

The logo for IMP (International Movie Productions) is located in the top right corner. It features the letters 'IMP' in a stylized, white, cursive font with a horizontal line extending from the top of the 'I'.

The  
**STARRAP**

Tom Gnagey



An evil genius threatens  
to blow up an innocent child  
to exact his revenge against  
an old rival.

# **The STRAP**

**An adventure sequel to  
The BOX**

**A philosophical romp through human possibilities.**

**By**

**Tom Gnagey**

**Family of Man Press**

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My special thanks to  
Jeremy Hess  
for his always welcome  
thoughtful reactions  
and hard questions,  
and  
for his good natured,  
honestly pointed,  
philosophic sparring.

Written in the hope that  
the readers of these pages  
will be moved to,  
at least momentarily,  
shed the comfortable shawl  
of their certainties  
and allow the genuine  
consideration of possibilities.

- G F H

## CHAPTER ONE

### Summer Plans Cancelled (Again)!

"I need your help, David."

Without question it was the first time the old man had *ever* uttered those opening four words.

"You have me at a disadvantage, Sir," David said intrigued but puzzled at the stranger's unannounced appearance at the top of the stairs to his loft.

He looked to be an excellent specimen for his seventy plus years. His erect carriage, deep tan, and well-managed waistline suggested pride and self discipline. His tan, mostly bald, head sat above a fringe of closely cropped, white, hair – its hue matched in his substantial, bushy, moustache. One got the idea that if he had *not* chosen to be bald the hair would have not dared abandon his head.

He moved from the open door into Dr. Lawrence's expansive though unassuming space above the Blue and White grocery in downtown North Manford, Indiana. Those several steps forward allowed the appearance of two familiar faces that followed him up the final few stairs and into the room. With that, the man's identity appeared to David in a flash although any possible reason for his presence continued to escape him.

"Ari Stephanopoulos, Senior, I assume," David said extending a hand, which was ignored.

"The fifth, if you care to be accurate."

He seemed as straight forward, tactless, and detail obsessed as his son, the now deceased Ari Stephanopoulos who had been David's close friend at Harvard two decades earlier and more recently his mortal adversary.

"Won't you have a seat, please?"

David acknowledged the other two with a nod and smile – sufficiently meaningful and sincere between old friends – as he centered his attention on Ari.

"No time for that. Been sitting in the plane – seems like days rather than hours. My grandson, Ari the seventh, has been kidnapped by someone or some group that apparently feels the need to punish me in this worst of all ways. I do not know who it is. They requested no ransom but require the successful completion of a timed contest of sorts or threaten that young Ari will be killed."

David cocked his head and lowered his brow indicating the need for more information.

"The details are in this envelope."

He motioned over his shoulder.

One of the men handed it around Ari to David.

"My son believed you to be some sort of super human being. In our last conversation before he died he said if I or my grandson ever found ourselves in some grave situation, I should enlist your help. I am here to do that. The material in the

envelope will explain why I believe you are my best avenue for help – my only hope to see my grandson alive again. The situation must not become known to the world."

David's forehead wrinkled. It frequently accompanied deep thought on his part and had not been offered as the precursor to a refusal.

"Your fee will be whatever you request – whether you are successful or not. All the expenses, of course, are on me. You recognize Alex and Connie, here. I have convinced them to assist you like I understand they did last summer on some clandestine mission for my son. Again, your nephew will assist you."

"That will have to be up to him, Sir. He arrives back here for the summer from Harvard this afternoon. I cannot speak for him."

"He will help. Upon his acceptance of the assignment, there will be twenty five million dollars deposited into the fund he established to feed and care for homeless children in South America. Upon completion – successful or not – another seventy five million will be made available. He'll help. I've studied the two of you. You will *both* help. You will both risk your very existence. And, in the end, neither of you will accept anything for yourselves."

"Your approach is interesting – joining up with the kidnappers as you have."

"What do you mean?"

He had been taken aback and made no attempt to hide it.

"If Kit and I don't accept the assignment not only your grandson dies but, as you have now reconfigured the situation, so do thousands and thousands of innocent children who you have the power to save. It is you, Sir, who is requiring a ransom and that ransom is our service."

"That is not my view of the situation. You will think what you will, of course. You have fifteen days beginning tomorrow, June first."

"One thing is certain, Mr. Stephanopoulos."

"And what is that?"

"I have now been extorted by the best."

The old man paused for only a moment and then proceeded as if discounting David's characterization of the exchange.

"These two men know how to contact me and will keep me abreast of your movements on a daily basis. Not as spies, you understand, but I've relegated that duty to them in order to free you for the more important endeavor. They will now fly me back to my plane in Indianapolis and then return to work out details with you. It's 10:11 a.m. now. They should be back here by two."

He turned his head, addressing Alex.

"Give David the phones."

Alex handed over a small, felt bag containing four cell phones which would prove to be updated versions of the ones Ari had provided the summer before.

"Call me anytime. Pound Key then One. It is my fully egotistical way of referring to myself as number one man in the world."

"And here I thought your son had held that title."

"Sadly, there can no longer be a contest for it."

David nodded, acknowledging and sharing the old man's sorrow while not meaning it to condone the excessive Stephanopoulos combative spirit. With no move to shake hands – historically a means of affirming equality – Ari tuned and left. Neither of the other men spoke. There would be time for talking later.

David took a seat on his comfortable though thread bare couch and called his sister-in-law, the mother of his nephew, Kit.

"When is Kit due in?"

"My husband is picking him up at eleven down in Wabash. Should be here by noon. I have a feast awaiting him. Please come over and join us. Bring your wife, of course."

"I'll have to beg off, this time. 'Got stuff,' as Kit would say. Have him give me a ring as soon as he has a chance."

"A ring? If he's true to his old form he'll be up your stairs with a napkin still hanging from his belt and dessert in his hand."

"In that case, have him bring me some, too. Molly's enjoying her mother's company in Colorado this week and next."

David's upbeat conversation in no way reflected the feeling of trepidation that was rapidly gnawing its way deep into his being.

With a full-bodied sigh, he opened the large, brown, envelope and began examining the several sheets it carried.

On top were two photographs of a boy – front and back. He was a handsome lad with long black, wavy hair, and a slightly turned up nose. He was wearing nothing but a harness. It consisted of two sets of straps centering on a wide belt at his waist. One set crisscrossed his chest to his shoulders and continued in a similar fashion down to the belt in back. The other set descended from the belt, through his groin and back to the belt in back.

In front, on each side of the buckle, was a small, flat, object the size and shape of a snuff can. The harness did not seem to be attached to any sort of leash or rope. Clearly it had some purpose other than restraining the lad's freedom.

To his left in the front view he held a newspaper dated May 28th. It was an old fashioned dating ploy which held only modest validity in the day and age of graphic magic. Still, it lent credence to the 'situation' as Ari had referred to it.

If David's memory was serving him well, Ari VII was eleven years old. He lived with his mother somewhere in Greece. His father had described her as a good woman who was raising the boy to be one of the good guys in the world. They had not married.

Somewhat ironically, one of the boy's father's final wishes was for David to meet his son. It now seemed imperative that that take place.

The essence of the unusual ransom note was this: Between June first and fifteenth a team of no more than four, was to discover and follow a trail of clues that would lead them to the boy. If he wasn't discovered within that time he would be killed. It hinted that some additional stipulation might be presented at the time he was located. The team

was to be presented with no artificial obstacles at any point on its way to find him.

An interesting twist had been established. It revolved around the harness – the strap. The small round containers were said to hold plastic explosive – enough to blow a mansion into unrecognizable splinters. It could be detonated in two ways – by remote control at the pleasure of the kidnappers and by having any of the wires, which were threaded through the straps of the harness, cut or short circuited. The construction of the harness clearly would not allow it to be removed from the boy's body without severing several of the straps and therein the wires.

There were also several credit cards and a small envelope included in the material. It was marked First Clue, and was sealed. David set it aside.

The summer before there had been a small, initial, time cushion in which he and Kit had begun deciphering the clues on *The Box*; this time it appeared they would have no such luxury. The clues would have to be dealt with as they were discovered.

The conditions of the ransom note and Ari the fifth's conditions of engaging David and Kit were detailed on separate sheets. David put them, the envelope containing the first clue, and the pictures of the boy on the coffee table for easy access once Kit arrived.

He phoned his wife.

"Molly. Having fun yet?"

"Yes, actually. We're going through boxes of family pictures and filing them by person and age."

"Must be a challenge when you come to those group photos taken at reunions."

"AND, we have a *group* category," she said. "How are you doing – back to being a bachelor again?"

"Oh, really bored during that first half hour after crawling into bed at night. Other than that I'm fine, but . . ." his voice trailed off not having prepared a good cover story.

Molly picked up on his dilemma.

"If we ever renew our wedding vows I'm going to add, 'until death *or but's* do we part'."

David smiled and chuckled.

Molly asked:

"What is it this time? Pago Pago? Timbuktu? The Blue Amazon?"

"A lot like last summer, actually. The up side is that Kit and I should be back about the same time you get home from out there."

"Will it be dangerous? Tell me 'no' whether it will be or not."

"Dangerous? Me, the nerdy philosophy professor from tiny little Manford College, get involved in something dangerous?"

"That was *no* answer, you know. Thank you. Just make sure you've stopped his bleeding before you bring Kit back *this* time."

"I will do my best. Don't worry. It's all hush-hush but pretty straight forward. I love you more than life itself, you know."

"I know. Be careful. I love you. Give Kit a big, juicy, kiss for me."

David put the phone down. He was torn between opening the envelope containing the first clue and beginning to pack. It was no contest.

He rolled a pen along the inside of the gummed flap of the ivory envelope and blew it open. It contained a single card on which was hand printed a set of numbers and words.

43/44 7/25  
Aria 485  
Mane door  
Fleur de lis 10 → R  
Refuse butt bin

He set it aside and began packing as he contemplated the cryptic message.

