you have done things that have made life better for others. And, through diligent study and practice, someday, the number of folks you will be able to influence that way in a day’s time will be multiplied a thousand-fold.”

“I understand. You’ve been where I am and every place along the way I’m going to be. You’ve already asked all these questions. I suppose that’s exactly the kind of best friend I need, isn’t it?”

Again silence. Words were not necessary. I was still ticked off in a major way, mind you, but I now saw some hope that I would be able to cope with it and realized that Gus would always be there by my side.

He removed his arm and slapped me on my knee.

“Ready to go home?”

I nodded.

“Ready.”

Again, a dilemma had been established – home? It had always been the loft. Even during my time at the Hall I continued to think of the loft as my home and the Wharfies as my family. I would never choose between the two. I’d just have two homes and two families. I felt better almost immediately.

Once in my room I changed for dinner. I must admit I spent time inspecting the Crimson outfit Gus was wearing – something I had only ever done in passing before. Someday I would have one like it. My greens were merely a step on my way toward them – and now, I understood, eventually to the rainbow-colored robe of the Sage.

A huge amount of work lay ahead for me. I understood that the Sage thought I was up to it. I still had my doubts but assumed the Sage had ways of knowing things I didn’t.

Some of that ‘perspective’ Gus mentioned began to

emerge. It really would not have been proper for him to keep the long-term possibility from me. It would have been basically dishonest to lead me on thinking my life as a Calibrator would be one way when actually it would eventually be something very different.

I felt especially close to Gus right then so I sat with him at dinner. Few words passed between us but still, our bond grew. I guess I had been stressing over the relationship because during the meal I felt myself relaxing about it. It was solid. It seemed perfect. It was forever – almost.

Afterwards I went to Abby and she suggested a short walk in the woods out back. We walked and talked. I guess I was babbling on about this and that (as I tend to do when I'm nervous) because she put her fingers over my mouth. It had become our private signal for me to stop talking and begin kissing. I did. We did. It was great!

Abby had become a very special person to me in just a short time. I liked holding her close and running my fingers through her wonderful smelling hair. I liked it when we talked and I liked it when we just looked into each other's eyes and studied each other's faces. I liked the kissing, too, of course, but that was just one part of the total relationship. I wondered if I would want to spend time with her if, for some reason, our lips could never touch again. I decided that I would. There were going to be lots of important questions for Gus later that night – none of them related to Calibrators.

At six thirty Gus and I – wearing our comfortable clothes - were back on the city streets. We took a position in the alley behind Hanson's building; it was the entrance Gus had discovered his men used to come and go. They had a headquarters of a kind in the basement. At seven, the one we were waiting for emerged from the building and began stowing gallon cans in the trunk of a car parked there. Three more joined him. As they drove away down the alley Gus seeped our pre-planned messages to them.

Gus pointed up. I understood. We jumped to the roof from where we could follow the vehicle. My first actual engagement with bad guys had begun. My brain was tingling with such intensity it seemed I could feel my hair rippling against my scalp.

The car turned south on Ash.

"I imagine they are heading for the Rehab House at Ash and 69th," Gus said. "Once we determine whether they are working together to set each fire or just dropping them off one at a time, we will know how to proceed. My guess is that each one will set one and then be picked up later at prearranged locations."

We didn't have long to wait. The car pulled into the alley behind the house and one man left the car. He took two cans from the trunk, closed it, and the car drove off.

"You stick with the car," Gus said. "Keep me informed of your location with mind speak. If this guy works fast I'll cuff him and join you. If I see he's taking too much time, I'll execute a Time-X and catch up. We'll have to come back and finish things later."

"What if the police find them while they're suspended in Time-X?" I asked.

"A person in Time-X doesn't exist in the moment so he is invisible to other people."

There was so much to learn. I was beginning to understand why he hadn't wanted to turn me loose yet. I followed the car.

'Middle of the 700 block of Winston,' I mind spoke to Gus. He was immediately by my side. I wondered how he was able to come to the exact spot where I was.

"The Star," he said. "It's like a homing device. Each of us radiates our own, unique, signal. Remind me to show you how it works."

Sometimes my training seemed pretty hit-and-miss, as if the course of study weren't all that exact.

"You want it to be pre-set like a teacher's lesson plan?" he answered, giggling. He had made his point.

The second man was soon out of the car and to the rear of the house with his cans. Again, Gus went to him and I followed the car.

'Corner of Pierce and Terry,' I sent. He arrived within a minute.

"Got the second one cuffed to a radiator in the basement. The first is in Time-X. The mind seep seems to have made them super cautious."

Gus left to tend to number three and I followed the driver to a house at 319 Block. I waited but Gus didn't show up. Suddenly I was in contact through mind speak. The building where he was had caught fire by mistake, so Gus was evacuating the house. He had the arsonist trapped in time. Details later. I was to go ahead and carefully do what I could at house number four. The emphasis had been on 'carefully'.

I Jumped to a place behind the car and became invisible. The man took the remaining two gallons of gasoline from the trunk and made his way to the basement door. I followed. The door was locked but he soon had it picked and open. He stepped inside. I followed.

It was then I remembered that Gus had all four sets of handcuffs. I looked around for a substitute. There was a roll of wire – number nine if that's of any significance. I could not yet make objects invisible unless I was touching them and the man was between me and the wire. I performed a slow and cautious Near Jump over him as he knelt preparing to open the cans. There were large, floor to ceiling, metal poles – jacks, I think they're called – that had been installed to keep the old structure from sagging. I would wire him to one of them. My problem was how to get him into position, and, to do so before he began pouring the gas around.

I worked a mind cloud intended to confuse him for a moment.

"This is Hanson," I said in the deepest voice my twelve-year-old vocal chords could muster. "Take my hand and come this way."

I led him to the pole so he was facing it, one arm on each side. I unbuckled his belt, brought it out around the pole and refastened it. I hoped that would buy me the time I needed to wind the wire around his wrists figure eight fashion on the other side of the pole. It did!

I had to chuckle even though it was serious business. As I left he was calling out, "Mr. Hanson! Mr. Hanson?"

Still invisible, I entered the alley. A squad car pulled in and slowed. It crept along, its spotlight, first sweeping car and then the area near the basement door. I did a mind seep. 'A thorough officer would get out and check the basement door, which should be locked.'

The car stopped. The driver side door opened and an officer got out. The back window rolled down, revealing Jerry in the backseat, eager to see what was transpiring.

‘A sensible kid would stay in the backseat and not get in the officer’s way,’ I seeped to him. Humorously to me, he nodded when it was received as if acknowledging the message.

Very shortly, I heard the officer’s voice through his lapel transmitter, which came over the car radio.

“Apprehended what seems to be a non-resident about to burn down the Rehab House at 317 Block. Request backup, though the situation seems to be well under control.”

I left immediately to see if I could help Gus. The fire trucks were there and from what I could see the fire was out. The street was filled with the residents of the house. Police were on the scene. I seemed to have arrived too late to be of any assistance.’

“Nice work back there, Pal,” Gus said as I felt his arm sink into place across my shoulders.”

“Thank you. Same here, the way it looks. What happened?”

“The idiot spilled a can of gasoline on the cement floor in the vicinity of the oil burning furnace. It seeped in under the unit and you see what happened. I made double good use of the fire extinguisher down there. First, I swatted the moron over the head with one of them – I don’t like to use violent force like that but he really P.O.ed me, you know.”

I laughed out loud.

“What?” he asked looking puzzled at my reaction to his tale of heroism.

“There’s just something absurdly funny about a thousand-year-old Sage saying he was P.O.ed.”

Gus chuckled with me acknowledging my take on it.

“I assume the second good use of the extinguishers was to put out the fire,” I said.

“I couldn’t really put it out but was able to keep it from spreading up through the ceiling. I have to admit it called for some fancy jumping.”

I looked puzzled.

“I had to be in the basement fighting the fire and I had

to be upstairs getting the people outside. Maintaining a presence in two places at once can be mentally exhausting.”

Within ten minutes we had seen all the bad guys into the hands of the police. They were, of course, baffled about how the would-be arsonists ended up handcuffed, wired to a pole and laid out cold on the floor. I figured the kids would have lots to talk about come the party Friday evening.

“Banana split or hot fudge sundae?” Gus asked.

“What?”

“Missions always leave me hungry. There’s a place I know not far from here that makes the best, the biggest, the most delicious ice cream treats in the world – well, there is that little place about twenty kilometers northeast of London.”

He was babbling and my first inclination was to put my fingers over his mouth, but since that in the past that had always led to a wonderfully long and meaningful kiss I hurried on to another Plan B.

“I love sundaes. Show the way!”

They were all Gus said they would be. Maybe someday he’d treat me in that little place north of London. We walked toward the woods.

“Do you think I should go look after Jerry? I’m not sure it’s such a good idea to have a kid in a patrol car.”

“I’m sure the plan was for him to ride a typically peaceful patrol. I won’t say you shouldn’t go to him, but I think he’s in good hands.”

I accepted that and stayed the course with Gus back to the Hall. I was soon out of my street clothes and ready for a long man to man talk with Gus about romantic love – a category of feeling I was sure had to be different from the kinds of love I had so far encountered in my life – love of self, love of family, love of friends, love of other human beings in general.

Gus, however, had Sage business to attend to in Bangkok, so it would have to wait for another evening. He would have probably tried to get by with saying that it was a feeling I could never understand until I experienced it, so there was little use in discussing it beforehand. That would not be satisfactory. I could already tell that emotions and physical feelings somehow got all tangled together in romantic love and

I was bound and determined to get them sorted out well ahead of time.

I repositioned the bunk beds so as I lay there in the dark I would be able to look through the window and watch the night as it played out there between the waves and the stars. Like most little kids, I had lived through a phase when I was afraid of the dark – no, that is not an accurate description of the state. I was afraid in the dark and I was afraid of what unpleasant things might be present in the dark but I had never been afraid of the dark itself.

Molly and I used to play a game at bedtime. We'd give each new night a personality – happy, playful, busy, witty, serious, and so on. Its character depended on things such as the temperature, the visibility of stars, the amount of moonshine, the wind and how it moved or did not move the limbs of the trees, the sounds of the waves, and things like that. She insisted that nights never had unpleasant personalities so I came to see the dark itself as very safe and reassuring. I was not, however, as convinced about the positive motives of those menacing, night-prowling, child-eating Trolls that lived under my bed! (I still check sometimes.)

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## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

### **Second Thoughts**

Gus was not in his bunk the next morning. He was never up and out before me so I assumed his meeting was taking longer than expected. As I was enjoying my shower I received a mind seep from him. It seemed he and a half dozen seasoned Calibrators were finishing up a mission that involved a would-be dictator and a hand full of his close associates somewhere in Southeast Asia. I received no details but it did make my drug thing with Hanson seem like pretty small potatoes. Gus was saving a country from oppression and I was wiring a bad guy's hands to a post in a musty basement.

At school things were buzzing about the attempted arson in the area the night before. From the crowd gathered around him in the hall it was clear that Jerry had become the expert on the subject. I liked that. He was a great kid but I got the idea he really didn't like himself very well. I hadn't taken time to look into it and I should have. There were always things others could do. I assumed there would be something I could do. Even before my Calibrator days I had a knack for boosting folks' good feelings about themselves.

Early in life I discovered that when I asked somebody a question I knew they would be able to answer, it lifted their spirits right off. It made them feel important and capable. I felt so powerful when I was able to do something like that for somebody.

The opposite was easily achieved also, of course, by asking things the person did not know, putting them down, and

things like that. Since I wasn't out to depress the World, I stayed away from that. I'd spent enough time with the dock workers to see that guys who felt bad about themselves were really hard to get along with. They made life miserable for those around them. It may have been why my family was such a comfortable family – we never put each other down and always built each other up (in honest, reasonable, ways of course. Idle flattery is really a most unpleasant put down and gives folks a bad taste in their mouths about the person who tries it.).

I stood for a few minutes at the edge the crowd and listened while Jerry regaled the group with his exploits about his time on patrol with the police the night before. I moved on to home room hoping to have time to talk with Kate before the school day got underway.

She was working out the party details with Tasha and Ted and motioned me to join them. It made me feel good, no great, to be included. Kate's mother had learned from the social worker that the kids at the Rehab House didn't have swimsuits. Ted's mischievous solution was that we just make it a co-ed skinny dip. He got his ear tweaked and his face, playfully slapped. He shrugged his shoulders as he winked at me.

The girls related that between the two of them they had plenty of spares for the girls. I had to wonder why they would have so many, but let it go. Ted had two extras and Jerry had offered one. That left two to go. I said I'd take care of it, though without Gus on the continent I wasn't sure how I would accomplish that. Swimsuits weren't mainline items in November there in the northeast. I'd look into it after school. I always kept a ten folded in my wallet for emergencies – cab fare and such. I could use that.

Many things about life amaze me. That day it had to do with the interesting – though almost predictable – correlation between suddenly raised self-esteem and ability to accomplish things. In PE that day, Jerry tore up the court: He made a string of six, three-pointers, shot 90% from the free throw line, and led his team in take aways. His team trounced mine thirty-one to twelve – one of which was my free throw, which made me feel pretty good.

After school I was always offered rides, which I usually turned down since Gus was there waiting. My friends were intrigued by Gus and had questions about him: Where he went to school, where he lived, how we became acquainted, how long we had been friends, and on and on. Kate told me to bring him along to the party on Friday. I said I'd see and covered by adding that he and his family often had weekend plans, which was certainly not an untruth. It would actually be pretty nice to have him there. It would also mean one more suit.

Ted's dad honked and asked if he could give me a lift. I thanked him but declined saying I had things to do there in the area. I got the ideas many of the parents thought I was not properly supervised, being allowed to roam the city streets like that after school.

I headed for Amy's place with two purposes in mind. First, to obtain one of her wonderful treats. The second became the focus of our conversation as I stood there nibbling.

"Gus is out of town," I explained in answer to her original question. "Not sure when he will be back."

She nodded but did not pursue it.

"I'm in need of three, guy's, bathing suits. Any idea where I might find them this time of year?"

"There's a basement shop on Ash – about 670 or somewhere in there. If they can be found in this city, Hilda will have them. I have to ask, though, swimming in 40-degree water. You tryin' out for the Polar Bear Club?"

I smiled. It was the first time she had ever really shown an interest in my life. Perhaps because Gus wasn't with me. Regardless, it was nice.

"A girl in my class is having a party at their indoor pool. They keep the water way too warm if you ask me. Having some of the kids in drug rehab over for an evening outing on Friday. Pretty nice of her and her mom I think."

"You stop by here after school on Friday and I'll have a big sack of Amy's best for you to take."

"How sweet. Thank you. I'll do that."

I leaned across the counter and planted a kiss on her chubby, red cheek.

“Does that perfume I detect?” I said, pulling back but keeping my hands on her shoulders and looking her in the face, like a father to his wayward daughter. She smiled a broad but closed mouth smile, dancing her eyes and bouncing her head.

“A new guy in your life, maybe?” I continued.

“She nodded and giggled like a twelve-year-old.”

“Good for you. No, good for him. I hope he knows how lucky he is.”

I kissed her again figuring she would fill me in when and if she became ready. I thanked her for the bagel and headed for Ash Street.

Amy was right. Hilda had a little bit of everything. The room with the clothing was filled with tables heaped high above and crammed full below. I explained what I needed and why, feeling she might think it was an odd request at that time of year. She took me toward the rear and pointed. Dozens of suits were piled there in a corner on the floor. Out of season duds clearly didn't get the first-class ride.

I picked out six and laid them on a table so I could make the final choice. I went for boxer styles with elastic waist bands and draw strings, thinking those would fit a wide variety of sizes. I noticed at the previous party that the girls seemed to spend more time watching the skimpier, tighter variety like Ted wore but he was really well built and not every guy would look good in that style. I selected three and then added one more for good measure.

At the front of the store I placed my ten-dollar bill on the counter. Hilda took my hand, holding and patting it as she looked up at me.

“You're a good boy helping those sick kids like you are. Let me just give you the suits.”

“Are you sure? I had fully intended to pay for them.”

“I know you did. That makes it all the more special, you see. Lots a folks come in here with their hands out, lookin' for me to help 'em out. I usually do, but lots got the attitude that I owe it to 'em for some reason. If there is a thank you it seems . . . I don't know . . . mechanical, rehearsed, not really from the heart you know. You take these and we'll just keep it between you and me where they come from, okay?”

I agreed, of course. Hilda, like Amy, was a genuinely nice person who clearly loved people. As I left I was bothered by the idea that I might have seeped the generosity thing to her without even knowing it. Another question for Gus.

Speaking of whom, he and I entered our room at the same moment. Whether that was by design or not I didn't ask. It was really good to see him and it took an extra-long hug for me to convey that feeling. I dumped the suits out of the bag onto the couch. He scratched his head.

"If you're going for a different suit for every day of the week I believe with the one I got you, you're still two short."

I gave him the short version.

"Kate's throwing a pool party for some of the kids our age in drug rehab, and they don't have suits. She invited you, by the way. As the mysterious stranger at the iron fence, you've become the focus of a lot of questions among the kids at school. I hope you'll come. I picked out the crimson trunks for you."

"Friday night, I assume," he said, taking the suit and holding it up to himself as he walked toward the mirror.

"That's right. Seven to eleven like the last one. Only real difference is the drinks will all be caffeine free and there won't be any poppy seed rolls – something about poppy seeds making them test positive for drugs."

"Sounds like you've been very productive while I've been away – a party for recovering young addicts in Hanson's own pool. How ironic!"

I nodded.

"Things fell into place. So, you'll come?"

"I'd love to come. We'll have to work on my story, of course. Do I get to take a girl?"

I burst into laughter. Gus smiled and then chuckled and eventually laughed along with me.

"What's so funny about me asking about a girl? 'Gus' is thirteen in every usual and normal sense of the age – well, that plus a bit, perhaps."

I couldn't resist. "I imagine you've developed quite a line over the past . . . oh, I don't know, say, thousand years."

I laughed myself silly at my joke. Gus laughed, but I could tell it was at and with me rather than at my attempt at

humor. Considering he had grieved the loss of six wives it may have been in poor taste. I hadn't intended that.

"I know you didn't. Don't be so hard on yourself. Believe me. Having had six wives required me to cultivate one humdinger of a sense of humor – and I mean that in the best of all possible ways."

"If you're serious, I'll set you up with a girl from school or do you have a girl you've been hiding away from me?"

"No girlfriend. Girls my age who live here tend to be standoffish about dating a thousand-year-old teenager, you understand."

It was an immediately humorous reference and garnered smiles from both of us.

"I'll work it out, then," I said. "This is so great that I finally get to do something for you. By the way in case you haven't heard, the four bad guys were all charged – three with intent to commit arson and the other with arson and attempted murder. Apparently, no connection has been made between them and Hanson."

"And it won't be I'm sure. He's a careful man and his men are too scared of him to squeal."

"You sound like a cop in a 1940's comic book."

He smiled. "I'm afraid I was otherwise occupied in Europe during a large part of the forties."

I understood his reference to the Second World War.

"I thank you for that," I said.

"For that?"

"For doing whatever you and your Calibrators did to see that I and my generation don't have to grow up living under a dictator."

He nodded and stared out the window. I had apparently stirred some memories. We remained silent for some time. I went about putting on my greens for dinner. He turned back in my direction.

"Any word on Antipathy? Has he showed up in your life again?"

"Not to my knowledge. About that, there must be some way for me to recognize him other than the star. I have to get so close for that."

"The mental bounce."

I furrowed my brow.

“Calibrator mutants – all known as Antipathy, by the way – have what is best described as a truncated Integrity Path.”

“Truncated – like cut off short or severed you mean?”

“Right. For some reason, they don’t have the positive end of the path. They cannot, therefore, receive positive mind seeps and they bounce right back to you. It is uncomfortable though not really painful.”

“So, when I have reason to suspect Antipathy’s presence, I seep a positive option and wait to be slapped in the mind. It’s like radar – sort of.”

“A good analogy, I suppose,” he said.

“Hanson set out to kill him. Is that possible?” I asked.

“Possible in a one in a billion sort of way. Not likely. The mutants are equally as brilliant as their Calibrator counterparts. The Anton guy he made up to sell drugs won’t be found floating off shore, if that’s what you’re asking but those who went after him for Hanson – and failed – will certainly not be heard from again.”

I shuddered. I didn’t like violence. I didn’t like bad guys and the way they thought. It was momentarily depressing to think I would be spending the rest of my life – my suddenly long, long, long life – in the presence of such scum and brutality.

I guess I remained quiet through dinner because Abby mentioned it as I declined dessert.

“Things on my mind, I guess,” I said in response, and then attempted to shift the conversation. “I’m looking forward to Friday night – again. How about you?”

“Yes. It will be interesting to meet the kids in treatment. I hope I do okay. I’ve been worrying that I won’t know what to say.”

“I think our best bet is to put out of our minds that they are anything other than just kids like us, only from a different school. If they want to share anything else, we listen, but we don’t press for information.”

“You’re a wise boy . . . man . . . person . . . whatever,” she said.

“It’s hard to know what we are at our age, isn’t it?”

She nodded a definite yes but didn't follow up on the topic.

It had become our routine to take a short walk together outside after dinner in the evenings. Lots of other couples did the same. We found our own, regular, private spot – one I assumed Gus had arranged. We were seldom bothered by anyone passing there.

“You still okay about our what-we-will-and-won't-do-when-we're-alone-agreement?” she asked.

“My brain's okay with it. My value system is definitely okay with it. Sometimes my body struggles a bit but those other two things seem to keep it in line. Yes, I'm fine with it. You?”

“About like you, I suppose. I'm sure glad we talked about it. It was the first time I had ever had a conversation like that with a boy. I think it made me feel more grown up, you know, like we both understand the possibilities and we've been wise enough to set our own limits.”

Fortunately, I thought, the actual length of time a kiss could be held between us had not been stipulated in that agreement and it seemed to have edged up significantly from those first few we had shared. Growing up as a guy was a marvelous adventure and I was determined to enjoy every aspect of it as it unfolded for me, but I also wanted to be sure I didn't make any big-time mess ups along the way.

My family had done a great job in helping me learn how to set my own limits. This was the first time I really had to consider somebody else's welfare on an equal par with mine. It felt fantastic to realize that I was thoughtfully working to make myself into something more than just a formless bag of rampant, agitated, hormones.

I loved it when we walked and she held my hand with both of hers. I loved to pull her close with my arm around her waist and kiss her gently on the top of her head for no reason other than I just wanted to. I loved having someone with whom to share my affection. I still needed to have that talk with Gus, however!

When I entered our room, Gus was sitting by the window reading a book I didn't recognize – Theories of the Universe, then and now. He looked up and pointed to the

book.

“Something the Sage picked up for you on his recent journey. Hard to put down once you get started. There may be a short delay in getting it into your hands.”

“I wondered if you still read,” I said hoping it didn’t sound like a put down.

“Oh, yes. Voraciously, some might say.”

“And most might not say it, since they’d have no idea what voraciously means. Like, you just can’t get enough of something, I assume is your intent.”

He nodded and smiled.

“It’s not a word I’d use with just anybody, you understand.”

It was as close to a reprimand as Gus had ever given me. I accepted it in the positive way I was sure it had been offered. ‘Think about the options – all of the possibilities – before responding.’ Gus always spoke to others in words he knew they would understand and I knew that so shouldn’t have made a big deal of it. I suppose I was partly kidding him and partly showing off because I knew the meaning.

I grew silent as I hung my greens in the closet. Gus sensed something was wrong.

I sprawled out on the couch not sure if I was ready to talk.

“Come, come,” Gus said, moving into the big chair. “What’s going on?”

“I guess I’m just finally letting myself feel overwhelmed by this whole Calibrator thing. I’m not at all sure I’m actually cut out for it. I really miss my Wharfies and the kids who come to the loft for their lessons and even the rough talking, brawling, guys on the docks. Everything I’ve ever known has suddenly been turned upside down. By when, exactly, do I have to decide if I’m going through with it or not?”

“You have right up to the moment of your thirteenth birth moment – that will be at 6:54 a.m. on March 9th.”

I looked across at him, suddenly amazed.

“I was born at the very minute the sun came up that day . . . It’s another one of those senseless pieces of information I have stored away in this head of mine – sunrise and sunset for each day of the year since 1980.”

Gus smiled and shook his head.

“What?” I said. “I was bored one weekend. It was either learn to play the violin or that. You act like I made the wrong choice.”

It was offered in good humor, of course, and Gus understood.

“I’m here to talk when you’re ready,” he said. “I know you’d feel more comfortable speaking with Otto or Yorka about your situation but that is just not possible. Outsiders cannot know about us – not even those you trust the most. It would be just too much responsibility to place on their shoulders.”

I knew all that. There was something else that had been bothering me.

“You say that after my Tyro time is over here – on March 9th Hall time – I’ll go back to my family at the loft.”

“Yes.”

“How can I be a Calibrator and yet live with them?”

“Options. Think of some possibilities, Tommy. Let’s see what we can work out, right here and now so you won’t have to continue to be concerned.”

I thought. I turned onto my side and thought some more. I sat up, legs crossed, scooted back against the arm of the sofa.

“I could receive a scholarship to a boarding school for gifted students. It could be something I looked into on my own but didn’t share with my family until I was certain. I could go home for weekends or holidays or times like that. You could be the headmaster of the school and come and charm my folks into letting me go. It would handle things through college – that would buy me at least eight years for starters. It would really not be an untruth either. A stretch maybe, but not hurtfully so.”

“I can certainly live with that. You will have to be extremely cautious around the city so they never catch a glimpse of you during that time.”

“You approve it, just like that? No what ifs or how abouts?”

Gus just shrugged as if to indicate there was nothing more to say.

“Of course, if I decide not to go ahead with things here,

I assume I will be able to return to them.”

“That’s how it works; of course, you will have no powers and no memory of any of this. It wouldn’t be fair to you, you understand. I’d never want you to have to second guess your decision.”

I did understand. It was like telling a little kid he could have all the raspberry twisters he ever wanted but he could never have any other kind of candy. I could be a Calibrator and never again just be a regular person or I could go back to being a regular person, having to give up all of my Calibrator potential. Well, maybe it wasn’t exactly like the twister thing but it was close. For sure, it gave me an awful craving for Raspberry Twisters.

I would have sworn I saw Gus flicker there in his chair for just a split second but he spoke so I let it go.

“By the way,” he said, “In addition to the book here, The Sage found you a supply of wonderful raspberry twisters in London on his way back today.”

“And they’d be where?”

I figured I understood the flicker. I had very likely been in Time-X while he Jumped off to London and back

“Under your pillow on your bunk I believe.”

“You’ve been eavesdropping, again, just now, pally.”