\* \* \* \* \*

At 12:32 the familiar, though long silent, rush of young feet mounting the stairs, interrupted the tranquility of the loft.

There was no napkin draped from the boy's belt as predicted but there was dessert in a small brown paper bag held high so as to necessitate no needless conversation about it.

"Hey, Uncle David!"

"Hey, *Nephew* Kit!"

They moved close, each offering a full-out hug to the other. David held it long enough to administer the juicy kiss he had promised Molly he would deliver.

"What was that?"

"From Molly. She's away for a few days. Thought I better deliver it immediately not knowing if the new Harvard man would be into receiving such things anymore."

"I thought we settled that last summer while bobbing around in the Pacific Ocean off Brazil. I'll always be into hugs and kisses from you."

"Glad to know the east coast hasn't infected you with its too often disingenuous sophistication."

"Not a chance. I carry your inoculation against all things insincere."

"That pleases me."

"Me, too. So, what's new?"

"You have ten seconds in which to retract that question."

"What? Never? You have me hooked – of course you knew that. Why do I suddenly believe my summer plans are about to change?"

"You got all that from those ten words?"

"Actually, I got it from the strangely sober face that met me just now but I figured I'd humor you until you were ready to give. So, give!"

"This will seem surrealistic – *deja vu*-ish – implausible, even."

"Suspense, Unc. I don't do well with suspense."

"It's Ari's son. He has been kidnapped and his grandfather – my Ari's father –

came here asking for our help."

"Somebody seeking a huge ransom from the old ship building billionaire?"

"Actually no. Read the ivory sheets there on the coffee table."

Two minutes passed.

"So. The old man is in effect blackmailing us into helping him. He must not know much about us to think he'd have to do that. Of course we'll help him. The added extra for the kids will be fantastic. I would have respected him more if he'd have just sprung that part on us after the fact instead of making it a condition for our assistance."

"Essentially that's what I told him. I'm sorry to invade your summer again."

"Last summer was without a doubt the most fantastic summer I've ever had. Make this one turn out the same and I'll be double blessed."

"Blessed?"

"A generic idiom."

They smiled.

"Looks to be more stuff here," Kit said.

"Look it over. I'm about packed. You'll never guess who will be jockeying us around the clouds again – well, stated that way I suppose you will."

"Really? Connie and Alex! Haven't seen them since they helped us fend off pirates, natives, and Mother Nature, retrieving that treasure in the Brazilian Cave last August. Someday we really do have to write about that adventure. When do they arrive? I'd set my head to think we'd never see them again."

"Me, too, actually. Sometime after two."

"I better go home and get packed. What's our cover story and am I going to at least get one night with Megan?"

"We'll leave at sunup in the morning. As to a story. The one we used last summer seemed to work well. The grant from last year was renewed and we'll be traveling the globe to study various cultures."

"Sounds exciting," Kit said. "Can I come along?"

David reached out and ruffled Kit's hair as if he were still a little boy.

"Seems a bit longer than I remember it," David said feigning disapproval of the lobe hiding locks.

"Boston girls like it that way."

"Thought you and Megan were being loyal to each other."

"We are, but it helps sustain a guy through those long winter nights when girls give him a long look-over as he enters classrooms and pass him on the walks."

"Ah! Yes! The old sustenance-by-being-ogled thing. I remember it well."

"Go be with the love of your life. Assure her that we should be gone no more than three weeks. Have a wonder filled night. Just . . . how I can I say this without sounding too old fogeyish. Protect yourself in the clinches."

"We don't have intercourse, remember. Everything else, just not intercourse. *That* we're saving for marriage as per *your* social philosophy which, as I have pointed out, I am following considerably better than you did at my age."

Then as an after thought:

"You and Molly are adjusting well to marriage, I assume."

"Very well, I'd say. The love grows. The passion remains. And all other things are fantastic."

"Good. That pleases me, you know. How many years ago did I begin telling you two that you needed to get married?"

"To be perfectly accurate I believe you were three and after telling us that, you asked, 'What *is* married, anyway?'"

"Really? I was a little charmer, wasn't I?"

"Charmer or Imp. I've never quite decided."

Kit flashed his endearing grin.

"I'm going to shower before I leave. Do I still have any clothes here?"

"A couple of shirts in my closet and some shorts and undies in the lower drawer of my chest."

Kit stripped for his shower as they continued to talk.

"Any idea about the clue?" he asked.

"It seems to be presented in two layers or stages. The first are the numbers which I'm very sure are latitude and longitude given in degrees and minutes. Second are several obscure phrases which must contain the specific directions we will need to find the next clue."

"So, the only real challenge seems to be the phrases, then," Kit said, really asking.

"It would seem so, yes. Can't guarantee each clue will be set up in the same way, of course."

"Some coincidence that your cryptographic skills will be needed again."

David nodded, the hint of a thoughtful frown catching his brow for the moment.

Kit left for the shower. David spent time loading and unloading software into his laptop, adjusting it according to his best guess about the challenges he felt might lie ahead.

When Kit returned, toweling his hair, David had just dipped into the sack and was enjoying the first bites of a piece of Kit's mother's, locally renowned, apricot pie.

"That was quick. Maybe an all time quickness record, in fact," David said chiding him about the amount of time he used to spend in the shower.

"Going to be with Megan tonight. No need to dawdle."

They chuckled at the private reference.

"I assume the shampoo in the Lavender, glass, bottle is Molly's," Kit said. "I used the old standard in the green plastic squeeze container."

"You traversed the mysteries of marital toiletries well, Grasshopper. Tomorrow you may try to locate the bread in the kitchen."

"Not in the breadbox anymore?"

"Oh, no, un-espoused one. *That's* where the clean dish towels reside. The bread, of course, is in the lower shelf of the fridge – right where it belongs!"

"Your disdain is being feigned, I take it."

"You take it right. She can keep the bread and towels anywhere she likes."

"One thing," Kit said smiling.

"Lay it on me," David said expecting some sort of shot.

"You're saying that now you *really* have *clean* dish towels? What kind of insanity has overtaken this place?"

"It is sooooo good to have you back, Kit. I miss you everyday."

"I understand that; believe me."

He moved to the open, floor to ceiling, window at the rear of the room to let the breeze 'drip dry' him as he and David referred to the process.

"I think I found my Ari," he said taking comfort in the familiar roof-top view of his small hometown.

It was in reference to David's earlier suggestion that we all need to have somebody in our life that challenges and pushes us to justify our beliefs and to explore new philosophical horizons. He had also suggested that he doubted if conservative Manford College could ever provide that for the boy.

"I'm happy for you," David said thinking that might be the end of the conversation. It wasn't.

"Allison," Kit added.

"Allison of the female persuasion?"

"Yup."

"Rich?"

"Penthouse with a pool, rich!"

"Suppose that gender thing precludes skinny dipping the way Ari and I used to."

"Who says?"

"I stand corrected."

Silence.

"For sure this mission doesn't seem to be as dangerous as the other one," Kit said again really asking for reassurance.

"Doesn't seem to be. Speed, wits, and accuracy appear to be the major factors."

No more was said on the topic.

Kit dressed and, after a lingering hug, began to descend the stairs. He turned and called back up to David.

"You may or may not find me on your couch in the morning. In any event I'll be here by five."

"Tell Megan hi from me. When we get back I'll take the three of us out to the best restaurant within fifty miles – *her* choice."

"Sure you're up to an evening at *The Tofu and Kelp Galley*?"

Kit chuckled himself on his way, hurrying out of earshot in case David had a comeback.

At 2:30 there was a knock at the door at the bottom of the stairs. David heard the door open and a discordant echoing of footsteps ascending to the loft. He stood to go meet his old friends.

"Connie! Alex! It is *so* good to see you both again. I can't imagine how you let yourselves get talked into this."

Hands were extended and accepted all around.

"Well, it's summer and we were sooo tired of just sitting there on the Riviera watching the beautiful young women frolicking topless on the beaches. Actually, we were just asking the same about you."

"The Stephanopoulos Clan seems to have a way of sinking its claws into one. But I thought you two were set for life from last year."

"Who says we can't do a little freelancing for Kit's Kids' Fund?" Alex said.

"The old man found your Achilles heels as well. You are good people. We are glad you are in our life. What's our ride this time?"

"Same old goose as before if that's satisfactory. Best fly in the sky," Connie said referring to the customized Gulf Stream executive jet they had used the summer before.

"Can it be ready to flap its wings by dawn?"

"Absolutely. Where are we going?" Connie asked, immediately amending his comment. "Oh, that's right. As I recall we often didn't know our destination until we'd been in the air for an hour."

"Now *that's* an exaggeration and you know it. It was never more than thirty minutes. This time we need to get as close to these coordinates as we can: 43/44 west, 7/25 East. Monaco if my map reading skills have not failed me. It's like a progressive treasure hunt – the ultimate treasure being Ari VII. At each stop we will pick up the clues for the next destination. If they all give us latitude and longitude it should make your job a piece of cake."

"Cake's good. We'll take that."

Alex nodded confirming it.

"So, you're telling us we left the Riviera to come here and take you with us back to the Riviera."

"As a first stop, at least."

"We're *pound 2and 3* on your cell phone," Alex said.

"The number *two and three* men in the World. I'm honored to be working with you. How long to get us to Monaco?"

Connie took an electronic gadget from his shirt pocket and plunked in some numbers.

"Six thousand miles and two refueling stops, east coast here in the States and then Lisbon. Count on thirteen hours with a good tailwind – perhaps a little more if Kit escapes the plane to ogle the young naked beauties on the Portuguese beaches."

It was worth a chuckle among them.

"With a six a.m. take off that will put us over there when – their time?" David asked.

Again Connie poked at the device.

"Two a.m."

"David nodded.

“Upon landing we'll stay on the plane until daylight. Then begin our search. Kit will need the sleep – hasn't seen his girl friend since Christmas.”