“Me?”

“I’ve never told you about my addiction to twisters and yet you knew.”

“I assume, then, that I should prepare for an imminent, incoming leaping attack.”

“You better believe it!”

I mounted the back of the couch and flung myself the eight feet in his direction. It was a wonderful, fully exhausting, tussle. In the end – as always happened – we laid there on our backs laughing until we cried.

At some point, I realized that I was crying more than laughing. I had things that needed crying about and that was alright. Gus pulled me close, his strong arm cradling my shoulders. I leaned into him and sobbed on for some time.

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## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

### **Kids Without Hope**

Mr. Hanson tried to put on a pleasant face when he greeted the van full of ragamuffins as they came – wide-eyed – through the front door of his mansion that Friday evening. He winced when he saw their emaciated bodies once they had donned swim suits. He seemed amazed as he watched them devour a table full of sandwiches and pitchers of orange juice. He clearly felt uncomfortable as they tried to engage him in conversation. The two workers who accompanied them stayed mostly in the background – not an easy thing to accomplish for a pair of three hundred pound black men at an otherwise all white gathering.

By eight, the party was well underway and the initial uneasiness between the two groups of kids had long since passed. Most of them had never learned to swim so Ted and Jerry and I offered lessons on the spot. By 9:00 most were at least dog paddling across the pool and back. Their obvious joy reminded me of an awestruck three-year-old bobbing his first red balloon from its string.

"So, I hear you're not in rehab," one of the boys my age said, opening a conversation as we sat dangling our legs in the water from the edge of the pool.

He broke a smile, which let me know it was an attempt at humor.

"Haven't had the pleasure," I said, immediately sensing it had been a dumb thing to say.

"You're okay," he came back nodding, sliding his elbow gently into my ribs. "I'm Marcus. We don't use last names at

the house."

I offered him my hand. "I'm Tommy and I have no idea what my real last name actually is."

He looked puzzled so I provided the simplest explanation.

"Adopted."

He nodded. His expression said, 'I'm sorry about that'.

"Hey, I lucked into a wonderful family so I feel pretty fortunate about the whole thing."

"You guys are really different from what I expected, you know?" he said.

"Oh. Really? Seems to me we have five fingers and toes just like you."

"You know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't but I'd really like to."

"Snooty. Actin' better than us. Lordin' your stuff over us."

"Sorry if we are disappointing you," I said.

He grinned and even managed a short chuckle.

"It's really hard, you know."

I turned toward him and sat cross-legged indicating I was ready to listen. He began talking though seldom looked into my face.

"Got six brothers and sisters. No dad. Held back twice. Teachers seem to hate my guts. 'Til I got in rehab I'd never been further north than 79st Street or south past 41st. My whole world was mainly four square blocks. Now I been places. Goin' to a football game tomorrow if I don't get no marks between now and then. Substitutin' doin' for usin' is really hard, though, man."

"I'm not sure I understand – doing for using."

"At the house, they're always after us to be doin' stuff – reading, crafts, paintin', bein' in plays and skits, talkin' in group. I ain't used to doin' none a that stuff. I hate to read – well, I thought I did anyway – before. They see ya just sittin' and they tell ya to get up off your butt and get busy or they'll find somethin' for ya to do. My brain ain't set to live that way, ya know?"

He paused, apparently needing a response.

"I'm beginning to, thanks to you, Marcus."

It warranted another smile and the briefest glance in my direction. He continued.

"The workers who come to my home sayin' they want ta help, just don't understand and they don't want ta listen – just want ta preach."

"I imagine you'd have a lot of suggestions about how they could do things better.

"You're damn right I could."

His heightened emotion quickly shrunk into silence as he slumped and looked around sheepishly. He spoke to me in a hushed tone.

"If the workers find out I cussed I'll get a mark and won't be allowed to go tomorrow."

"Cussed? All I heard was you referring to a large wall that holds back water."

He frowned. It quickly changed to a smile as he caught my meaning. He attempted a forceful high five which, if high-fiving had been a part of my life, probably would have worked. As it was I ducked as his hand came toward me, losing my balance and falling into the water.

He laughed out loud.

"You're okay but you gots lots ta learn, Tommy without no last name."

He got to his knee and offered me a hand up. If it had been Gus, I'd have pulled him in, making a joke of it. But this was a serious offer of friendship from Marcus and I wouldn't ruin that. I stood up on the deck and squeegeed out my long hair.

"Your hair is awesome. They cut ours off as soon as we entered rehab. Something about leaving our old ways behind us. Some guys fought it. I let it happen. Hair grows back, ya know."

Marcus had a sense of perspective, which, I guess, I hadn't expected to see in these kids.

"Have you met Mr. Hanson, Kate's dad?"

"The dude who shook hands at the front door?"

"That would be the dude," I said.

"What about him?"

"He's on the advisory board for the Human Services Department here in the city."

"What's that?"

"They give advice to the people in charge of sending the workers out into the neighborhoods to help – the ones you were complaining out, I suppose."

"They ain't been offerin' much good advice as far as I can see."

"You'd have some suggestions for him then."

"About a truck load."

I hitched my head indicating he should follow me. We got up and walked across the patio.

"Mr. Hanson," I began. "It was really cool of you to do this for us. They're a great bunch of kids. I'd like you to meet my new friend, Marcus. He lives up near your office building. If you have a few minutes, I'd like you to hear him out about some changes he thinks would be helpful in the Human Services outreach programs offered in that area."

Hanson looked at his watch as if hoping it would provide some escape route for him. I barged on before he could refuse.

"Great! How about we sit at the table here?"

Again, I didn't wait to allow an answer.

"The floor's yours, friend," I said looking at Marcus.

My new friend folded his hands in front of him on the table. It told me he was taking the opportunity seriously.

"Well, for one thing ya gotta change who comes into the neighborhood. You understand, we got lots a reasons not ta trust fancy dressed folks drivin' nice cars and carryin' leather briefcases. Right off when we see 'em we knows whatever they gots ta say might be okay where they're from but not where we're from. Lessin' ya live here ya can't know.

"What ya gotta do is send folks like we is – folks who really knows how it is ta live without no money, no dads, no parks, and havin' to travel streets where you're likely ta take a blade in the gut if ya tries walkin' 'em after sundown. I worry about my mama every night out there. My mama works two jobs, seven days a week. I ain't never had no allowance. I ain't never had no store-bought clothes. I'm lucky if there's food enough for three meals a day. Mama's smart. She could handle a good job. A few years ago, they put her into a training program – filing and office stuff. She was makin' good

money. Then they found her a job and then cut her loose. It was like sixty blocks away from where we live. We don't have no car. By bus it would a took her two hours ta get there and two ta get back. Cab fair was more than she'd a made in a day's time. She didn't have no money ta buy the kind a clothes she'd have ta have. So, she's back cleanin' toilets and washin' windows. They keep tellin' us we gotta try ta better ourselves, but all the stuff they offer her is just dumb that way. They don't understand how it really is.

"I don't know how many a us, ya got on that committee a yours, but it can't be many or you'd be doin' things a lot different.

"Another dumb thing. They come in and try ta tell mama how to be a better parent. She knows how to be a good parent, she just don't have no time to be one. Ya know what ya oughtta do. Ya oughtta hire her ta help the young moms learn how ta do it right. That's what ya should do. I ain't in this drug predicament 'cause my mama don't know how ta be a good mama. She jist never had time ta be one to me, ya know."

The conversation went on for twenty minutes. Before it ended everyone at the party had gathered around, listening. Even the two large gentlemen in the shadows inched closer and nodded at what they heard.

Later on, the boys threw the girls into the water – a senseless act it seemed to me – perhaps a macho thing or maybe an acceptable way to touch the girls or work off some of the hormone driven energy brought on by those tiny little bikinis. And they did seem to suck my hormones right to the surface. On several occasions, I found myself multiplying mixed fractions in my head in order to keep my mind otherwise occupied.

Gus mingled with the kids talking and joking. He and Amanda seemed to be getting on well. It was strange to see him giggling with a beautiful girl while she fed him strawberries. He looked more fifteen than thirteen in the swim suit. Perhaps that's why he always bested me in our tussles. Each of his muscles made two of mine – and mine were looking pretty good for not quite thirteen. I needed to improve my tickle strategy somehow because it seemed clear there

wasn't to be a legitimate pinning of Gus in my immediate future.

I assumed Gus had been mind seeping Hanson, so I stayed out of it. A few of the kids related horror stories about their time on drugs and the terrors of withdrawal the first few days in Rehab. Most, however, avoided the subject and just enjoyed the good time. Kate's parents spend a good deal more time with the group than they had at the previous party. I assumed it was some trust-based issue on their part and may have been warranted.

The overriding impression I got from the kids was that even though things were going well for them at the moment, and they were happy about that, none had any reason to think it could continue once they left the rehabilitation program. They would go back into the homes and neighborhoods that provided none of the opportunities they needed – none of the possibilities they needed – none of the options they needed – to make permanent changes in their lives. I wanted to cry for them. Later, I probably would. I wasn't going to let that happen. Maybe that was to be my Calibrator Mission.

Listen to me – a green frocked Tyro – making promises like that. It made me wonder again if I was really up to the Calibrator calling.

Gus came by and gave me a friendly swat on the butt.

"Smile. You're having a good time, remember."

It had been offered only partly in good humor. I understood and put on a happy face. I wanted to follow up on something I heard Marcus say earlier. He was sitting alone on the edge of the pool away from the others. I approached him and took a seat alongside.

"Your teachers hated you, you say? Your grades had nothing to do with being held back, then?"

He gave me a quick glance as if to say he didn't expect that kind of aggravation from me.

"They hated me. I wasn't about ta do work for 'em."

"And that helped you, how?"

Again, he looked into my face.

"You just don't understand."

"You're right but like I said before, I really want to."

He nodded.

"You do, do ya? Ya never will a course. I'm poor, ya see. Poor kids get no breaks handed to 'em."

"Hey, I'm poor. Like you, I've never had new, store bought, clothes. Unlike you, I guess I never thought anybody owed me a break. My family has always made its own."

He grew quiet. I couldn't tell if he was considering the point I'd tried to make with him or regrouping to come at me with something else. It turned out to be more an attempt at explanation.

"They was always on me at school about how I talks. I talks like everybody else where I growed up."

"Sounds reasonable to me – that's how you were taught to speak."

"So, why's school folks always on me ta change it?"

"If you went to Mexico do you suppose you'd be expected to speak Spanish?" I asked.

"Ya."

"And if you went to France, French?"

"Ya, but what's that got ta do with here? This is America and we speak English."

"There are several ways to go about speaking English and to most Americans, your way sounds as foreign as Spanish or French. If you want to make it here, you just HAVE to speak Mainstream English."

"Mainstream English?" he asked.

"The English most of us speak. Surely you hear the difference between the English you speak and the English you hear on TV or from your teachers."

"Well, yeah."

"You see, there isn't anything wrong with speaking French in France but it just won't work out in the big world here in America. Just like there's nothing wrong with speaking how you speak when you're in your neighborhood, but it's not going to work for you outside of your neighborhood."

Again, he grew silent. Again, I wondered which wheels were turning inside his head. I had one more base to touch so I plodded on.

"About those breaks you mentioned. Who's going to get the job around here - the guy who speaks English or the guy who only speaks French?"

He looked up and nodded, indicating he got the point. I continued, just to make sure.

"Who's going to get the break - the guy who knows how to make change or the one who doesn't; the guy who's studied and graduated from high school or the one who hasn't; the guy who has a clean record or the guy who hasn't? You see, I think we each make our breaks by getting prepared ahead of time."

"So?" he began, looking into the water. "What do I do about this English thing?"

"Seems like two things to me: first, don't put yourself down for the way you learned to speak. That can't make you a bad guy. Second, work as hard and long as you need to so you can learn how to translate that into Mainstream English when you're out in the big world."

"How?"

"Quite honestly, I'm not sure. I know there have to be ways. Get some friends who speak it and listen and ask them questions about it. Ask them to help you remodel your style so it can come out mainstream."

"Sure! Like a fourteen-year-old druggie can find those kinds a friends, Tommy. Get real!"

It was sarcastic and it overflowed with truth. I looked around.

"Jerry," I said to Marcus. "I think he needs a friend. I get the impression you're a great friend when you decide to be."

"Yeah. I'd never rat out a friend."

It wasn't exactly what I was going for but it seemed like a starting place.

"Let me see what I can work out," I said.

I stood up and he slipped into the water in search of any female who would give him the time of day.

Before the evening was over, I had Mr. Hanson's word that he'd have two, side-by-side, fifty-yard line tickets for the Saturday game waiting at the gate in the names of Marcus and Jerry.

Jerry was an easy sell. It turned out he liked Marcus and loved football. I felt like a Calibrator doing his thing. I felt like a human being doing his thing.

It was too soon time to leave. In the dressing room the boys seemed to take forever getting out of their suits. They took forever drying off. They took forever getting dressed. They didn't want the time to be over. They knew they'd probably never again be at a pool party at a mansion with kids who accepted them without reference to who they had been. They each clearly wanted to hold on to even those last few moments.

In an odd way, I understood. They were struggling with having just experienced something they felt they could never have. I was struggling with the possibilities of giving up things I knew I could have.

\* \* \*

At the party, the night before, Gus had done some heavy-duty seeping. He did a Mind Fix on Hanson – like a seep but permanent. It was actually three images. One was Kate getting out of the rehab Van as if she were one of kids coming to another party. Gus had painted her as thin and pale, with sunken eyes, unkempt hair, and no energy. The second was an image of Kate in her room inserting the needle of a syringe into her arm – the look of sudden ecstasy washing across her face as she fell to the floor. The final image was a collage of the eyes of the youngsters from rehab as they looked into his face and thanked him on their way back out to their van.

The first two, at least, would be horrific images for any parent to have to face. For Hanson, it would be a hundred times worse. He loved his daughter. He wanted her to have a good and happy life. He would never involve her in his filthy business.

There had been rumors about him, of course, but his family, knowing the husband and father they knew, dismissed such tales out of hand. Those things could never be true of him and had probably been started by some jealous competitor in the insurance business.

Kate's mind had not escaped Gus's attention. It was a seep that pushed her to visit her father at his office – something that had never been allowed. I saw how I could help. I'd seep the Civics teacher a new assignment – visit your parent at work for a day and write a summary of how

governmental agencies impacted that job or business. It presented a small problem for me – accompanying my father – but shouldn't for the others.

I had another flash of brilliance – at least I thought it was. I learned from Yorka that when trying to make a point with somebody it was always good to get the other person to agree with you on some small points first. It got them in the agreeing mood, setting them up for the eventual big question or main point. I tried it out on Gus as we dressed for breakfast Saturday morning.

"You said emotional pressure makes people more easily receptive to seeps, right?" I said clarifying what I was sure I remembered.

"Right."

"And to get Hanson to be receptive to the option about going legitimate with his business, the more emotional pressure the better?"

"Right, to a point at least."

From his expression, it became clear that Gus knew what I was doing but I pressed on.

"What if we obtained photographs of the kids who have died of drug related deaths – overdoses or been killed in robbery attempts trying to get money to buy drugs, things like that. And, what if we mounted each of them on a small sheet of black poster board and under each picture we wrote in white ink the kid's name, age, and the date and place he died. Like: Johnny Miller, age fifteen, died of drug overdose on January 13th, in his bedroom at 129 Everett Street. Then, over a period of a week or so we plant them, a few at a time, where Hanson will have to come across them."

"You certainly think like a Calibrator, Tommy. Present a situation he absolutely has to come to grips with. Very good! Excellent, in fact."

Excited and pleased at his reaction, I opened the door to leave for the dining hall.

"There is just one thing, though," he said, as we entered the hall.

"What's that?"

I closed the door and we headed for the stairs.

"You might want to consider going back to the room

and putting on your pants."

How could I recover from such a dumb thing as that? I tried, of course.

"Couldn't we just say it's my summer outfit? I am wearing green boxers."

After a short delay, I was properly attired and our walk continued. In my mind, I formed a private joke – well, probably not private with Gus right there. 'I could have just painted myself green and gone as the Jolly Green Tyro.' Upon reflection, it was best forever left right there in my grey matter.

Gus was still shaking his head as we entered the dining room.

"By the way," he said as I was about to leave him for Abby's table. "I want you to accompany me today. Don't make any plans. You can have tomorrow free. Okay?"

It really wasn't a question to which I had the choice of refusing. I assumed the 'okay' was merely asking if I underunderstood rather than if I agreed to go. I wondered what he would have done if a Tyro did refuse?

He looked at me.

"A Calibrator would just never do that."

I nodded. It was what I figured. Since he already knew my thoughts there was no reason to say anything.

"Survive the party, okay," I asked Abby as I took a seat beside her. It was one of those absurd, ice breaking, statements I tended to make. It was the obvious absurdity that seemed to make it acceptable.

"Sure did. I had a really good time. I hope we can do it again? In fact, I was thinking maybe we could go down to the pond later and go for a swim."

It posed a momentary quandary: Spending time with a beautiful, scantily clad girl who enjoyed being kissed by me as much I enjoyed kissing her, or go fight bad guys with Gus? Gus had veto power so I'd try to reschedule my Abby time.

"I'm busy today. A commitment I can't get out of. How about tomorrow?"

"It will have to be before ten tomorrow morning," she said. "I have family stuff the rest of the day. Dad's coming in. I get to see him so little these days I want to be there with

him."

"Sure. I can understand that. Believe me, if I had a dad I'd be there for him any time he whistled. So, is eight too early?"

"How about seven, then we can watch the sun come up together."

"Will this really be okay with your folks, you and me alone together in swimming suits?"

"Sure, silly. They trust us."

"I suppose my real question is if we trust us, or maybe just if I trust me?"

"Oh. I hadn't considered that. You are clearly stressing over it."

"Seems so. I've just never had any practice in all this. How about we invite one other couple to be there, too?"

"Are you sure that isn't just so you'll have two girls to look at?" she said joking.

"That will just be an added extra. I don't know how it is with girls, but with boys there are urges that I think could get out of control in a hurry and I'm not well enough practiced with them yet. I'd never want that to happen."

She reached up and touched my face, looking into my eyes.

"Tommy Powers, you are the dearest, sweetest, most thoughtful boy I've ever known. I just might be able to fall in love with you someday."

I didn't respond because I didn't want to say anything I truly didn't mean, and, just sitting there, I was having feelings that I was sure could easily take control of my tongue. I think she understood. I did nod and I did smile and I did choke as I tried to swallow.

I wasn't used to having someone laugh themselves into convulsions while I was in all likelihood choking to death on my own saliva. In the end, it provided a good transition from the serious talk to the regular sort of chit chat we usually enjoyed together at meal time.

It had been a case of options with which I had just been struggling. The options of living high or low, positive or negative, on my Integrity Path. I chose one that I felt would be safe and protective and sensible. I realized ahead of time

that I might not agree with some of that as I was laying close to her on a beach towel, kissing her soft lips, and that had been my purpose in arranging the second couple option – preferably a couple that blushed at the mere thought of holding hands!

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## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

### **I Can Soar With The Eagles!**

"I suppose you heard Abby and me talking at breakfast," I said to Gus as we approached the door to our room.

"I declare, Tommy, your mind is so powerful it just shouts its thoughts about the universe. Yes, I did, but it wasn't because I was trying or even wanted to, I hope you understand that."

"Did I do okay? I seem to suddenly be wearing a man's body, and at twelve and a half, it's so new to me I'm seldom sure how to proceed where man things are concerned."

"You did very well. I am extremely proud of you. I'm in no way surprised, however. You make good decisions. The more experience you get living with your 'man feelings', as you aptly call them, the easier it will become to guide them in the directions you want them to go."

I felt better – much better. I also had a major bone to pick with Mother Nature about providing me with these urges well before I had any business acting on them. They were wonderful, however. There were also options and I'd work it out; even Gus said I would.

As I began changing clothes I engaged Gus in conversation.

"So, you get things finished up in Thailand or where ever?"

"Finished, doesn't seem to ever apply to a Calibrator's work, my friend. It's usually more like a series of successive approximations toward our goal."

"I really don't understand that."

He took a coin from his pocket and handed it to me.

"See the book on the seat of the big chair?"

"Yes."

"Flip the coin with your thumb so it lands on it."

I tried but it fell some six feet short.

"That's closer than it was. Go stand where it fell and try again from there."

"I got to within a foot of the chair."

"Still closer. Again, from there."

"I missed the book by less than an inch."

He held out his hand, palm up, and I returned the coin to him.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Well. Each time I managed to get closer to the book – to the target."

"And that's how our work often goes. We try something and it gets us closer to the goal we have set. Then we try again and get even closer – perhaps finding a solution, even though it's still not the best solution. So we try again, and again, each one approximating where we want to be even if not right on target."

"I see. Each approximation gets us closer to the goal – a series or succession of approximations. I got it!"

It had been a good explanation – not the kind I would expect in school but exactly the kind I was learning to expect when facilitation was the guiding philosophy.

"So, what are we up to today?" I asked.

"Off to the police records department to get the list of young addicts who have died during the past six months in Hanson's territory. Then, we'll enter their homes, find pictures of them, make copies, and begin planting them in Hanson's office and home according to your suggestion."

"I am assuming we are not going to just walk in and ask for all of this."

"I have arranged to receive a print out of the names and basic data on each victim from the police. The story is that you, my son, are doing a school project related to the deaths. To make it legitimate I figure you will find a way to use the information at school."

"It will make a great follow-up to the pool party. I can see the pictures on the bulletin board in the main hall with the caption: "Kids who couldn't make it to the party."

Upon saying it out loud it was even more powerful than it had been inside my head. It put things into perspective like nothing else had. My gut churned and Gus winced. We moved on.

"It's a street clothes day, I guess," he said. "I'll need my Tommy's Dad outfit for starters. Then I'll zap back here to change for the rest of the day. I like your word, 'zap', and seem to be using it often."

He smiled. I nodded.

"How will we get the pictures? Seems like an unpleasant intrusion to go door to door asking for pictures of parents' dead children."

He handed me a small camera.

"State of the art. Digital. We'll jump into the homes, under a state of Invisibility, do a short Time-X on anybody who may be there, take a picture of the picture, and leave without having interfered in any way in their lives."

"Why the Time-X if we're invisible?"

"Invisible cameras can't take pictures of visible matter. One of us has to materialize with the camera, you see."

"Ah. Yes. I see. I still have so much to learn about the Calibrator stuff."

"CS?" he said, smiling. I didn't get his meaning and I guess it showed on my face.

"CS – Calibrator Stuff!"

He chuckled as we Jumped into the alley behind the police station as Tommy and his Father. Soon inside, Gus found the right room and shortly we had the printout in our possession. Fifty lives summarized on two sheets of paper. It seemed . . . sad, I guess. Sad that that's all the records would show about those kids who had families, hopes and dreams, skills and friends. Now it was just Name, Age, Next of kin, Address, and dates of birth and death. It read like a tombstone.

I shuddered.

From then on it was Tommy and Gus. Fifty visits even at the speed of Calibrators took the morning. It was all sad –

tragic, really – but making it worse, six of the families each had two children on the list. I had to wonder how the parents managed to go on. I could imagine nothing worse than the death of your child – and such senseless deaths these were. How could a parent ever get over such a thing?

The mission became almost routine. Jump inside, perform a Time-X, take the picture, leave and move on to the next address, which was never far away, it seemed. I hated that it was routine. I wanted to get to know the families. Hear all about each child. Determine what had gone wrong and see that it didn't have to ever again go wrong for other kids and their families. I would make time for that later. But that day it was routine, one step in the plan that had to be accomplished first.

By noon we were finished. Gus asked, "We can make it back to the dining room for lunch if you want?"

"I lost my appetite hours ago, Gus. Guess I'm just not cut out for this kind of a life. Seems like I'm feeling more that way every time I get involved in this CS."

He put his arm around my shoulder, and pulled me close. He said nothing. We walked together block after block, ending up at Amy's Bagel Stand.

"Got something for a down-in-the-dumps Tommy?" Gus asked her.

"Cream cheese on a blueberry beauty," she suggested.

I shrugged and nodded, putting on a smile. I believed there was never a good reason to sadden the folks around me just because I happened to be feeling down. We moved on and sat in silence on a bench in the nearby park. I managed to finish my bagel and, if pressed, would have probably even admitted I was enjoying it by the last few bites.

"Ready for Phase Two?" Gus said at last.

I nodded. We stood and he continued.

"Put that mischievously creative head of yours to work, now, and think of spots where nobody but Hanson will likely be looking."

The business was closed for the weekend, which made it easier. We entered his private office. Gus produced a large envelope containing all fifty, five by seven photographs already mounted on black paper and labeled in white ink.

I was puzzled as to how that had come about.

"While we were bageling - I took a little side trip, you could say."

I understood I had been placed in a Time-X while he went somewhere and got things ready. He clearly realized I needed time to think and be alone. It raised a question.

"When a person is in Time-X does he continue thinking?"

"Interestingly, yes. All bodily functions continue."

We got to work. Pictures were placed in all of his desk drawers, on the back of his office door, on his calendar and I even replaced the picture of Kate, which sat on his desk, with a photograph of one of the girls. Others were fastened to the mirror in his private bathroom and the underside of the toilet seat – I personally liked that one the best. Gus put several in conspicuous places inside his walk-in vault and made sure one was left in his accounting book – the one he didn't show the IRS! I even managed to scan one into his computer – Gus had earlier got the password – and put it up as his screensaver.

Once finished there, we went to his mansion, which required us to work under the cloak of Invisibility since he and his family, plus a half dozen maids, butlers, and such were there. Gus used some of his own ingenuity in fashioning a photo that fit perfectly on the inside rearview mirror of Hanson's car. Others went into his glove compartment and trunk.

Inside the house I deposited them in his sock drawer, in the pockets of his jackets, and with the help of Gus even inserted a small version into the picture section of his wallet. It left us with about half the pictures still unused. The plan called for us to periodically replenish the pictures during that next week as Hanson found and removed the first set.

By the time we finished, it was after two.

"Let's go tree climbing," Gus said out of the blue.

"O k a y," I said hesitantly, having difficulty, I suppose, switching gears so rapidly.

I waited to be zapped someplace and wasn't disappointed. I looked around. We were in a beautiful woods, but not one I recognized. The fall colors were ablaze on oaks

and maples so it was clearly someplace much further south than the city.

"The Arkansas Ozarks," Gus said. "Beautiful here, isn't it?"

I agreed wondering why the woods surrounding the cabin wouldn't have been satisfactory. It was suddenly quite warm and I shed my coat and shirt. So did Gus.

"So, do you actually climb these trees or just jump around?" I asked mostly seriously, searching for the ground rules.