“Unless there is something else, then,” Connie said, “We'll be on our way back to the plane. I'll arrange the limo to be here at five.”

“Great. I can't tell you how good it feels knowing you two will be by our sides on this one.”

They each shook David's hand and left.

David had no way of knowing if the clues would lead them around the globe again or if they would be confined to just one country or city or even one building. He had no way of knowing if there would be three or three dozen clues to decode and follow. That added a frantic element to the task – the sort of frantic that was a step or two up from the frantic they had experienced the summer before.

He was troubled by the phrasing of the assignment, something indicating there would be no artificial obstacles placed in their way as they approached the place where the boy was being held. At that point, however, it seemed that exemption might come to an end. It suggested some new stipulation could be or *was to be* added during the trip to return young Ari to Athens.

That vaguery made planning impossible. There was no way to guess what that or those modifications or additions might be. They would have to face them creatively when they appeared.

If the motivation of the kidnapper was, as the old man had suggested, to produce the ultimate in anguish for him, it appeared the plan was masterful. David wondered, however, if the elder Ari's take on it had been accurate. It could have been set up as some sort of distraction to occupy Ari's mind and divert his attention from something else – an attempt at a business takeover, a ploy to garner a contract; who knew?

David took time to call Ari and pass on his thinking about the possible alternative motives.

“I'll keep them in mind,” was the response. There had been no, ‘thank you’. No indication of appreciation for either the idea or the call. Just, “I'll keep them in mind.”

The heart of the mission was rapidly moving away from helping the unlikable grandfather, to full focus on helping the youngster.

David had been to Monaco during the winter break after he began teaching at Manford College. He had accompanied Paul Donner, a classmate during both his undergraduate and graduate days at Harvard. They shared majors in anthropology and philosophy so engaged in numerous activities, clubs, and academic projects together. Paul was always number two behind David in the chess tournaments, debates, and freestyle swimming events.

Paul was finishing his PhD dissertation that year, having taken additional time to complete his research. The two of them had gone together on one of Paul's grants. They had enjoyed a good time – a nice hotel, evenings of chess, mornings walking the beach, beautiful women, French cuisine, and even some actual research during mid-days.

He took out the clue once more and spoke aloud to himself as he often did when

pondering a question.

"I'm going to assume the first four numbers represent latitude and longitude. The second line has several interesting possibilities. The word, ARIA could be a misspelling of 'area' if the perpetrators are not native English speakers. That interpretation would give some sense to the number that follows - 485 – as if it represents the area of Monaco. Problem: Monaco is far smaller than 485 square miles or even kilometers. Let's crank up the laptop."

In a few minutes David had – no where nearly as adeptly as Kit – Googled his way to Monaco's official website. It jumped out at him as things will when it is a single entity for which one is searching.

"485 acres. That pretty well confirms that the place is Monaco and that the four numbers on the first line *do* represent position on the globe. Aria? The kidnappers clearly wanted us to locate the country without any problem. That makes me think they want us to get to the boy quickly – as if freeing him is *not* the truly important element in all of this. If that is true, the clues will have been scrupulously laid out and that means *aria* means *aria* not *area*. Aria would lead us to the Opera House, I assume.

"The rest may have to await our actual examination of the structure. It seems the same problem is repeated with Mane Door. One might assume it was intended to be Main Door but, again, accuracy requires it to be Mane – the long hair on the neck of an animal – typically a lion or a member of the equine family – horse, zebra. As I recall the Opera House is lousy with *Fleur de lis* so the number ten, the arrow, and the 'R' must be the significant clues.

"Refuse butt bin? 'Refuse' could be the *verb*, meaning to 'decline' or the *noun* meaning 'waste'. Butt may refer to the anatomical rear-end or the blunt end of most any object. It could refer to being the butt of a joke or bumping with a head. Bin seems rather straight forward – some kind of a container, usually an open container, I suppose. Let's see, an open container in an opera house. The orchestra pit, perhaps. I guess it receives an array of human butts, if you will. No. That part seems too far fetched. I'm betting that these clues, though a bit obtuse, are more closely tied in meaning to real things.

"Tying the words together in terms of meaning, a bin holds objects, therefore refuse the noun – waste – would seem to partner better with it. A dumpster, perhaps? A waste basket? A toilet. Now there's a disgusting – though fully fitting – image that puts all three words into its context. I don't know. I'll let Kit have a go at it later."

\* \* \* \* \*

The boy only snored in one position – on his back with his arms stretched back, beyond his head. David's mind opened that image the moment he was awakened by the sound.

He looked at his watch – a few minutes earlier than he had planned to begin his day but once awake David was up for the duration. He showered and dressed before pummeling Kit's head with a pillow.

The boy's gene pool had not inherited his Uncle's early morning *up 'n at 'um* proclivity so David figured that the feather dusting was probably just the first phase in

convincing the boy to greet the day.

To his interest, it had been fully sufficient.

"Hey, Unc. I assume it is morning or you wouldn't have administered that affectionate greeting."

"Your assumption is well founded. Have a good time with Megan last evening?"

"*Good* would be an empty descriptor. Fantastic, awesome, monumental, out of this world, titillating, enrapturing . . ."

"I think I get the idea – something better than, 'Not bad'.

Kit smiled and sat up on the couch where he had deposited his weary body a mere two hours before. He stretched and scratched and groaned – his usual wake up routine.

"I believe there will be a cat nap in my immediate future – once on the plane."

"You shower," David suggested. "I'll throw some breakfast together."

"Have any idea where we're off to?" Kit said standing and looking down at the envelope still on the coffee table.

"Monaco."

Kit immediately perked up.

"The French Riviera, Monaco? The miles and miles of clothes optional beaches, Monaco? The . . ."

"Go! Shower! Better make it a cold one!"

"You know that never de-hornifies me – just makes me generally uncomfortable."

"I know!"

"Ah! Your sadistic side rears it ugly head!"

It was cause for a chuckle as Kit rounded the corner to the shower.

They lingered over David's famous Lumberjack Breakfast – pancakes, bacon, scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, biscuits and black pepper gravy with an assortment of beverages. Kit often referred to it as 'UCOS – Unc's coronary on a shingle'.

"Here we go again, I guess, huh?" Kit said, breaking ground for the obvious discussion.

"Another summer, another joy ride."

"In a nutshell," Kit began, "We go from clue to clue and eventually find the kid. Then we take him back to his mother in Greece. Is that it?"

"In a very *sterile* nutshell, yes."

"There's more you haven't told me?"

"Nothing I'm sure about. Just a feeling that rescuing the boy may be the easy part. Getting him home may pose the problem."

"How?"

"I have no idea."

"You're not being much help."

"Sorry. I know."

"When will we find out?"

"Probably about the same moment we find young Ari."

"Think we can remove the strap from the kid?"

"If anybody can, Alex can."

"Has he seen the pictures?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"It's good he agreed to come along again, huh?"

"Very good."

"So, what's the chance we'll all get blown into cosmic dust, you think?"

"I'm betting on none."

"I'll bet with you. Not sure what *my* odds are, really."

"Odds?" David asked. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I got through the bio-toxin thing more or less whole early last summer. I got through the treasure cave thing last August. Don't know if that means I've already had my allotment of luck or if it means I'm just the lucky kind so I shouldn't worry about the outcome here."

"How about this? Let's not worry but take all due caution to protect our merry little band."

"Sounds good. I don't really believe in luck anyway. I suppose that was just a way of airing my concern."

"Did that air it?"

"Yes. Thank you. I feel fully ventilated."

"Good! The limo will be here in fifteen minutes. Let's get these dishes done up."



## CHAPTER TWO

"I'd forgotten how comfy the bunks were in this plane."

Those were Kit's first words as he entered the cabin from the sleeping area in the rear.

"Probably a good thing," David said as Kit slumped into the recliner facing his uncle. "It may be the only beds we get to enjoy on this junket."

"No lavish hotels or suites like last summer? If I'd have known that . . ."

"You'd have still come and you know it."

Kit smiled sheepishly. The two of them knew each other too well to be duped by something like that.

"Are you refreshed after your six hour *cat nap*?"

"Seems so."

Kit looked out the window.

"Already over the Atlantic?"

"Refueled an hour ago," David explained. "Heading for Lisbon."

Kit nodded acknowledging the information and setting his head for the day. David handed him the card with the first clue on it.

"Ideas?"

Kit re-studied it for a few minutes.

"I'd say we're looking for one of ten well decorated toilet stools in the opera house – most likely the one on the far right."

David laughed out loud.

"You laugh at the product of my astonishing cryptographic proficiency?"

"No. Actually, I'm amused at the fact that we both arrived at the same conclusion – well, I dismissed it but it was one of the choices that surfaced for me."

"So, do we at least agree on the Opera House?" Kit asked.

"Yes, we do."

"I assume the 485 refers to the number of acres in Monaco and that if 'aria' actually means 'aria' – as we seem to agree it does – then *mane* actually refers to the long hair on a horse's neck rather than the entrance."

David nodded, then added.

"Or, horse-*like* animal or lion, perhaps."

"So, we may be looking for the door to the lion's den – something common to all opera houses, of course!"

They shared a chuckle.

"Seems to be a set of clues that we can't figure in advance," Kit noted, thoughtfully. "We're going to have to rely on having it pop out at us once we see it. I imagine that represents a huge number of square feet of wall, floor, and ceiling space to survey on our way to the solution."

"Huge but beautiful beyond imagination."

"You've been there, I take it. With Ari?"

"No, with another friend from the same era, however – Paul Donner."

"I've never heard you speak of him."

"It was an uncomfortable relationship, I suppose that's why."

"Uncomfortable?"

"We shared many interests in common."

"Oh, I can see how that would be *very* uncomfortable!"

"Do you want to hear my response to your question or will you be content to just ridicule my presentation?"

"Sorry. Couldn't resist."

Try as he would to temper his ear to ear grin it didn't happen.

"I almost always just bested him in things – chess, swimming, girls, grades. Ari hated him and I think Paul was jealous of my relationship with 'the spoiled rotten Greek' as he referred to him. Those things taken together, the enjoyable part of our friendship forever floated on an underlying base of tension. We never spoke of it but I always felt it. I assume he did as well."

"You mixed the metaphor. If you'd have substituted 'sea' for 'base' it would have flowed more appropriately."

"Thank you, Miss Dove."

"Miss Dove?"

"A literary reference I'll let dangle as full retribution for your disapproval of my speaking style."

"That would probably more properly be your abstract illustration style."

"And you sitting next to the door without a parachute, at forty thousand feet over the Atlantic."

Such exchanges felt like love between them.

"Heard any more from Grampa S. – Ari number five?" Kit asked.

David related his phone conversation.

"A strange old duck, isn't he?"

"At least that."

"It must be a sad way to live."

"What way?" David asked always interested in the boy's take on people.

"Working so hard to remain aloof and detached from others – having to denigrate their importance in order to make himself seem significant."

"An interesting set of observations – more than likely true, although one might wonder why a billionaire would have doubts about his own self worth."

"How often have you said it to me? 'Money, possessions, stuff, and power have nothing to do with deep down happiness. You can't buy self love'."

"You've actually been listening to my diatribes on the subject?"

"That and observing how you live your life. More precisely observing the *result* of how you live your life. I've never known anybody as deep down happy as you are."

"How are *you* doing in that department?"

"Well, I'm nineteen so I'm still into proving things for myself. As you've so often pointed out, teenagers feel the need to invent each of the important wheels in life all over again for themselves. It's as if the established truths of history hold no meaning for us. I make comparisons to verify this and that – to raise additional questions I need to answer – make that *investigate*. If I've learned anything from you, Uncle David, it is to never be content with *any* answer. Always allow for new evidence, new possibilities, new options to examine.

"In answer to your question, though, I'm mostly a very happy dude right now. There's still that gnawing feeling that I need to know how certain things really *are* forever and ever, amen! But, I suppose the ability to live with uncertainty comes with practice. Does it?"

"It does, though not without some continuing, underlying, anxiety, I suppose. Until you can make that state of unease your friend, it will fool you into thinking it's uncomfortable."

"My friend?"

"Happiness and contentment are *not* synonyms – a potentially devastating mistake many, if not most, people make. To live my way, one has to be ever alert to the new and novel. That requires an ever-present degree of outward focus. Focus demands concentration which requires mental energy - tension. By contrast, one can sit back being *content* without ever having to muster an iota of mental energy. Content is certainly more comfortable."

"But, *content* means being willing to live in ignorance – never knowing if there is a better way or a more appropriate belief or a more useful value," Kit added immediately.

David nodded.

"Grasshopper has been keenly focused. Today's problem is for him to examine the concept of contentment from the viewpoints of the Dynamic Searchers and the Ignorant Know-it-alls."

"Ignorant know-it-all. That's certainly an interesting pseudo-oxymoron."

"The level of abstraction to which this conversation has risen is making me light-headed," David said smiling.

"Pseudo-oxymoron, you mean?" Kit asked rushing to clarify. "On the surface the terms *ignorant* and *know-it-all* appear to be paradoxical – incompatible. But, in reality, anyone who claims to know exactly how things are for now and evermore, does, by so doing, define himself as willing to remain ignorant of new nuances if not catastrophic

transformations."

"I didn't say that I didn't understand – just that it was making me lightheaded!"

"Well, it helped me to define my point even if it was unnecessary to enlighten you, All Knowing One."

Kit joined his palms in front of his chest and bowed, Grasshopper to Teacher.

"I'm starved. This old goose stocked with goodies?" he asked.

"Something tells me Alex undoubtedly took care of that."

Kit moved to the kitchenette, such as it was, at the rear of the cabin.

"The makin's for ham salad sandwiches, milk, cheese, French bread, fruit, canned soups, cereal, broccoli – who'd bring *broccoli*? Alex must have a sadistic side. I thought the first President George Bush outlawed broccoli."

"The sandwich sounds good to me. You?"

"Yeah. With a slice of cheese below and above. How about you make them and I'll take orders from the cockpit?"

"Sounds good."

Kit hit a button on the intercom and David moved to the counter.

"Permission to enter the most sacred realm of the cockpit."

"Password?" came Connie's voice.

"Alex wears pink tights."

It was Alex who responded.

"And Kit is flirting with eunuchhood."

The door popped open and Kit stuck his head inside.

"Food?"

"Great! Surprise us!" Connie said.

"Gee, Connie. You've spoken two sentences to me so far this trip. Isn't that overstepping your quota?"

"I *am* the strong, silent type but Alex here won't shut up so I'm eager for any chance to slip a word in."

"It is so great to have you two with us."

"Since we're piloting this old goose, I'd say it was *you* who were with *us*."

"Either way, it's great. Back with ham salad sandwiches in a sec. Oh, would those be with our without cheese?"

"Who'd put cheese on ham salad?" Alex asked.

"Who'd bring broccoli to an all guy outing?" Kit came back.

"No cheese."

The food was fixed and Kit delivered it, lingering for some reason until they munched their first munch.

"You scoundrel!" Alex said, feigning more displeasure than he felt. "Broccoli in a ham salad sandwich!"

Kit felt no need to respond. He pulled the door closed and chuckled himself back to his chair. He sat there staring at his sandwich.

"A problem with my sandwich craftsmanship?" David asked.

"No. I'm just fuming over my closed mind."

"I'm lost."

"We just finished this long discussion about being open to new things and I followed it with a blanket rejection of broccoli anything."

"It's not as if you hadn't already rejected that veggie at the ripe old age of three, you know."

"I suppose but the ham salad / broccoli combo would be new."

"A dilemma, I guess."

"Wouldn't be, of course, if I'd just try it."

"Right."

"But its BROCCOLI, Uncle David!"

"I believe we've established that."

Kit stood and made his way back to the fridge where he proceeded to doctor the sandwich – well, half of it. He returned to his chair.

"Well?" David asked.

"Interesting. Crunchy. A consistency very much like chocolate covered grasshoppers. Actually it adds none of its own flavor at all. Nice texture. No broccoli taste. Not bad. Want some?"

"At this point I'll take your word for it."

"Chicken."

"No. It's just that while you were pursuing your funk, I finished my sandwich."

"I did stew a bit, didn't I?"

"If by *bit* you mean an all encompassing, life grabbing, reality obscuring event, then, yes, you did stew a bit."

Kit grinned and munched on.

\* \* \* \* \*

They approached the airport from the Mediterranean. The bright full moon lit the foamy crests of the low, restless, waves below, creating narrow, irregular, streaks of light appearing and disappearing as if by whim. The slender band of beaches stretched like glistening golden strands gradually disappearing into the night. An armada of yachts bobbed just off shore as if awaiting sunrise to launch its attack.

Upon landing, Connie taxied to a remote section of the airport, speaking in French with the immediately accommodating control tower. The ubiquitous Stephanopoulos influence was again evident.

It was 2:07 a.m. as the engines droned to a stop and the pilots entered the cabin.

"Kit and I are going to catch some shut eye here on the plane until about seven," David said. "You two are free to come and go as you like until you hear from us on our fancy new phones. I have no idea how long things will take here."

"Gosh!" Alex began. "You mean we have to get back to watching those naked young ladies playing on the beech?"

"That would be your choice, I guess. There are museums you could visit you know."

"How about I stay with the guys on the beach and you go give the Opera House the once over by yourself," Kit teased, glorious beach visions momentarily commandeering his senses.

David ignored the comment and removed the pictures of Ari number seven from the folder. He handed them to Alex. The harness is laced with tiny wires. The severing of any one of them will supposedly detonate the plastic explosive in the two round cans on the front of the belt. Work on some way of extracting the lad from the straps. We have from now until we locate him to solve the puzzle."

"And there is no way of knowing how long that will be, of course," Alex said confirming the basic dilemma of the assignment. He turned to Kit.

"Can you get me good quality blow-ups of these photographs?"

"Let's give it a try. We got some new software in here that automatically reconfigures the fuzzies and empty spots with the most likely filler images. How big?"

"Bigger the better. Need clarity. I'd like to get a look at those wires, which are barely apparent in these small pictures."

Kit placed the front view on the scanner and began plunking instructions into the computer. The screen was a hodgepodge of blips and colors and pretty, though unrecognizable, cubed images.

"Think I got it."

"That's no picture at all," David said.

"I'll give you the honor of pressing *enter*."

David went along with the playful request dramatically circling in for the final tap.

The image was suddenly there, large and clear. The printer whirred and an 11 X 17 sheet rolled out.

"How's that?" Kit asked. "I can't make a full shot any bigger on this printer. I can divide it up into quadrants and get you details that are four times larger."

"This is great but go ahead and do the quadrant thing. The more information the better in cases like this. I really can't promise anything – I'll tell you that right from the start. The strap looks pretty foolproof."

"But," Kit said, eyes sparkling, "You're no fool you know."

"Thank you. I agree. In this case the phrase is inane. It should be *genius proof*."

The quads were printed for both photos, and Alex nodded his approval.

They all opted for sleep time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Upon awaking they went their separate ways – Alex and Connie to one of their familiar haunts and David and Kit to a cafe David and Paul had frequented.

After breakfast, they walked to the Opera House. It was closed.

"It may say closed and the door may be locked but you can bet there's plenty going on inside," David said. "Around back I'm sure we'll find an open entrance."

It turned out to be a substantial walk. The building was huge and the grounds not easy to traverse. A truck was unloading sets at the dock. They stopped to survey the

situation.

"You have a clipboard in that backpack?" David asked Kit.

"Letter or legal size?" Kit asked swinging it to the ground and kneeling beside it.

"You're kidding, of course."