"Just climb the old-fashioned way. There were very few trees on the island where I spent the first twelve years of my life. I climbed every one of them that was there. From the tops I could look out and watch the ships pass. They seldom stopped. It seemed I could see forever from up there."

"I doubt if we'll see many ocean-going vessels from here in the Ozark Mountains," I said chiding him a bit.

Gus smiled.

"These are great climbing trees, though aren't they?"

"They are that."

I could tell it held some special significance for him and had to wonder how it must be to have memories of a childhood that occurred a thousand years before. I climbed but mostly I watched Gus.

"Is that not really too high into the flimsy top of that one?" I asked at one point, fearing for his wellbeing.

"And if I fall?" he asked, smiling.

"Well, usually that would mean a rapidly accelerating descent and eventual impact with the earth."

"If you fall you just Jump yourself to safety."

I should have figured that out on my own and felt a bit dumb about it.

"Watch this," he said as he did a swan dive out into space, his arms spread wide.

About ten feet before impact, he disappeared and was back up on the branch from where he had started.

"Give it a try. Nothing like it!" he said sounding more like a careless six-year-old than a . . . whatever.

"What's the worst that can happen to me?" I asked leaning over cautiously to look down at the ground.

"Well, you could mess up and Gus would have to come to your rescue at the last millisecond."

With no further discussion, I jumped and began plummeting toward the ground some sixty feet below. I rolled head over heels and twisted round and round. Stopping sooner than I would have needed to, I jumped up to a spot beside Gus. It was too much weight for the spindly branch and we both went tumbling through space. What fun! I felt nine years old again. We continued playing for a half hour. My life was suddenly simple. It was like living a little boy's fantasy – flying through the trees, even if, straight down. Gus was a wise person, and sensed just what I needed at that point in my day, in my life.

"Now, my young friend," Gus said as we were sitting with our backs against the trunk of one of the larger trees, "I want to see you fly up to that branch."

He pointed to a spot some twenty feet off the ground.

I frowned.

"Gravity doesn't usually work in that direction, my friend."

"Remember the very first times you watched me Near Jump down in the cabin?"

"Yes. Oh! Wow! I think I'm getting your message. If I just Jump myself an inch or so at a time between here and that branch it will be like flying."

"So why are you still on the ground?"

"I'm not!"

At that point I was an inch in the air. Then two, three, four, moving slowly toward the branch. It hardly looked like flying but it was a start. I tried to visualize those successive points in space at a faster and faster pace. By the time I reached the designated branch, I was moving along at a pretty good clip. Gus clapped. It was amazing!

I 'flew' back down to where Gus was on the ground.

"I have one caution for you, Tommy," he began.

I interrupted.

"Never be seen flying. Only do it in a state of Invisibility or at some uninhabited spot in the Ozarks."

"Why do I even try? The boy's always ahead of me," he said as if talking to himself, though clearly pleased.

“You have ten minutes to soar to your heart’s content; then we have business to attend to.”

I flew! I flew straight up. I circled overhead. I zoomed in among the trees and hovered high above the woods taking in the magnificent, gently rolling panorama.

My time was too soon over.

Gus patted the ground beside him indicating I should take a seat.

"The Sage needs to spend some time with you."

I sat, cross-legged, facing Gus who stood and went behind the tree. The Sage appeared and took a seat. He cleared his throat, and plainly it was not the young throat of Gus.

"I have selected this beautiful place to pass on to you The Calibrator’s Ten Pillars of Life. It is a simple statement, in ten parts, outlining the basic beliefs that hold us together as a brotherhood and reminds us of our purpose and our hopes for mankind. It is our guide to living – moment by moment, day by day, century by century. It is not intended to replace other systems of positive philosophic beliefs. We hold to these Pillars to enhance and focus our individual beliefs."

For some time, I had figured there was surely something like this, but had not asked. The Sage moved on his own schedule and according to his own plan. My experience was that I received just what I needed, just when I needed it. I was learning to be patient. Unbelievable! Tommy Powers, patient! My Wharfies would never have believed it.

"Just listen, now," he said. "There will be time for inquiries and discussion later."

I nodded even though I recognized no response had been called for. Again, it wasn't for me to agree or disagree – just to be receptive to what was happening. It would surely be an important piece of information for me to consider as I struggled with the dilemma about whether or not I could – should – continue my life as a Calibrator.

The Sage Began: “These ten Pillars help us define our purpose, our beliefs, and our way of life.”

1. All life on Earth flows from the energy of the sun. I owe my existence as a human being to the sun and the Forces that have created it. I am grateful for this opportunity

to experience existence as a human being. I am committed to working toward becoming all that I, as a human being, can become – physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally (many may want to add, spiritually.)

2. Posture sets our being. Posture is the way I carry my human body while waking, sitting and standing.

3. From Posture, flows Attitude. Attitude is the mental set with which I approach my life, my work, my play and the people I encounter.

4. Attitude allows Love. Love is the sense I have that all human beings, including myself, are precious.

5. Love is the basis for Compassion. Compassion is my feeling that all human beings are worthy of my attention, understanding, assistance, and patience.

6. From Compassion flows Nurture. Nurture is my determination to see that people have an adequate opportunity to live and grow comfortably, and that good and adequate care is taken of all human beings within my immediate reach – however large or modest that reach may be.

7. Nurture forms and disciplines my use of Power. Power is my ability to influence myself and others.

8. Power, directed by these five attributes, fosters and maintains Peace, both within me and outside me in the World.

Peace is a state in which everyone agrees that everyone else has the absolute right to exist safely, and to honestly obtain and maintain his or her possessions, beliefs, and preferred way of life, so long as they do not prevent others from enjoying these same rights and privileges.

9. Only in peace, may each person be free to realize his Ultimate Human Potential. The maintenance of Peace requires that only those parties who observe these commitments and responsibilities will, in turn, be permitted the freedom to enjoy these same rights and privileges.

10. It is our responsibility to do the best we can, through the humane and thoughtful utilization of the most reliable, currently available, information about human nature, to help heal those who find it difficult to live in peace and harmony with others.

When he finished, I sighed a long, slow, sigh. It was

beautiful what I had just heard. It set things in order. It defined 'right'. It laid out my purpose – every human being's purpose – as a part of the natural flow of things in the Universe. It connected me from the sun, my source, through seven of the most fundamental aspects of living, to my responsibility as a human being. I felt an essential connection I had never really felt before. It helped the past flow into my present and my present flow on into my future. I would never forget one word, one syllable, of what the Sage had said.

Then, terror stuck my heart. What if I turned down this Calibrator opportunity? My mind was to be washed clean of these memories. Would I also lose knowledge of those Pillars?

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

### **Going It Alone**

The Sage alleviated my terror to some extent by telling me he had no doubt that if I chose to leave the Calibrators I would discover the Pillars all by myself. He pointed out that, except for the existence of their organization, I had already figured much of it out. I felt better.

Of course, I would not base my decision on staying or going back to how things had been, merely on the ability to fly - but my, that was stupendous! During the several months that followed I flew often. It seemed I could think more clearly high above the world. Maybe it was the fresh, clean, air. Maybe it was that the process required so much of my attention other concerns faded for a little while. Maybe it was just the distance that flying put between me and all the worldly things I had to be troubled about. For whatever reason, I had become Tommy Powers, the flying fool.

I spent more and more time with the Sage listening to him talk and learning from his vast knowledge and wisdom. I enjoyed the way he approached learning. He would present some information and then begin asking questions that helped me understand its importance and assisted me in applying it to life. Nothing in school came close to that. My teachers seemed strictly interested that the students learn the 'facts' and apparently had no interest in helping them apply it all to their lives or to solving their own or mankind's problems.

At the end of first semester, I said goodbye to the school but kept in contact with my new friends. We organized weekly outings for the kids in rehab. I learned to seep options

to them in what must have been effective ways. Very few returned to drugs after release. They were always included in the outings. Marcus and Jerry became best friends and Marcus was making great progress with his Mainstream English. He even seemed to feel good about it though wasn't yet ready to admit that.

Gus and I manipulated some of the Human Services programs. The formerly useless in-home parenting program became staffed with Facilitators from the neighborhood, Marcus's mother among them. They were gently helped to improve their own approach and that spread rapidly throughout the area. After school programs, which the government had cut, were reinstated with private funds from sources such as Hanson Enterprises. The kids ran the programs, made the rules, and for the first time in their lives felt they had the possibility of controlling their own destiny.

By early February Hanson had completely switched his business into legitimate undertakings. He established and managed a self-insurance program for the families in 'his' neighborhood. He brought in two light assembly plants which provided good paying jobs within easy walking distance for the local residents. Ted and Kate helped organize a neighborhood watch program, which, by Christmas, had made it one of the safest neighborhoods in the city. Would be drug dealers learned to stay away. Gus and I didn't always approve of the local's methods for accomplishing that, but they used what they knew – and, apparently, what the dealers understood! As their base of knowledge increased such strong-arm tactics would subside.

Abby and I became a very comfortable couple. I had no idea if it would be a forever thing – even if I remained a Calibrator, which was becoming less and less a certainly – but that was okay. We felt deeply for each other and enjoyed expressing our affection in a wide variety of ways; kissing was better than ever but the little things began being a more important part of our relationship. The flowers I'd pick for her, just because I wanted to. The books she'd bring to me for the same reason. The long talks we enjoyed about life and how to best live it. They were all ways of expressing affection – of saying we cared.

I had grown fond of her as a person, a best friend, a companion. I had also grown fond of the kissing, and holding her, and whispering romantic things in her ear as we lay close on a blanket watching the stars at night. It was that combination of the emotional, the intellectual, the companionship, and the physical that I came to understand made up romantic love. They all had to be present or it couldn't work. They all had to be important and cherished by both partners. It was often complicated but it was extraordinary!

I chuckled when I realized that by mid-February my Wharfies had finally made it all the way to Sunday afternoon – the day before I was to return from my weekend with Gus. I spent more and more time at my window, looking down at the docks and the loft. All of that played such a large part in the huge decision I would very soon have to make.

As the Hanson Mission began taking less time, Gus and I took on other projects. The one at the moment was closing down the drug traffic that streamed across the docks and into the city from the Middle East and South America. Antipathy had reared his ugly head again, having taken over as the leader of the dock workers. They were an easy target for his charm and promises. Many of them struggled from day to day to make ends meet for their families. The work was terribly hard. The hours were long, even though a strong union had negotiated improved overtime wages.

Many of those men ended up on the docks because they possessed neither the skills nor the personalities to make it in less strenuous, more comfortable jobs. They were brawlers – look at one the wrong way and expect to be beaten silly. They spoke a form of English that was short on conveying meaning and long on four letter words. Oh, it used English words and all, but it was shallow and really didn't have the power to say much.

Swearing, I had always thought, was more an indication of lazy thinking than an indication somebody was 'tough' or 'bad'. It really amounted to a form of imprecise thinking. When they'd say, "You're a blinkin' fool," the swear word carried no real meaning so it added nothing to the communication value of the phrase. If they'd say, "You're an

inconsiderate fool," or "You're a hurtful fool," or "You're a confusing fool," then the adjective would help convey some real meaning – add some precision. But, since a meaningless word like blinkin' can replace a hundred or maybe a thousand meaningful words, it becomes useless. By using it, though, the dock workers didn't ever have to make the necessary effort to search for the word they really needed to convey the actual feeling or idea they had. They failed to communicate with others and also, they never really specified their exact needs or problems or desires to themselves. It prevented them from understanding themselves and why they had the unpleasant feelings they harbored.

But it appears I'm getting off track. Oh, no, actually, the original purpose of that far too lengthy dissertation was just to say I think a big part of the problems the dock workers have among themselves (and probably at home, as well) is due to their imprecise, sloppy, lazy, thinking and that it is also a major reason they ended up spending their lives miserable there on the wharfs, instead of being better off someplace else where actual thinking and communication was required.

I spoke with the director of one of the local rehab houses about my theory and he and his staff began exploring it with the kids – asking them for alternative words that would say what they really wanted to say and think about. Almost immediately, the kids at that house began making faster progress than before.

Antipathy had apparently decided that if a substantial portion of the human species was addicted to drugs, it would soon destroy itself and that, of course, was his ugly goal. I wondered if he had thought far enough ahead to figure out what he'd do with the rest of his life if there were no more human beings to torment and abuse. Apparently, he hadn't. It was something he and many of the dock workers had in common – no consideration of the long-term consequences of their actions.

He had arranged things so the security – or, really, the lack of security – at Dock Seven allowed free passage of drugs and the raw materials from which they could be manufactured. It was something Gus and I had recently uncovered.

"So, what are our options?" Gus asked that evening as we were lounging around our room.

"Alert the law enforcement agencies would be one," I suggested, then immediately saw the down side of it. "He'd most likely just move the operation elsewhere, then."

Gus nodded. I still was often not sure when he already had the solution in mind or when we were actually searching for it together. Either way, I understood it was good practice for me. So, I continued.

"For the police to try and catch the head guy, Antipathy, would be an exercise in futility – it will never happen. With no positive part to his Integrity Path we can't do with him what we did with Hanson. Is there no way to put him in a bottle and cork it?"

Gus chuckled and shrugged.

"None that we have found. You have an idea?"

"No. But I'll get to work on it."

"First, the supply has to be stopped," Gus said."

"I don't get it," I said.

"What don't you get?"

"In Hanson's neighborhood, we dried up the desire for drugs. Isn't that the secret? Providing options that are more attractive and meaningful than drugs? Fixing families so kids have no reason to turn to them?"