"Of course. Will this do?"

"Yes. Fine. I need some paper to put on it."

"I'm lost but of course you know that."

"Yes. I know that. Follow my lead. Look serious."

"Here's the paper."

David donned his reading glasses and took out a pen. They mounted the dock, moving toward the truck. David stopped from time to time and pretended to check things off the sheets. He'd scribble comments.

No one questioned him. They garnered lots of smiles and nods, and several variations of, "*Est-ce que je peux vous aider?*" (Roughly, may I help you?).

David declined all offers and maintained a humorless countenance. The two of them were quickly inside.

"Let's head for the main entrance area. Its beauty will knock you off your feet but it's the small brochures about the structure that we need. As I recall there was a floor plan with some of the most famous features pictured."

It was a good five minute walk that took them fifteen as they picked their way through a maze of blind alley halls and small rooms.

"Wow! Your description was understated by about a billion miles or whatever units understatement are measured in. What a gorgeous place!"

While Kit stood being impressed, David located the brochure he sought. He thumbed through it, beginning with the pictures, hoping for a quick break.

"Find what we're looking for?" Kit asked, not really paying attention to the publication.

"Afraid not."

"What? No picture of a *fleur de lis* laden lion addressing a refuse butt bin? How dare they have left that out?"

It was worth a set of smiles, but concern immediately broke onto both faces.

"Seems we need Plan B just twenty minutes into the mission," Kit said summarizing their plight.

"We just have to find the 'Mane Door,'" David said having included the word 'just' to make the task seem feasible.

"So, we walk up and down the halls looking at doors," Kit said all quite seriously. "We can do that."

"Together or separately?" David asked.

"Separately would make faster work of it. We could meet back here in, say, an hour?"

"Okay. Let's divide up the floor plan. I'll take every-thing from here around to the south and you go around to the north."

"There is one problem, here," Kit said rethinking his suggestion.

"Only one? That sounds *great* to me!"

"I'm being serious. If we each search for a half hour and then use the next half hour to return here, we have wasted an hour between us. Sticking together and not having to rendezvous may make more sense."

"You're probably right – as usual," David said. "Let's take the stairs to the top floor and work our way down."

"Sounds like a plan. Beat you to the top!"

"Of course you will. I'm too wise to be a party to such a contest."

As they approached the top of the last flight, David pushed Kit aside and ran up the final dozen steps performing a Rocky style victory dance on the landing.

"Not fair! Foul! Perhaps unconstitutional, even."

David ignored the protests and studied the floor plan. He pointed to the right and they proceeded down the long, wood paneled, hallway that curved around the outside of the main auditorium.

They stopped at each door hoping, as Kit had predicted, the clue would pop out at them.

They encountered lots of doors and lots of *fleur de lis* but nothing remotely resembling a refuse butt bin or mane. At one point Kit indicated a beautifully framed landscape with a white rabbit crouching amid tall, green, grass, all below a cloud-appointed sky of variegated soft blues.

"Will *hare* qualify as mane?" he asked grinning.

"Haredly,"

"That was terrible."

"And yours wasn't?"

"We get this way when we're feeling desperate, don't we?"

"I believe that has been well established in the past."

At the end of the hall was a small door. It looked to be a service entrance and was locked. Kit slid his backpack to the ground, opened a side pocket and removed several short pieces of steel wire. He knelt in front of the door and soon had the lock picked.

"Butchy?" David asked referring to Kit's less than upright buddy from grade school."

Kit nodded. "We need to grow in whatever way we can from every experience."

"I assume you are quoting me back at me."

"You assume correctly. I don't know what kids do who don't have such quotable Uncles."

"Live long and healthy lives, perhaps?"

Kit ducked, feigning fear of being swung at.

They entered the door. It led onto a small platform overlooking the backstage area. There was a descending, spiral staircase. They wound their way to the platform below and entered the hallway back into the public part of the building.

They followed it the entire length with no more success than they had before. The

process was repeated in each hall on each floor.

Three hours later they found themselves back in the main entry way.

"Must in be the basement," Kit said.

"I doubt that. Here at sea level the water table is virtually at the surface. No basements. There is still the dressing room area back stage. Let's head back there."

Operas frequently have both male and female leads. That requires double star-class dressing rooms. They located them to the north side of the stage – one marked Mâle (his) and one Femelle (hers).

The doors were magnificent – hand carved, ornate, and matched, in a way. On the male's door was a rendering of the King of the Jungle. On the other, a lioness and her cubs. Just above the wainscoting that ran the length of the wall, were dozens and dozens of six inch *fleur de lis*.

Kit counted ten of them to the right of the Lion door – the Mane Door. Directly below it sat a cigarette butt depository.

"Qualifies as a refuse butt bin, I'd say," he said looking at David. "But where's the next clue?"

"Inside, I assume or maybe taped to the bottom."

"I'll check the bottom," Kit said. "Wouldn't want to deprive you of the opportunity to stick your hand into a container of filthy, stinking, cigarette butts."

"Thanks, Pal. You first, just in case my trip is not necessary."

"Nothing. Nada. El zippo! down here."

David examined the wooden box and determined that the top was hinged. He opened it. Taped to the underside of the lid was an envelope. He removed it and closed the box.

Kit drew close not wanting to miss any aspect of the unveiling.

"So. You going to open it or just stand here in the draft?"

David carefully opened the flap and removed the card holding it so both of them could view it.

"Not really the same format as the first one," David pointed out. "Anything jump out at you?"

"Afraid not. The latitude and longitude that was on the first clue gave us a lock on Monaco. The first line here is not so helpful."

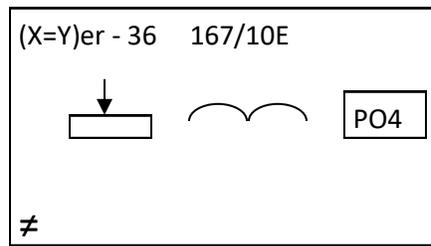
"But, it still seems to be the global locator," David pointed out. "The 167/10E is in longitude form."

"I suggest we get back to the plane where we can crank up the old computer and see what we can make of it all," Kit said.

"Good idea. It's going on noon. Let's find take-out for lunch on our way back to the airport."

Beneath the Styrofoam lids lay two fried chicken dinners. They ate as they worked at the computer table.

"So, let's just look at the entire clue, first," Kit said beginning to read it as they both perused the card.



First comes that formula-like statement,  $(X=Y)er-36$ . Then to its right the longitude marker  $167/10E$ . Second line has the 'not equal to' math symbol to the left of a narrow rectangle with a short arrow pointing down at the top. Then a set of curly lines and  $PO4$ . The bottom line reads, 'Key 119 + the rest'.

A short silence ensued.

"More obtuse than the first clue I'd say," came Kit's evaluation.

"Agreed. Let's find the longitude it seems to be indicating."

Kit brought up a world map and partitioned it to the north/south area which focused up and down the 160 to 170 degree East location.

"The easternmost part of Siberia to the far north, some scattered islands north and south of the equator and then good old New Zealand to the south. A tiny bit of Antarctica also. We need to define that equation with the -36 at the end. If it means thirty six degrees south latitude it puts us on the very northern edge of New Zealand's north island – maybe even Auckland."

"Let's assume for the moment that the 36 refers to something other than latitude. It would have probably been written out as before if it were. It is thirty six *some things* less than the equation  $(X=Y)er$ ."

"Let me see if that's some sort of mathematical constant," Kit said, quickly accessing an appropriate website. "There must be a thousand constants listed here but would you believe not the one we're looking for? Maybe the *er* means Esoteric Reference."

"It is *that* for sure. Interesting, though, it will only *be* that until we figure its meaning."

"Ah, Yes! Once again the philosopher commandeers reality."

"Explains! *Explains* reality, Grasshopper."

"How could I have missed that subtle difference?"

David moved on without a response.

"X equals Y. X is the same as Y. X is Y. X and Y are uniform. X and Y are similar. X and Y correspond."

He stopped. Kit had an addition.

"X is equated with Y."

"OR, X and Y equate!" David said, adding a slight amendment and acting less the teacher and more plain out pushy.

"The bespectacled, middle aged, philosophy professor has done it again," Kit said

as if announcing something spectacular to the World. Then he ran with it.

"The X equals Y represents the word 'equate'. Add to that the 'er' and what do we have, boys and girls?"

"Equator. Yes." David agreed, but it takes us back to the original problem. What does minus 36 represent – degrees, miles, kilometers, lily pads? And what direction?"

"Well, probably the minus means south – strange, no good reason for that, but I'd bet if you presented a globe to a thousand people and asked them to point to '*minus*', 999 of them would indicate the southern hemisphere."

"I'll agree for the time being. Let's move on to the next line. Maybe it will provide some help with the minus thirty six."

"Well," Kit began sitting back and holding up the card in front of him. "It begins with that *does not equal sign* and ends with PO4 and in between is that narrow rectangle with the arrow pointing down at the top of it. To the right of that is the humpy line."

"I'm guessing you just characterized it properly," David said.

"Of course I did. What did I did?"

"That the rectangle and arrow are not meant to be a rectangle and an arrow but the symbolization of top, or upper, or some related concept."

"Taken as a whole then," Kit said thinking aloud, "that part of the line reads, '*does not equal the top*'?"

"That's my best take on it. You?"

"Nothing better. What about the PO4? A Post Office box somewhere that holds our third clue?"

"One possibility. Think chemistry, however!"

"Ah! PO4 is the symbol for phosphate."

"Let's hold those two interpretations as possibilities," David said. "What about the double wavy line just before the PO4?"

"Boobs. Seems pretty straight forward to me."

Kit smiled. David sighed.

"You'd see boobs in a colon,"

"Interesting. I wouldn't have but I will from now on. A nude on her side: And by the way, how long have you had this fetish about colons and breasts, Unc?"

"Moving beyond anatomy what other choices do we have? Mountains, camels . . .?"

"Remember that bunny painting in the Opera House? Up in the sky it had similar lines of various sizes representing birds in the far distance."

"Okay. A good possibility. In fact, a VERY good possibility."

"Really? Good for me! What?"

"Tell me this, what is one major source of phosphate?"

"You got me."

"Bird droppings leached and hardened over time. Ask that gizmo of yours to find us some place in our search area that has piles and piles of bird dung."

"You're not serious."

"I'm *very* serious. I remember something about a phosphate island – tropical even. Close your search to within forty degrees south of the equator."

Kit put his hands on the sides of the monitor.

"Google forgive him for he knows not what he's doing."

"Well I'll be a huge pile of bird dung. *Nauru*. Let's see here. A small island nation thirty six miles south of the equator. The smallest island republic in the world. Somewhere between seven and ten thousand inhabitants. Has relied on the mining of its interior phosphate hills for a century. About depleted now. The whole island is only twelve miles in circumference with just over eight square miles of surface. Native language is Nauruan – makes sense – but English is the official language. They have no currency of their own but trade in all major currencies. The government makes lots of money by issuing stamps for collectors. It has an airport and a couple of hotels, a small golf course. Beautiful beaches. Lots of fishing. Says it's a peaceful retreat without the distraction of many activities. Sounds like they're saying come visit us even though we have absolutely nothing to offer you. Some pictures here. The native girls are beautiful and historically do their traditional dances topless. We really need to go check it out."

"We certainly have our location. We can work on the last line once we're in the air. Get Connie on the horn."

"Connie old man. Put your eyes back in their sockets and get gassed up – the plane you understand, not you, please. We're off to *Nauru*."

"Never heard of it."

"A tiny island just south of the equator, due north of New Zealand."

"I can *probably* find that."

"I'm not into *probables* my friend. Get it all laid out neatly before we take off, please."

"You got it. *Nairobi* here we come."

Connie hung up. Kit shook his head.

"The two of them really enjoy tormenting me you know?"

"Small price for their loyal service."

"You've turned me into currency?"

"Can't be all bad?"

"I don't follow," Kit said.

"We're about to visit an island full of beautiful native girls who are used to accepting and handling foreign currency!"

"Ah! Oh my! Suppose they give change?"

David frowned in the boy's direction indicating he was lost.

"I have no idea what that meant either but it certainly raised my pulse rate – and something else, actually."

"More than I wanted to know. Check the fridge and pantry for supplies. By the way, how far is it from here?"

"On this map it looks to be about seven inches."

"Clown!"

"I'd estimate ten thousand miles. The bad guys are forcing us to use up lots of time in travel, aren't they?"

"Looks that way. It may work in our favor."

"How's that?"

"They've given us only fifteen days and they really seem to want us to find the boy within that time frame. With lots of long travel legs it probably means there will only be a few clues to decipher rather than lots. That should make our job somewhat easier."

"I see what you're saying. Less taxing of the mind. More taxiing around the globe."

"Your mind works in strange ways, son."

"Proof that it's from our *shared* gene pool I suppose."

\* \* \* \* \*

There were to be three refueling stops and the route was necessarily circuitous in order to avoid the Middle East hot spots.

They had been in the air only a few minutes when Kit began playing with time.

"So, we left Monaco at 1:00 pm on the 2nd of June; we will travel for twenty four hours and arrive in Nauru at 11:00 pm – their time – today – June second. Time zones are wondrous things. We keep landing in the middle of the night. That wastes precious time."

David nodded.

"It is what it is."

Kit pushed the cockpit intercom button.

"Crank this thing up into hyper-drive. The kid is impatient!"

"If you think you can do better than I'm doing feel free to open the door and try it on your own wings."

It had been Connie. Alex was sleeping so he would be fresh for his upcoming eight hour shift at the wheel.

Kit chose not to respond.

David drew his attention back to the task.

"We still have that bottom line of the clue to work out."

"*Key 119 and the rest*, as I recall," Kit said taking a seat in the other recliner.

"Right. Key 119 is written as unit rather than as two entities – no comma or other separating device," David began.

"Key could mean the obvious," Kit offered. "A door key or such. It could also mean a guide or an index or a code."

"It could mean that final element needed to complete something," David said. "Like an abstract simile for the final step."

"Let's apply Occam's razor here," Kit suggested. "The simplest answer is typically the right answer."

"You mean think of key as the metal object?"

"Right. That would make it key number 119. It takes us to a situation in which

many keys would be needed – each one probably different or there would only be one."

"Unless there were many people needing personal keys to the same place for some reason."

Kit nodded accepting the exception to his statement and continued.

"What do keys do? They unlock doors or safes. They start vehicles."

"Remember it says 'plus the rest'. So it may be something more than just the 119."

"Like an infinity of numbers beyond 119?" Kit said wearying at the possibility.

"That puts it into perspective," David said. "Because of that innate problem, it almost has to mean something else."

"*The rest*. What could that mean? Death – that would be a final kind of rest. Siesta? Wrong culture, probably."

"Go back to that razor of yours. What is the most likely reference – the most universal reference?"

"Ah! Nighttime sleep, you mean."

David nodded.

"Here's an off the wall take," Kit said sitting up straight. "A hotel room – number 119 – where you rest – sleep."

"Extending that idea a bit. *Where* do you sleep in a hotel room?"

"On a bed. Oh! Right. Resting could not be a hiding place but a place of rest could be. So you think we're looking for a bed in room 119?"

"I'd bed on it!"

"Back to terrible, Unc. Wish I'd thought of it, however."

"See about the hotels on that little hunk of island," David said.

Kit moved to the computer.

"It has two hotels. Get this. One of them has a Chinese restaurant like back on Pico. *Reynaldo's* in this instance. A Mexican Chinaman?"

"Hey, it's an island where they don't speak their own language, don't have their own currency, and don't have much left of their mainstay industry. Perhaps Mexican Chinamen represent their one original offering."

It had been a roundabout route to very little humor but Kit accepted it and moved on.

The major hotel seems to be the *Menen*. There is a smaller one also - the *OD-N-Aiwo*. BINGO Uncle David."

"I always love your bingos, Kit. What did you find?"

"Guess how many guest rooms the Menen Hotel has."

"Oh, I don't know. Let me just pick a number out of the air. How about 119?"

"Golly Unc! Your conjure-acity never ceases to amaze me."

"Let me call ahead and see if we can reserve that one for . . . when would that be again?"

"Tonight. Arriving about eleven assuming we don't run amuck in a bevy of dung producing Terns upon approaching the island."

David made the call. That room and apparently a hundred others just happened to be available.

"How do you feel about wearing a long white dress and lipstick?" David asked as he hung up.

"What?"

"Room 119 is the bridal suite."

"To get that clue and a real bed to sleep in at least once on this trip, I'll even struggle into a girdle and wear high heels."

"Girdle? Do they even make such things anymore?"

"Couldn't say, I guess. I *do* know they make high heels – beautiful, shiny, red, high heels with black soles and white lace around the top cradling the soft, pink, flesh of beautiful feminine feet."

"There seems to be no small bit of emotion attached to that image."

"On a dancer at the first nudie bar I visited back east."

"Ah! Part of a memorable, matching, ensemble I assume."

"No. Just the shoes."



### CHAPTER THREE

Jojo was Polynesian from his broad bare feet right up to the black bushy hair atop his five foot two inch, sixteen year old, frame. His constant smile exaggerated his full cheeks. It was not immediately certain whether he and his World War II jeep arrived planeside of his own volition or had been sent by the hotel. Inquiries about it were skillfully evaded.

"I'm Jojo. So good to meet you, Mr. Stephanopoulos," he said taking David's bag as he stepped down onto the ground.

Kit spoke low from close behind his uncle. It was a question.

"Mr. Stephanopoulos?"

"Figured we need every advantage we can muster on this mission," he replied, his head turned aside.

Kit moved around David and extended his hand.

"And I'm Kit, Jojo. Kit Rockefeller."

Jojo nodded. David raised his eyebrows. Their gear was loaded and the hell bent ride for the Menen Hotel was underway. Just why the lad felt compelled to hit sixty during the quarter mile ride was again not immediately obvious. He overshot the front door and was obliged to back up. His shrug seemed to be his full and sufficient explanation . . . apology . . . whatever.

It was a white frame, three story, structure set among palm trees on a lush lawn, not thirty yards from the narrow beach and deep blue, quietly rolling, ocean beyond.

They each hefted a bag and followed the boy inside to the modest reception hall. It was clean and comfortably elegant – both answered questions brought along in David's mind. Their passports were held at the desk though neither had been opened to check identities. They were each handed a key.

"The *Anibare Restaurant* stayed open in case you might want to eat," the man behind the desk said.

"Anibare? I thought it was called *Reynaldo's*."

"We have two. The Anibare offers more traditional western cuisine. We thought that would be more to your liking – steak, pork, chicken."

"That is very kind of you," David said. "Yes. Let us get these things up to our room and then we will certainly want to eat. There will be four. Our pilots will be here

momentarily. They have reservations for two additional rooms."

"Oh, yes. Ground floor. Beach view. Shall I send a car?"

"Yes. Thank you."

They turned and followed Jojo up the wide, jute matted, stairs. Kit called the plane to inform them that transportation was on its way.

"I don't mean to be rude, Sirs," Jojo said as he opened the unlocked door and stood aside for the others to enter, "but why would you want the bridal suite?"

Kit created the answer.

"119 is my lucky number. I'm just funny that way."

"I see. Well, you will like this suite very much. My girl friend and I use it often. I turned the mattress for you myself this morning. We made wonderful lukaluka here last night. Must always turn the mattress after a night of lukaluka."

Neither David or Kit would ask for the translation though were amused by his forthrightness. Apparently Jojo had the run of the place. Kit needed answers.

"So, Jojo. You worked here long?"

"My mother is the maid and my father the handyman. I have always lived here. I earn my living from tips."