"That is the secret. But do you realize how many drug infested neighborhoods there are in the world? How do we reach all of them? How do we have time to make the necessary changes in the basic structures of all those families and the economy?"

I didn't like having to agree with him about it.

"So, you're saying that until we can find a way to do all of that, we at least have to make drugs harder to come by."

He nodded. I suddenly had two new missions. To find a way to free the world of Antipathy and, also, to speed up the process of fixing neighborhoods and families – THE WORLD OVER! Just how overwhelming a responsibility would that be???

I could tell I wasn't cut out for this work. I hurt too deeply for all the people of the world who were caught in a state of perpetual helplessness. What percent was it? 10?

25? 50? Even one percent represented millions and millions of people – so many of them children. It was just too much. Suddenly I seemed to be one of the helpless – so much to do and no way of doing it."

Gus had been 'listening,' something I had long ago given him permission to do. My thoughts were a basic part of me and I wanted him to know me. He usually didn't comment. This time he did. A single word. His tone made it a question.

"Options?"

Clearly, he didn't think I had yet exhausted my own.

I had trouble getting to sleep so I gazed out over the ocean for a long time. I thought about Abby – about kissing her, actually – and wondered how my life would be if everything about her were to be erased from my memory. Would I have to re-learn all the things about life and relationships we had learned together?

I watched a shooting star and wondered where it had come from and if any part of it would make it into the ocean. Before its fiery presence disappeared, it split in two and both parts hurtled toward earth.

I sat up and poked Gus.

"Two becomes four becomes eight," I said.

"Is this really going to be worth giving up sleep for?" he said struggling into a sitting position on the top bunk.

I ignored his question and stood facing him, talking with my hands, as was my style when excited.

"We now have one neighborhood that's inoculated against the drug problem. Next, we get leaders from there, to go and work in two other neighborhoods. To teach them what's been learned in their own area. We know it works. Then, when those two areas are stable, we'll get two sets of leaders from each of them to go work the magic on four new places, then eight, then sixteen and thirty-two on and on right around the World."

"Each one, teach two, I think I once heard you call that," Gus said.

"Really? I said that? Wow. Good for Tommy Powers."

"Would that be, Calibrator Tommy Powers?"

"I'm still not sure, you know. But maybe. Maybe."

"Do we have to begin this right now or can I go back to

sleep for a few hours," Gus joked falling over on his side and burying his head in his pillow.

I reached for my pillow and pummeled him into a fetal position on his bunk. We fell asleep chuckling.

I awoke the next morning to mixed feelings: good ones related to the idea, which I had shared with Gus the night before; bothersome ones related to Antipathy. How did you go about getting rid of an evil force that was indestructible? With the damaged Integrity Path, which he possessed, he had no positive possibilities. He could not be rehabilitated.

What abilities was I up against? He could Mind Read negative – evil – thoughts but not positive – altruistic – ones; that was just the opposite from the Calibrators. He could Near Jump but not Far Jump. He could assume the physical form of others. His star was useless to him and to me since at birth it ceased emitting its signal. He had no conscience. He was brilliant and his ultimate goal was to destroy humanity.

Seemed like just the kind of foe any not yet quite thirteen-year-old boy should be able to take down. Yeah! Right!

I finished my shower and was getting dressed for breakfast when Gus stretched himself awake and joined the living.

"Gus. What kinds of things have been tried to defeat Antipathy? Have any of those who came before him been . . . what, handled, satisfactorily?"

"We mostly mop up after Antipathy has made a sweep through an area. He gets bored quickly – that's usually good because he seldom follows a plan though to the end. As far as actual attempts to neutralize him in some way I suppose there really haven't been any. The being is indestructible and with no positive end on his Integrity Path, there is no option to move him into that kind of thinking."

"I see. Yes. I've considered that."

"You have a plan?" he asked frowning, making me wonder if he thought I shouldn't have.

"I'm looking into it. Can I request that you stay clear of that area of my thoughts until I have something concrete to present to you?"

"Certainly. You have your right to privacy. Would it do

me any good to caution you against going off half cocked to handle him yourself?"

I shrugged, not wanting to open it up for discussion. It garnered a 'look' but no further comment. I understood his admonition.

It was my morning to meet with Facil and review with him my studies. It went well, I thought. I missed the kids at school. Heck, I missed school! I never thought I'd say that! The teachers lacked creativity and many of the kids had trouble getting past superficial things like clothes and possessions and family status, but, still, I missed them. I received permission to sit in on some of Abby's classes there at the Hall, just to be with kids. I volunteered to help in her brother's science lab. I liked that. I thought I would make a good teacher – still one of my options though time was running out for me to make that humongous decision. There were exactly three weeks left.

Gus was leaving on Sage business so I would be flying solo for a while – his time-line seemed indefinite. He had great confidence in me and my ability to use my powers. I considered that a great compliment. I respected him in every way. It would be lonely in my room while he was gone. Maybe one of the other boys would hang out with me.

After lunch, I flew down to Dock Six to snoop around and find out how the drug operation worked. I wanted to determine how much it depended on Antipathy's actual presence in its day to day operation. I had no idea how he would appear so I began seeping positive options waiting for the telltale mental bounce. Eventually it happened. Gus was right; it was not a fully pleasant sensation. He had taken the form of one of the workers, barrel chested, unshaven and strong. They called him Andy – apparently, a common alias.

They were unloading a smaller private yacht. There were dozens of boxes each about one foot square. Antipathy marked each one with a large, self-inking, stamp. Invisible, I moved in close. The stamp was an address – Pathway Imports at 15001 89th Street. A truck backed close and the boxes were loaded. The boat and truck pulled away at the same time.

Dock Six was small and sat between two huge wharfs –

Five and Seven (which probably makes sense!). No huge crates of shipping containers were unloaded there. Only a few small boats came in and out each hour. Interestingly, nothing ever seemed to be shipped out from Dock six. Everything was incoming.

Some deliveries got stamped while others didn't. Antipathy was clearly in charge of each and every box. There were no more than a half dozen other dock workers and no one wearing a badge of the security or inspection departments. By three o'clock I figured a total of six hundred cubic feet of merchandise had been hand stamped, loaded and dispatched by truck to the 89th street address. Next stop 15001.

I arrived well before that last truck managed its way through traffic. Without Gus's Far Jumping skills I couldn't Jump through the wall so had to wait until a door was opened and then enter invisibly. Inside I quickly saw how it worked. The drugs were transferred from their original boxes into others with a variety of printed labels; canned vegetable boxes, paper towel boxes, soap boxes, and so on. Delivery vans – no two alike – moved them out almost immediately. I assumed they were delivered to a number of different holding places awaiting street distribution. If one spot were detected, the others would remain safe. It was a well-planned and orchestrated operation; I'd give him that.

From what I could tell, Antipathy was specializing in pot, cocaine, and chemicals for the local manufacture of a variety of other potent and potentially deadly street offerings. It angered me that all of that poison was right there in the room with me and there was nothing I could do to destroy it. Or was there?

The boxes awaiting the next van were stacked three high on the cement floor in the center of the huge room. I retrieved a lighter from the pocket of one the workman – there were only two in the building. I made my way to the side of the stack that was away from them and lit each of the cardboard boxes there – twelve in all. They should catch the entire stack and burn out safely on the cement floor of the block and brick building.

The boxes with the marijuana were immediately ablaze.

The others smoldered but didn't really burn. I was convinced it had been ruined, however, since the plastic bags the powder was in had ruptured under the heat. After the fire died down, I flew with the lighter to a sprinkler head near the ceiling. It had not apparently received enough heat to be triggered. I held the flame close. The water soon drenched the powder, spreading it across the floor.

To make the lighter work, I had to make myself visible for a lingering moment. One of the workmen saw me heating a second sprinkler head. He pulled a gun. I made myself invisible and, not acting in the smartest manner, remained there motionless. A shot rang out. My lower abdomen was suddenly afire with searing, hot, agonizing, pain. I had been shot!

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

### **The Trap is Set**

Remaining invisible, I jumped to a spot near the door, figuring I would just open it myself and leave, that time being smart enough to move aside rapidly so as to not take another bullet.

Once outside I jumped to a secluded spot behind a dumpster in the alley and began examining my invisible self. It was an odd sensation as I pulled up my shirt and touched the point of entry in my flesh. The pain was gone. I could see the slug there, deep inside me. For some reason, it had not become invisible when it touched me. I had no idea why. Perhaps it had to remain in contact with my skin. I pressed on my abdomen and my hand sunk into my body as if it had no more substance than fog or smoke. I slipped it in further and took hold of the tiny piece of lead and pulled it out. I was less interested in it than I was in determining if I was bleeding to death.

I put the slug in my pants pocket and returned my attention to my body. Before my eyes the jagged wound closed itself. Five minutes later I was whole again. There would be no scar on the outside and apparently, no damage on the inside.

I had always healed rapidly. A cut would be healed in a day or two for me where it took weeks for others in my family, but I had never experienced anything like that. Perhaps it, like my other abilities, developed more and more rapidly as I approached my 13th birth moment. Why had Gus not told me about the exceptional healing ability my body possessed?

Maybe because he thought I was already aware of it. More likely, so I wouldn't be tempted to go off halfcocked – the way I just did – and take risks – the way I just did – and get hurt – the way I just did.

I needed to think. My best thinking place had always been the roof that jugged out over the entrance to the boat shop, just below the big window in my loft. I saw no reason that I could not return there, invisibly, for just an hour or so. I Near Jumped to the top of the tallest building in the area and then flew to the spot, immediately taking a seat up against the front of the building. I resisted the urge to peek inside and see what was going on with my family. One of the interesting side effects of being invisible was that I was never too cold or too hot. I removed my coat, folded it up and, sat on it. That kept it invisible and provided a soft cushion for my behind.

I looked out over the ocean and felt comforted by the familiar sights and sounds. I took a deep breath and felt content as the aromas of ocean and piers mingled to please my nostrils.

Visions from the past flashed in my head. I could see myself with several friends swimming off the little pier to my right. It brought back happy memories of another time – another Tommy, actually. Boys were great. Girls were yuck. Life had been simple back then.

It was the problem of Antipathy that was pounding relentlessly at the forefront of my mind. For a split second back there in the Alley a solution had pressed toward the surface but was overwhelmed by the revelation of my power to heal myself. What had it been? What had fostered it?

The sight of the bullet sitting there inside me! Initially I wondered if it would just sit there forever, encapsulated by my flesh. Encapsulation! Yes. Finding a way to place Antipathy inside some place from which he could never escape. The cork in the bottle I had previously mentioned in passing to Gus!

One of the Pillars stated that when a person was unwilling or unable to live in peace with the rest of us he was required to give up that freedom to live among us. It seemed a superior solution to the ones the Calibrators had been using – following him around and cleaning up after him. But what

kind of a place?

A place in which he could live comfortably – in his case it was not his doing that he could not relate in positive ways to the rest of humanity. I had read studies that demonstrated many habitual criminals have a similar fate caused by brain damage or chemical imbalances. What sort of place could hold Antipathy? He was a Near Jumper and had no power to travel through matter. Why not just lock him away, then? Because he could continue to seep minds, if only in negative ways. Still, he could in that way both obtain help to escape and continue wreaking havoc on the world with malevolent mind seeps. It was my understanding that mind seeping was not effected by material barricades.

It caused me to remember a time at the second pool party when I was attempting to seep a message to Gus while he was underwater. He had not received it. I figured I had done something wrong or perhaps had tried an in-going at the same moment he was attempting an out-going, but had really never got back to asking about it. Perhaps Mind Seeps did not travel through water. How could I determine that? The boys swimming in my reverie! That's it!

I donned my coat and soared back to the pond behind the cabin – the pond that stayed warm the year 'round. I needed an assistant and Gus was gone. I would not be able to reveal the true reason for my experiment to anyone else. Jesse! He owed me one – well, he would have, had I kept track of such things, which I didn't. I flew up to the Hall and was soon at his door. Abby answered, happy to see me and ready with a simple and uncomplicated, 'hi, how are you' kiss.

"Looking for your brother, actually. Is he here?"

"In his room, and I'm glad to see you, too," she said apparently, a bit miffed at the lack of attention I showed her.

I pulled her close and kissed her in a more meaningful way. It was more for her than me. Kissing should be for both and I wasn't very happy about having done it that way.

"Yuck!" came the predictable reaction from Jesse.

"Hey, don't yuck me pal. I came to play."

"Really? With me?"

"Truthfully, no. I need your help but it will be sort of like play. It involves the pond and swimming underwater."

“That’s cool. Now?”

“If it’s okay with your mom.”

Jesse left to get permission.

He was immediately back with his mother in tow.

“She says yes. What next?”

“Swimsuit, if you’re modest. It’s pretty chilly outside today so put on some warm clothes.”

He was back and ready to go in five minutes. In the meantime, I chatted with Abby and her mother.

“We should be about an hour,” I said.

His mother nodded at me and planted a big kiss on Jesse’s cheek. He returned it with a long-held hug. Abby received the obligatory, brotherly, peck toward her cheek – almost actually landing, that time. The door was closed and we were in the hall.

“So, are you suit or skin?” I asked.

“Suit, I guess. Never swam the other way.”

“We’ll need to stop by my room to get mine, then.”

Jesse chattered the whole way. He had a thousand questions and ten thousand answers. He reminded me of myself at his age.

In the area adjacent to the pool, it was perpetual summer.

“Let’s just swim a while, first,” I suggested. “Then I have an experiment I want you to help me with.”