The message had been pointed and David dug out a twenty dollar bill. The youngster's eyes brightened.

"That will handle my services for your entire stay, Sir. Thank you. Much more generous than the last American here. He may have been sick. Skin white as these sheets. Complained the doors here were all too short. Nothing ever pleased him. You are much nicer."

He opened the window at the rear and pointed outside as Kit and David looked around the room – apparently a single room 'suite'.

"The swimming pool, tennis courts, and golf course are back there. The gaming room is on the first floor below this room. As you see there is TV, fridge and coffee maker here in the room. I can provide females for comfort whenever you wish."

"Let's find that restaurant, Jojo," David said at last. Will you join us?"

"Thank you but no. My girlfriend and I have planned to spend the night on the beach – a private spot sort of reserved for the kids. She'll be wondering where I am."

He escorted them to the restaurant and left. Alex and Connie soon joined them.

"Can we be of any help while we're here?" Alex asked.

"Probably not," David said. "It looks to be pretty straight forward. I imagine we'll be ready to leave for *somewhere* by mid-morning."

Kit and David hurried through dinner and excused themselves well before the others were finished. They were eager to search out the next clue.

Back in the room they began examining the super-sized bed.

"It's something I've never understood," Kit said.

"What's that?"

"Why beds in honeymoon suits are always so large. I'd think consummating a marriage would actually take very little space."

"I must admit I have never pondered that question nor will I probably do so in the future. Help me strip the bed so we can examine the mattress."

The mattress was clean – no envelope or card attached to it. There was no slit or opening into it. They searched the frame and the headboard. They examined the pillows.

"What possible use could newlyweds make of *six* pillows?" Kit asked.

"The wedding night is about more than just sex, Kit."

"No it isn't."

"You're right – mostly at least. I have no answer to your pillow question. Clearly we need to reconfigure our interpretation of the clue."

Together they remade the bed.

"*Key 119 plus the rest*. It seemed so straight forward," Kit said reclining on the couch.

David turned slowly, eyeing the other elements of the room.

"*The rest*. What in here might be considered some kind of *rest*?"

Kit looked around.

"The bookcase – books and knickknacks are *resting* on it."

He got to his feet and walked to it, moving the several books and larger trinkets to see under and behind them. He flipped through the books.

"Nada," he reported.

"How about the ottoman – a foot rest?" David suggested.

They turned it over and loosened the sheer black fabric covering the underside. Again no envelope. They operated in a similar manner on the couch, the two overstuffed chairs and one at the desk.

"Maybe it isn't an envelope that we're looking for," Kit suggested. "The clues could take other forms I suppose."

"Interesting. It leads us to the necessity of examining, and looking under and behind every single object in the room."

"I'll start at the front of the room. You begin at the back and we'll meet in the middle, under the ceiling fan."

An hour later their backs met in the center of the room.

David sighed.

Kit sighed bigger and longer and with that edgy, fully unsubtle, touch of angst unique to the teenage species."

David pulled the desk chair to the center of the room and pulled the chain that brought the fan to a reluctant stop.

"Take a look on top of the blades. The fan is now at *rest*, I suppose."

"Not a bad idea, actually," Kit said and he mounted the chair to examine things.

"Sometimes even good ideas don't pan out, Unc. Sorry."

He jumped to the floor and returned the chair to the desk.

"It's nearly one o'clock," David said. "We better get some shuteye and begin all over again in the morning."

"Good idea."

They began getting ready for bed. Kit continued.

"You know, we still haven't included that rectangle and arrow into all of this."

"You're right. I guess I just by-passed it once things looked so easy. Any ideas?"

"If it means not on the top, and room 119 *is* on the top floor, does that take us anywhere?"

"I don't know. It opens a new avenue."

"That this room 119 is not the 119 we're looking for."

"How many rooms in the other hotel – the one with the native name?"

"It didn't say. Just mentioned that it was considerably smaller and that would mean no room 119."

"Unless they begin numbering with 100 like most hotels do."

"So, that's our next step? To drop in on the other hotel."

"It's the only option I see on the table right now."

"Okay. I can sleep on that," Kit said.

"Son, you can sleep on anything. Me on the right and you on the left like in the old days?"

"Should work. I'll set my alarm for when?"

"Make it seven. That'll give us six solid hours."

"Shall I get into my naughty nighty now, dear?" Kit said falsetto, kidding his uncle.

"If you do it will be the first time I've ever seen you wear *anything* to bed!"

"I do hope nobody's listening at the door."

"People will think what people will think, Kit."

"I know. I was mostly kidding. I still have a few lingering issues about wanting other people to see me in a positive light."

"Speaking of light, turn it out okay."

"Yeah. . . . Bed's really comfy. I wonder if the typical occupants even realize that."

"I sincerely doubt it. Good night. Love you."

"Good night. Love you, too, Uncle David."

"Uncle David."

"Yes."

"The first time is really great, right."

"Are we talking about intercourse?"

"Yeah."

"Was your first time at T-Ball great?"

"No. I missed the ball, my bat went flying, and I fell and hurt my elbow."

"Sounds a lot like my first time with a girl. All things take practice and in the case of sex the practice sessions just keep getting better and better."

"Thanks. Knowing that takes a lot of performance pressure off me."

"Glad I could help. Sleep tight."

"We *could* discuss the absurdity of *that* expression – *sleep tight*?"

"Have a nice chat with yourself. I, for one, am going to sleep."

\* \* \* \* \*

David had awakened with the sun and had bathed and shaved by the time the annoying beeps chirped from the alarm on Kit's phone.

"Hey!" Kit said acknowledging his uncle as he rolled over to do whatever it was he had to do to turn it off.

"Some weather!" David said hoping his enthusiasm would rouse the boy into full consciousness. "Beautiful day out there. No shower in here by the way. Just a humongous tub. Seems to be plenty of warm water. May be the only kind of water there is on a tropical island come to think about it. You better get in and out. I still hope we can leave this place before noon."

Within the half hour – Kit cleaned up and their hunger satisfied – they were walking the beach toward the smaller hotel. The air was filled with birds. The flowers were beautiful. By day it became clear just how lush equatorial foliage could be.

They glanced at the somewhat higher, inland section. In harsh contrast it was moon-like, grey, and barren.

The second hotel was indeed much smaller and may have rated one star to the Menen's three.

"I feel the need for a plan," Kit said.

"Yes. I've been thinking about that. Just follow my lead."

"Okay but that doesn't seem to qualify as a very good plan."

They entered and were met by an attractive young woman – perhaps in her mid-twenties. David spoke. Kit looked.

"We are considering this island as a possible site for an international business meeting. Could we please see a sampling of your rooms?"

"Certainly, Mr. Stephanopoulos."

Kit and David looked at each other as if to say, 'No secrets around here'.

She led them to the rear of the entry hall and outside. The rooms all had private entries from a deck.

"This one is unoccupied," she said, pointing to the first door in the line of ten which lay to the east.

She opened it and stepped back so they could enter. Not being really interested in the accommodations David gave it a quick once over and nodded.

"Seems quite comfortable. Thank you. May we just wander around the grounds for a few minutes?"

"Certainly. I'll be in the lobby if you have questions."

She left. Kit's eyes lingered over her . . . exit.

"Let's see if there's a 119 around here," David said.

"Well, there's a 36/24/36 around here for sure."

"Down boy. Eyes on numbers not knockers."

"Very clever, actually. Worth a gold star."

They walked along the deck.

"119!" Kit said pointing several doors ahead.  
"Try the door."  
He got a frown from Kit.  
"If it's occupied I'll say I made an error. Misread it as 110. Time, Kit! We have no time to spare!"  
Kit pushed the door open. The room was empty. They moved inside. David locked the door behind them.  
"Let's do the bed first," he suggested.  
"This routine is becoming far too familiar," Kit said.  
"And so is the result. Another big nothing."  
"Do we search the rest of the place?"  
"It's our only current option."  
Kit nodded knowing the answer before it had been given.  
Thirty minutes later they found themselves without *any* options.  
Kit sighed his patented, torment laden, sigh.  
"Every time we come up empty I think about that frightened little boy huddled naked in the corner of a damp, dark, dungeon somewhere."  
"Actually, I imagine young Ari is being pretty well taken care of. His captors have no beef with him."  
"I hope you're right."  
Kit wanted to be convinced, but wasn't.  
They left the room and walked around the building to the beach.  
"Hey. Been looking for you guys."  
It was Jojo on the run from behind them.  
"Wondered if you wanted to go topside and see the old mines."  
"Topside?" the two of them asked as one, the vision of a rectangle and arrow flashing across their minds.  
Jojo pointed inland.  
"It's what the interior of the island is called. Because it's higher I suppose. Never thought much about it, really."  
"I think we'll have to skip that this trip. There is one other thing though."  
"What? Anything? Girls?"  
"No."  
"You two *do* like girls don't you?"  
"Yes. We both have our ladies back home to whom we remain completely loyal."  
"That's a good thing. Malu and I have been that way for years."  
The glance exchanged between Kit and David telegraphed the same question: 'How young did puberty arrive there on Nauru?'  
"So, what do you need?"  
"You mentioned turning the mattress in room 119 recently."  
" Yes. Yesterday. I turn all the mattresses at the Menen every day. It is our tradition."

"This will seem odd, I'm sure, but did you find anything unusual when you did that in 119?"

"Unusual? Like an envelope with a puzzle in it you mean?"

"Yes. That is what I mean," David said, exaggerating a deliberateness in his response to cover his full-out excitement. "You see, Kit and I are on a treasure hunt for charity and that was to be our clue about where we were to go next."

"Oh! I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"You had no way of knowing. Did you save the envelope or the card?"

"No. Malu and I tried to figure it out but when we couldn't I tossed it into the trash can."

"Would it still be in that trashcan?"

"No. The trash gets burned every morning. Here in the equatorial heat trash needs to be dealt with immediately."