Jesse was always agreeable with any suggestion I made. We had a good time horsing around together. A bit later I got down to business.

“This is sort of like a mind reading game. While you’re under water I’m going to be thinking of four letters of the alphabet. When you think you might know what they are, come up and we’ll check it out.”

“Can I come up even if I don’t think I know – for a breath, I mean.”

“Of course.”

“This is part of your Tyro stuff, I’ll bet,” he said, knowingly.

“Your right. That’s just what it is. Always practicing stuff you know and you’ve been about my best helper.”

He smiled and nodded.

“Let’s try one here face to fact before you submerge,” I suggested.

Again, he nodded. I thought, ‘T K Q Z’.

“I’m getting’ TKQZ. How’s that?”

“As perfect as it could possibly be. Ready to go under?”

“Sure. How far under?”

“Interesting question. Let’s do the first one with you clear down at the bottom out in the middle.”

He swam to middle and was soon pulling his behind out of sight, headed for the bottom.

“P C Y M.”

He remained under for a long time. I repeated the letters several times. He surfaced. I got nothin’. Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. This is science. We just do our best to find out the facts, not try to make them fit some preconceived idea. Let’s try it again with you swimming back to shore down about three feet.

He obliged and was soon submerged heading my way.

“G L J K.”

He surfaced smiling. “FISH.”

“Afraid not,” I said.

“No. I mean I was just swimming with a dozen big fish in here. It was great.”

“You received no letters then?”

“Nope.”

“This time just duck your head in so the top of it’s only a few inches under water.”

“Q W E R.”

“He sputtered to the surface almost immediately.

“QWER.”

“Fantastic!” I said.

“I thought you said anyhow it came out was okay.”

“You got me there. I must admit I was hoping for a certain result. Now it’s your turn to stay out of the water and mine to get in. I’ll try to send you letters from underneath the surface.”

I ducked my head and thought, “CVBN.”

I stood up.

“CVBN?”

“Okay. Now from the bottom.”

I flew to the bottom – just like in the air but under water. I motored along at a fantastic speed without flapping a foot or moving an arm. Could I do well on the swim team, or what?

“P O I U.”

I surfaced, really wanting to shoot on up into the air like a missile from a submarine but there would be time for that away from eyes that should not see such things.

“I got nothin’ again.”

I repeated the procedure a dozen times from a dozen depths and distances. Mind seeping clearly did not penetrate more than a foot of water. I wondered if the salt in ocean water would change that?

“Jesse, you trust me, right?”

“Of course, I do. You’re like my big brother, Tommy.”

“You know that Tyro stuff you mentioned, well, I’m about to do some of it with you. I promise it won’t hurt you in any way.”

“So, do it!”

By the time he said that, it was actually all over and we were back at the pond. Combining a Time-X of five minutes and Mind Clouding, I had flown him with me to the ocean shore. We had repeated the experiment there, Jesse on shore wrapped in my big coat, and me in the skin-bluing, flesh numbing, cold of the Atlantic. I thought I would freeze my ears off before it was over but I had to know and I had to remain visible to obtain accurate results. The verdict was no difference between fresh and sea water.

“Why you shivering?” Jesse asked, puzzled.

“Guess I got a chill. I think we better put anything else off for another time. If you want to swim some more go ahead. I’m going to get back into my clothes.”

He swam and kept up a constant stream of chatter for the next half hour. I assumed that while under water he conversed with the FISH. It was a good time – seeing him so happy and knowing he trusted me so fully. Trust was a double-edged sword. On the one side, it was a wonderful compliment to have somebody trust you. On the other, however, was the tremendous responsibility of never betraying that trust or letting the other person down.

It was finally time to leave. He climbed out and dried off. He sniffed my coat.

“Smells like the ocean – your coat.”

“It’s a seaman’s jacket – second hand – probably lived at sea for many years before it came into my possession.”

He nodded. I left him in the hall outside his door, needing to work on my plan more than I needed to kiss Abby. That was an interesting and unlikely revelation – duty before romance. It was almost more mature than I wanted to be.

Part of me wanted to stay the little boy and only have to deal with the minimal responsibilities of the little boy. That, of course would severely limit my possibilities. Part of me wanted to be a full grown, full-fledged, fully respected adult capable of handling any responsibility that could possibly be hurled in my direction. The ‘me’ that was there that day understood I was part child and part adult – part boy and part man. Most of the child and boy would soon be left behind. (And the two were different.) Becoming a full-fledged adult and man would be a grand adventure – not always easy, not always pleasing, but rewarding beyond belief and absolutely necessary to help move mankind along toward better things – and I was fully committed to that.

I could do that as a regular person living out a regular life. The scope of my accomplishments would be limited by my mortal capacities, but it could be a good, rewarding, and helpful life. I could do that as a Calibrator living on for who knew how long, able to perform unbelievable feats and serving a thousand – perhaps a million – times more people. Was it selfish to want to remain Tommy Powers, regular guy? Was it selfish to want to become Tommy Powers, Calibrator – and eventually, Sage of all Calibrators?

Once committed in either direction it was a lifelong commitment. I smiled to myself as I took a seat in Gus’s big chair and began shedding my clothes. The biggest decisions many thirteen-year-old guys had to face was whether or not to pop the zit sitting there like Mt. Etna on his nose.

Back to Antipathy. My plan was simple – I thought. Lure him into a watertight, securely locked, room that automatically provided for all his basic needs; then submerge it securely to the bottom of the ocean forever. He didn’t need

or want human companionship – he loathed people. He needed food, air, and little else.

I had not been told that I needed permission to do such a thing. In fact, Gus had said each Calibrator was his own boss. I would go forward with my plan.

Over the next several days I scouted the area for a suitable container. After extensive investigation, I located a deserted, thirty by thirty by ten-foot cement bunker left over from some abandoned military operation. Originally, it had been built as a temporary shelter for the President in case of nuclear attack. He and his family would have been flown to the area, driven to the site, enter, and been sealed inside. The bunker would then have been slid down a ramp into five hundred feet of water where he would stay until the emergency passed. Inside was a devise that separated oxygen and hydrogen from water, making the oxygen available for breathing and the hydrogen for heat and energy. A desalination devise provided fresh water. The state of the art communication center would need to be removed. There was a supply of canned and dried food sufficient to sustain five people for a full year. I figured by then I would have devised a way to replenish it.

Two quandaries remained. Should I discuss it with Gus or go it alone? Second, how could I lure the brilliant and ever cautious Antipathy into the trap? He was more experienced in these kinds of endeavors than I by hundreds of years. I would begin working on the second quandary first.

What was his weakness? What did he want to possess more than anything? What was his overriding goal in life?

That third one was the easiest to answer. His goal was the destruction of mankind. What would he see as being something that would help that along? He seemed to believe drugs were one, if not the most, effective means to tear human society apart. What if . . . what if a new drug were to come on the scene that caused lifetime addiction with the first sniff, and suppressed the human emotions of love and compassion? Would Antipathy not feel he had to have it? Would he not do whatever it took to obtain it – to corner the market?

I was on the right path. I could feel it. I would put the

word out on the street. I would enlist the help of the kids in and just out of rehab. I would seep the story into the paper and onto the news wires and internet.

News from Gus was that things were near the boiling point in the Baltic States and his presence was required a while longer. He reminded me that March 9th was less than two weeks away. Regardless of the state of things elsewhere, he would return to be with me that morning. That made me feel very important. It sent a warm and secure feeling through me.

When I was still a little boy Mario had showed me the method he used for making big decisions. He placed coins on the top of his dresser. Each coin represented something that needed to be considered in resolving whatever it was. Coins that laid heads up were all in favor of the change. Coins that were tails up were against it. Every morning for a week he redid the coins as he recited the pros and cons. From day to day, as more or better information was collected, the number of face ups and tails ups would change. Then on some day he designated ahead of time as 'Decision Day' he'd examine the coins and make the change if there were more heads or not make the change if there were more tails.

I had tried it a few times myself. It had many merits most of which I won't go into here. I decided to use it as part of my guide in making the biggest decision facing me – whether or not to go ahead and become a Calibrator. The next day was March first. There would be nine mornings left between then and the 9th. I secured a cup of pennies and placed it on my dresser. Each morning I would review the pros and cons as I saw them at that moment. I designated the morning of March 8th as my Decision Day.

During the following days, I enlisted the help of many of my new acquaintances. I told them the story that needed to be put out on the street. They were willing to trust me about the unspoken reason. We devised some horrific tales about how the new drug affected people. I named it Antipadem – Antipathy's demise! (downfall)

I followed Antipathy for several days as he became more and more interested in the new drug. He began making inquiries but no one had any solid information for him. He

visited contacts in other cities – also to no avail, of course.

Marcus made the first contact for me. He took a handwritten note to the dock and handed it to ‘Andy’.

“My guy said you’d tip big if I delivered this to ya,” Marcus said.

It was our attempt to make Antipathy think it was a routine communication. He forked over a twenty – not big but enough to feed Marcus’s family for a day.

The note said I – a guy referred to only as Tom – heard he had been asking about a certain new drug and indicated I had full control of its distribution. I would be willing to discuss terms with him if he could meet certain quotas every week. I tried to make it sound as legitimate as possible. The note ended by indicating I would be in contact again.

The next day Marcus again delivered a note. I was concerned for his safety that day so stayed by his side – invisibly – carrying a four-foot-long 2 X 4 in case Andy tried to pull something. He didn’t but the tip was larger, by five times.

The note suggested a meeting – at the bunker, which I had already prepared. I had but one worry – well two. One was how to get him inside and me back out to lock and seal the door before he understood what was taking place. He could read peoples negative thoughts so I practiced making it all a positive undertaking in my head – To free the world of Antipathy. It would take the most extreme amount of concentration I had ever been called upon to exert.

The second aspect was whether or not the ramp – two cast iron rails, actually, would still work. There were two iron rods each three inches in diameter that held the bunker in place at the top of the ramp. Each one merely had to be pounded down through the hole in its rail so it dropped to the ground and freed the bunker. There had been no recent dry run so I had to depend on the precise planning of the design engineers from decades before. The ramp itself was still in good shape. I had removed underbrush that might hamper its descent and I had ‘flown’ along its path all the way to floor of the ocean. What a superior body I must have developed to withstand all that pressure! Perhaps it was something about Invisibility that made it possible. It was one more question I needed to ask Gus.

Finally, it was the morning of March 8th. The question had been, 'Shall I become confirmed as a Calibrator.' Heads said yes. Tails said no. That morning I counted fifteen Tails and Nine heads. The capture of Antipathy would be my final act as a Calibrator. If it worked, the world would be safer. If it failed, there would be no dishonor on the Calibrators – I'd not be one of them.

I entered the bunker at eight o'clock. The meeting was set for eight thirty. I figured he was watching so I wore a trench coat and wide brimmed hat to help conceal the fact I was a kid. My plan was to turn on one battery operated light at the far end of the main bunker room – the one he'd enter first. It would allow him to see me down there sitting in a large, upholstered, chair. I would beckon him toward me, asking, "Andy?"

I would stand and offer him my hand, as much to show I was not armed as to invite him closer. When he either reached for my hand or got within a few feet, I would become invisible, Near Jump through the open door, closing and securing it. I'd then move to the front of the bunker and pound out the rods that held it in place. Provided the engineers had done their work right fifty years before, and if Mother Nature had not degraded the ramp too much, the bunker should slide down the rails, sink to the bottom and settle there for eternity.

I saw his silhouette as he stood in the door with the light of day at his back. It was then I had a most terrible thought. The Sage had said that at the instant of my thirteenth birth moment the power of my skills would increase one hundred-fold over what they were now. If that had also happened for Antipathy, would his Mind Seeping skill actually be powerful enough to penetrate the bunker and the five hundred feet of sea water? It was too late to turn back.

He took several steps into the room then stopped and looked around. There in the semidarkness, it looked to be a comfortable reception room or den. He took several more steps in my direction.

"Andy?" I asked in the deepest voice I could muster. I remained seated.

"Tom?" he asked referring to the way I signed the notes.

I chose not to answer but instead stood and faced him, slowly extending my hand.

He moved toward me. He reached out for my hand. Our eyes met. In that instant, we recognized each other. I followed my plan without hesitation. The moment I disappeared he turned and ran toward the door. I closed it. He pressed it open an inch or so. I exerted every ounce of strength my legs and back could muster. It closed. I clicked the main lock and then attended to the six auxiliary locks. Antipathy was sealed inside!

I ran to the front and picked up the sledge hammer I had sequestered there. It was heavier than I remembered. That could not stop me. I lifted it high and hit the rod. I struck it again and again and again. The first rod slipped through the hole in the rail and fell to the ground below. I repeated the process on the other rail. My arms ached and my back screamed out in pain. Finally, that rod slipped through the hole and onto the ground.

The Bunker did not budge. The plan was so close to being successful. I felt a tremendous force within the building. It was rage; it was anger; it was all the evil emotions combined as one. I had to move that bunker and I had to move it then!

There is one chance, I thought to myself. I returned to a state of invisibility and flew to a great height – many times higher than I had ever been. The air was thin and I gasped for breath. I would dive at the rear of the bunker, building up tremendous speed and power, becoming visible only at the last possible second, hoping the impact of my physical body would provide enough force to jar the bunker loose and send it on its way into the ocean. I understood that I would be crushed and splattered to the wind in the process. It had to be done. The World had to be saved. I began my descent. Faster and faster I sped. I had the target in sight. I was exactly on course. It began looming larger and larger. The moment of impact was there. I materialized just in time and my world went black.

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

### **The Decision of All Decisions**

The first thing I saw as I struggled back into consciousness was the cloudless, blue sky above, framed in the cold, black, limbs of winter's trees. I understood very little, other than that I was on my back, on the ground, looking up. Whether it was earthly ground or heavenly ground I could not immediately determine. I ached from end to end, front to back, side to side. It must be earthly!

The second thing I saw was a raspberry twister floating just out of reach above me.

The third thing I saw was a smiling Gus, materializing beside me, holding the twister, saying: "It's yours if you will promise never, ever again to try such a stupid, such a dimwitted, such a totally magnificent mission all by yourself!"

He pointed with the twister downhill to my left. I looked. The bunker was gone. Tears filled my eyes. Gus helped me into a sitting position against a tree. My bones screamed and my head pounded.

"My reward for saving the world is one measly, raspberry twister?" I said looking up at him and playfully putting on a sober face.

"No. You get no reward for saving the world. You're a Calibrator. It's what we do. You get the twister for promising to use more restraint in the future."

"You know as well as I that I can't honestly make such a promise. I'm Tommy Powers and that's pretty much that."

Gus grinned his boyish grin and took a seat beside me. He tore the twister in half, hanging one piece out of the side of

his own mouth.

“Okay. How about half just for being my friend?”

“Sorry, Pal, but my friendship isn’t for sale.”

“Then how about accepting this as a token of deepest affection from one friend to another?”

“That I can do! I assume you know what happened here. The last thing I remember was me about to splatter against the Bunker like an insect against a windshield.”

“A few of the guys and I have been monitoring your activities over the past several hours. When I realized what you were up to, we managed to get the bunker started on its way just in time to cushion your landing with our own ancient, and now, really, r e a l l y, aching, old, bodies.”

“Anybody broken?”

He laughed though it had been a serious question on my part.

“Everybody seems to be in one piece. They would like to shake your hand when you feel up to it.”

I struggled to my feet and they used that as their cue to materialize. There were seven of them – three in blue and four in crimson. In turn they stepped forward and shook my hand, each saying some kind word. It’s hard to remember because in my mind I was struggling with how I was going to break the word to Gus and the Sage about my big decision.

I do remember one of them saying something about how I almost ruined the Calibrator’s perfect survival record when on missions. Apparently, they had concluded that during those final few seconds I was, indeed, hurtling toward oblivion. I had to admit I was glad to be alive although I would have gladly given my life so the World could be rid of Antipathy.

They left the two of us alone. Gus put his arm around me and spoke.

“Are you ready for The Moment, in the morning?”

“About that,” I began, “. . .”

He put his finger over my lips effectively stopping me in mid-sentence.

“There is the ceremony and you must participate. At the outset, the Sage will ask the question, ‘Do you, Tommy Powers, give your consent for this Ceremony of Confirmation

to continue?’ That will be the moment for your response.”

“But I’m sure you know my heart.”

“Do you?” he asked. “Do you?”

There he went again with a question in place of an answer. I remained silent as we Far Jumped back to our room. My little escapade had left me filthy so I showered and then dressed for dinner. I had no appetite but I wanted to see Abby one last time and take our walk one last time and hold her close and kiss her one last time. I assumed that I would be erased from these folk’s memories just as they would be erased from mine.

After dinner, after our walk, after our kiss, I flew into the city just to spend a few minutes watching my new friends. There was Marcus refereeing a basketball game on the new blacktop court for the younger kids in the neighborhood. Jerry was in his room doing homework. He had a teddy bear beside the pillow on his bed. Who’d a thought? Ted was in his basement working out with weights. Kate and Tasha were sitting on the patio at the mansion, talking. They laughed and giggled. It was all just how it should be.

They would all be there, of course, after I left Calibration Hall. They probably would not remember me but at least I might have the chance to work my way back into their lives. I’d have to think on that.

I left a final Mind Speak for Mr. Hanson. It was short and to the point: “I’m very proud of you. Love, Tommy.” Who knew, that too might be erased by this time tomorrow.

I had a bagel and lingered over the kiss I planted on Amy’s cheek. I figured she would also be there, later, but knew she would not remember me. I thanked her for being my friend.

Then I cloaked myself in invisibility and flew high above the city. It was a magnificent feeling; one I knew I would not remember but one I clung to for as long as I dared.

It was close to midnight when I returned to my room. Gus was waiting up – well past his bedtime.

“Want to talk?” he asked quietly, not really prying.

“It’s all been said.”

It was the only honest response I had.

I hugged him long and shed some tears then went right

to bed. At least the view of the sea was mine to keep – I had brought it with me.

\* \* \*

I awoke at six – the last time my star would perform that service for me. I patted it as if to say, ‘Thank you and goodbye’. Gus was gone. I figured he would be. I put on my greens and looked myself over in the mirror. I did look good in that outfit.

I moved closer. What was that? My first real live zit on the right side of my nose. I chuckled out loud. How wonderfully appropriate, I thought!

I had not been told where to report for the ceremony but was sure I’d get zapped to wherever it was in plenty of time. That happened at exactly 6:50 just four minutes before my moment of birth.

I materialized in the huge, elegant, room where I had first met the Sage. The marble columns that encircled the room were bigger than I remembered and the walls glistened with a sparkle I was sure had not been present before. Even so, it was still stark and barren looking to my way of thinking. It appeared that all the Calibrators were there looking like uniformed, opposing troops from armies of thirteen year olds – blue vs crimson. Gus was by my side. He spoke to me.

“Is there anyone else you want here with you at this time?”

Earlier I’d thought about having Abby there, but it didn’t seem appropriate considering how things were to go. I fully expected to be zapped from that room directly and unceremoniously back to the loft and assumed it would occur within those next few minutes.

“No, thank you,” I said in response.

The room dimmed. The throne and the area where I stood were bathed in light. The Sage appeared, standing on the top step of the marble risers on which the throne sat. I looked over at Gus. He winked. I nodded still amazed after all these months.

The Sage began to speak.

“Dearest Tommy Powers. We are gathered together prepared to see you through the terrors of your thirteenth birth moment and to confirm you as a Calibrator Practitioner if that

is your desire.

“We have grown to love you, Tommy. Your unaffected, natural bounce and enthusiasm, and your zest for life have brought a fresh and renewed vitality to our brotherhood here at Calibration Hall. You have proved beyond any possible doubt that you possess the skills and characteristics required of the position and that you exercise them with selfless compassion and wisdom.

“We are your friends. We want to become part of your family. Do you, Tommy Powers, give your consent for this Ceremony of Confirmation to continue?”

Well, there it was. One minute to go and he popped the big question. It was what he said just before the question that struck me. ‘We want to become a part of your family.’ YOUR FAMILY. I had been thinking about this all backwards. If I were to stay I wouldn’t be giving up MY family; I would be adding to it. I would still have my Wharfies. I would still have the dock workers. My family at the loft would soon be old and all five of them would become my day to day, lifelong, responsibility. If responsibility was what I had been running away from, I certainly would not be free from that back in my loft.

I thought about Abby. I thought about Gus. It suddenly became clear that not only was it my destiny to change from child to adult, from boy to man, but it was my destiny to embrace my ultimate responsibility and privilege.

I took one step forward and looked the Sage deep in his eyes. I nodded, slowly and deliberately. Later, I was told I smiled.

“I give my consent for this Ceremony of Confirmation to continue.”

Gus sighed the sigh of all sighs and moved to my side. The Sage stepped down to me. They held me in their arms – far more tightly than seemed friendly. Gus whispered to me.

“Just keep telling yourself: It will come to an end and things will be wonderful.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant.

Then suddenly, I was; let me tell you, I WAS !

My head began throbbing. My eyes felt to be double size and pushing out of their sockets. My flesh crawled. My

heart passed two hundred beats a minute and my veins stood out on my wrists and my arms. I could not catch my breath. My insides ached, and growled, and churned. My entire being felt to be on fire. My vision blurred. There came a deafening ringing in my ears that isolated me from the world of sound. My tongue grew large and breathing through my mouth became impossible. I drooled and could not control it. Surely, I was going to die!

What was it Gus had said for me to say? Oh, Yes. "It will end and things will be wonderful. It will end and things will be wonderful. It will end and things will be wonderful."

At that point I felt my body splitting in two from top to bottom and I lost consciousness.

My sleeping mind continued the terrifying journey. The Trolls were there – twenty feet tall with young boy's legs sticking – kicking – out of their mouths. They leaned down and reached out for me. I ran and hid under my bed. A man chased me with a black bag, catching me and putting me inside. Suddenly, I was a baby sliding down the tallest, longest slide ever made. I fell over the side – down, down, toward the ground. I was looking out the window of the loft and from the sea a huge wave came rolling in. It broke the window and washed me away. A cabin sprouted legs and chased me through the darkest woods one could imagine. On the dock, in the twilight, a man and a woman tried to stuff me into a small wooden crate. I wouldn't fit and yet I wanted to more than anything else. Through my telescope, I saw the man in the moon crying, his tears filling the craters until they overflowed.

The water rushed across space to flood the earth.

Then, I stared the water back into space. I burned my way out of the black sack with my eyes. I created a cradle with a soft, silk pillow onto which I alit from the slide. I turned the great wave back upon itself and it stood there a giant wall of water, gradually receding back into the ocean. I opened the Troll's heads and removed a bone. They sat and became docile, playing with my fire truck and blocks. I blew a ferocious wind in the direction of the cabin and it fell apart reassembling itself as the Hall, high atop a tall, steep-sided mountain.

Suddenly I realized I was nauseous and terribly dizzy. Even so it was the most pleasant set of feelings I had experienced in recent minutes. The other things were gone – the unbearable pain, the flashing nightmares. My eyes were closed and I was on my back. The surface below me was soft. My forehead was moist and cool. I reached up to feel it. A wet towel lay there.

I heard applause – faint and distant at first, then growing louder and nearer. Was I relapsing back into my dream state? I heard Gus's reassuring voice.

"Practitioner Powers. Practitioner Powers," he repeated, calmly.

I felt his gentle touch on my cheek. I squinted into the light then gradually opened my eyes. It was applause I was hearing. I was on a mattress covered in blue silk. It had taken the place of the throne on the marble risers. It was Gus's face that I saw first.

"We have to stop meeting like this," I said attempting a humorous reference to the incident at the bunker and tried to manage a smile if only token. "Help me sit up, please."

The Calibrators applause died down and they moved in closer. I was wearing the blue of the Practitioner. I looked around the room. Columns had fallen. The morning sun was streaming in through holes in the ceiling. The walls were charred black in places and scorched in others. Pits, dotted the floor.

"What went on in here?" I asked.

"Early on I indicated to you, I believe," the Sage explained, "that your moment of confirmation was going to be a hum dinger and you sure didn't let us down."

"I did all of this? I'm so sorry. I'll help fix things, you know."

A chuckle rolled through the gathering.

"This is a natural part of the confirmation process, although no one in this room has ever witnessed the magnitude of power you unleashed here today. Your powers are extraordinary just as we knew they would be."

I stood. Gus continued to steady me. I felt sapped, much like I assumed a boxer feels after punching, toe to toe, for fifteen rounds. I whispered an aside to Gus.

“Am I expected to say something?”

“No, my friend. Your performance during the past ninety minutes has done that for you.”

“Ninety minutes?” I looked at my watch. It had been ninety minutes. The others filed out of the room, leaving Gus and me alone.

“So, is this finally the day I return to the loft after my ‘weekend’ visit at your place?”

“This is the day. Let’s get you back into your other clothes.”

We jumped back to our room. I spent more time than seemed sensible admiring my new outfit in the mirror. It was the same style but was light blue silk – just my color!

“I assume it remains here,” I said.

Gus nodded. I began changing.

“What will my schedule be?”

“You’ll have an entire month with the loft branch of your family. Then you’ll come and spend another weekend with me.”

“And I’ll be here how long during THAT weekend visit?”

“Let’s just take one thing at a time, Practitioner Powers.”

“Practitioner Powers,” I repeated listening to the sound. “I must admit both Tyro Tommy and Practitioner Powers are nice nice alliterations.”

Gus nodded.

“It’s time for you to be on your way – nine o’clock Monday morning, remember.”

“You coming?” I asked knowing he wasn’t.

“Not this time. But I will be by to pick you up, after school, on the 9th of April. For our own protection, we all felt it was only sensible NOT to have you around here on April Fools Day.”

“Me. Pull a prank? On Family? Come now!”

It deserved a smile, a chuckle, and a long embrace.

\* \* \*

The docks looked just like the docks I’d always known. The stairs and bright red door at the top looked just like the ones I’d always known. I opened the door. Otto was reading on the couch. Molly was sewing at her desk. Yorka was

playing the violin accompanying Mario who was singing. Tina was holding breakfast until I returned.

I hung up my coat and hat and was greeted with hugs all around. We gathered at the big dining table.

“Breakfast looks wonderful, Tina. Seems almost like a celebration – like I’d been away for six months or something.”

It was Molly who asked.

“Well, tell us; what did you do with your new little friend while you were away?”

“Gee, let’s see, I remodeled the Human Services Department of City Government, hung out with a bunch of addicts, revised the curriculum at a private school, learned how to fly, defeated the worst arch villain the world has ever known, developed a whole series of super powers, became addicted to bagels with cream cheese, and I may have fallen in love.”

Otto responded slowly and deliberately. “Pretty full weekend, I’d say. Please pass the muffins.”

Things were back to normal!