David grew quiet. Kit had an idea.

"You seem to be a bright kid."

"Yes I am. Not educated but very intelligent."

"So, I imagine you remember what was on that card."

"Oh, yes. I remember. I can draw it out on paper."

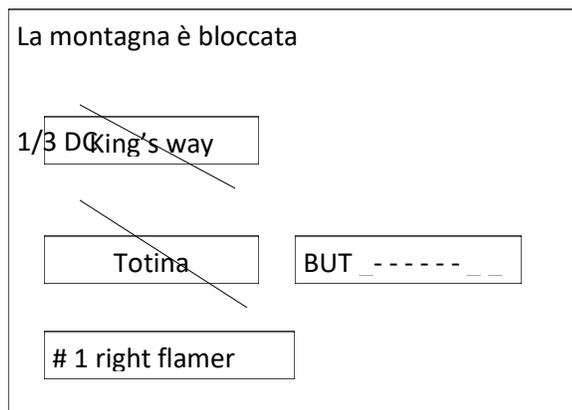
"Let's head back up to our room and you can do that for us. It will be very helpful."

Jojo went directly to the desk and took paper and pencil from its drawer. He began without hesitation.

"There. That is what it said. Mulu thinks the first line is Italian. Does it make sense to you?"

"Not immediately," David answered taking the card from the boy.

"That's part of the game – the treasure hunt – to figure it



all out," Kit added feeling David had left too many suspicious loose ends dangling.

Jojo nodded apparently satisfied.

"Again, I'm sorry if I destroyed something so important."

“If this is an *accurate* copy, no harm has been done,” David said.

“Oh. It is accurate. You can have my girl friend make one for you, too. It will be the same. Mulu is very intelligent. It is why I chose her to be my intended – well, that and here great skill at lukaluka.” Shall I get her?”

“No need for that. I tell you what you can do,” David said reaching into his pocket and removing another twenty. “You can take her out to lunch on us and ask her to reproduce it for you. If it is the same, all is well. If not I’d like to know about the differences. I’ll call you here at the hotel about two for your report. Okay?”

“Very okay. Thank you.”

Jojo left sniffing the crisp, green, bill.

David turned to Kit.

“Let’s roll up our sleeves and get to work on this.”

They took seats beside each other on the couch both passing up the opportunity to joke about the sleeve reference – the two of them being in T-shirts.

“I assume you can translate the Italian in the first line,” Kit said. “Something about a mountain, perhaps?”

“*The mountain is trapped* or blocked.”

“How do you trap a mountain?” Kit asked then continued. “Like it could be surrounded by water – an island? Blocked by water.”

“Seems logical. Doesn’t feel right to me though. Trapped?”

“If we are talking about another small country – like the other two *have* been – then maybe a mountain country trapped by the boundaries of other countries. Switzerland?”

“It was written in Italian, remember. That has to be part of the clue. What about the reference, 1/3 DC?”

“DC? DC? Any countries with those initials?”

“None that I recall. How about District of Columbia – our capitol city?”

“How can we use the 1/3?”

“Population, age, area . . .”

“Let’s go with area since we’re into countries,” Kit suggested taking the laptop from his backpack and beginning a search.

“Let’s see. Washington DC has 68.3 square miles. A third of that is about 22 or 23. Assuming we’ll probably be dealing in square kilometers that would be what . . . roughly 60.”

“That’s huge in terms of the countries to which we’ve been directed so far. It seems like we’re on a tiny country hunt. We need to have Paul along. His dissertation dealt with personality patterns of the inhabitants of the smallest countries.”

“And what did he find?”

“The very, very, short conclusion: they were generally happier, more mutually helpful and compassionate than people from larger countries in similar geography and position on the globe. I have a copy at home if your interest continues.”

Kit nodded making no commitment to pursue it. He brought up a site about the

smallest countries.

“How about a land locked little mountain country smack dab in the center of Italy.”

“San Marino?”

Kit nodded.

“How big?”

“Would you believe 60 square kilometers?”

“I’ll feel more comfortable with a little more evidence,” David said. “What else do we have to go on?”

“There is the King’s Way box with a slash through it. Probably means *not* the King’s Way but as of now we don’t have any alternative for it. Then the box with *Totina* in it. It’s also slashed. That’s followed by the word BUT and an empty box with six dashed lines along the bottom.”

“Six letters in Totina and six spaces in the *but box*.”

“Lot of that ‘but box’ thing going around in these little principalities,” Kit said with a grin.

David acknowledged it with a quick smile. He began thinking out loud.

“It is *not* Totina but something else – something else with six parts. Totina also has six parts.”

“The arrangement of the letters, maybe?” Kit asked.

“Very likely. I think there’s some software on that thing that arranges letters and numbers in all possible combinations. See if you can . . . .”

“This one, you mean, of course.”

“Yes, of course. Why did I waste my breath?”

“Should I search in English or Italian?”

“Try Italian first.”

Silence.

“Believe it or not, when it’s written with the capital T as Jojo wrote it, it’s giving us just one possibility – Titano. Can you translate?”

“Not literally. But I believe an ancient castle sits on a mountain by that name.”

“I’m on it. . . . I think we have your evidence. San Marino is essentially just Mount Titano. It’s where the city of San Marino is located – apparently up near the top. The structure you referred to is really more of a fortress than a castle. Several prominent towers and rows of fortification walls. Kings of old made it there home. There seem to be several levels perhaps seventy five meters or more from bottom foundation to top of the tallest tower.”

“Okay, I’m convinced it’s San Marino. You?”

“Yup. What’s with all the tiny countries do you suppose?”

“No idea. At least we have an expert waiting in the wings if we should need one.”

“Paul?”

David nodded and pointed to Kit’s cell phone.

“I know. Get Connie on the horn.”

“I’ll get our things together and order lunch. Steak, chicken, or Chinese?”

“I just have to see *Reynaldo the Chinaman* before we leave.”

It was a few minutes after one when they boarded the plane – autographed chopsticks showing above the top of Kit’s back pocket.

“Another 24 hour trip,” Kit said stowing his backpack in an overhead locker. “If memory serves me, since it’s one p.m. here today – June 4<sup>th</sup> – it is three a.m. *today* in Italy and San Marino. So, we will arrive there in about twenty four or five hours and that will be somewhere around three or four a.m. *tomorrow* morning – the fifth.”

David stuck his head into the cockpit.

“I assume we can’t land in San Marino it being a mountain and all.”

“Right. *Rimini*, Italy sits in its lap just to the north east. A few minutes drive.”

“I guess we’re ready back here whenever you are.”

“You got what you came after then?” Alex asked.

David nodded.

“You two get rested?”

“Sure did. Spent most of our time doing lukaluka.”

Hearing that, Kit was immediately at the door.

“Not together, I hope.”

“Of course, together – Connie won six times and I won five.”

“Won? You made it a contest? You have me terribly confused on more than one front.”

“Didn’t Jojo show you how to play?”

“He spoke of it often but, no. Taught us? This is getting just down right weird. Explain, please.”

“*Lukaluka*. The native board game. Sort of an egghead’s combination of Monopoly and Clue. Extremely challenging!”

“Really?”

“Really!”

Kit and David exchanged sheepish glances.

“The goose is ready,” Connie said. “Buckle up. We’ll be retracing our steps, refueling three times again. Be fighting headwinds most of the way so it may take some longer getting back to Europe.”

David took a seat in his favorite recliner and buckled in. Kit followed suit. He was clearly less troubled about flying than he had been the summer before. He was more troubled, however, about the way he had allowed himself to jump to the unfounded ‘lukaluka’ conclusion.

Within minutes they were airborne having taken off due west, a course they would follow to Jakarta. Refueled, they would chart a course just slightly to the north of west, which would take them to Mogadishu, in Somalia, a place that was only really friendly to westerners when the locals stood to make a buck or two. A plane full of fuel qualified so they expected a repeat of the cordiality paid them on the first stop. Then it

would be a straight shot northwest to Rimini where they would put up in a hotel and hire a car for their stint in San Marino.

"So, am I going to get to hear about your Ari – what is her name again?"

"Allison. Allison Astor, descendant of John Jacob – the furrier of the Hudson Bay area. *Her* family's money actually comes from some junk food company her grandfather started. She's a health nut but feels no compunction about enjoying the money the less enlightened spend on her father's salt, fat, and sugar based poisons."

"Pretty?"

"In a way. Not Maria gorgeous – remember Maria from the nude beach in Brazil?"

"Oh, yes."

"But, she's several cuts above average, I'd say. I really don't think of her in terms of looks. It's her mind that intrigues me."

"So when you're nude with her in and around her pool . . ."

"Her pool and everywhere else, there, actually. It's just *that* - nude – Maria nude. Nothing sensually *naked* about it. Very comfortable knowing we're friends of the head and not of the groin."

David chuckled out loud.

"What?"

"Just you being you, Kit. It's wonderful. I miss it."

Kit figured he understood and wouldn't pursue it. He did continue.

"She's one of the few females I've ever met that appreciates the young male's intense sexual appetite. Most girls neither understand it nor like it. They think they'd be happy if it just went away."

"But Allison?"

"She has an interesting theory about the survival of the human species. She draws up a straw man scenario in which sex is of no more importance to the male than say . . . spitting. The reproductive act only occurs when procreation is desired. I told her she sounded like a Catholic priest.

"Her observation is that men really prefer the company of other men except for purposes ultimately tied to sex. Since that is so, in her scenario, females would be fairly useless and girl babies would probably be killed by the more powerful males to diminish the population of useless humans needing to be fed and cared for. The species would grow at a very slow rate if at all and eventually probably die off. If fathering boys became a status symbol then a few more fertile females would be needed to bear and raise them. At any rate, once a woman hit menopause she would be done away with.

"So, you see, she believes the quintessential element in the survival of this balanced society of male and female humans is due solely to the young male's intense sexual drive. I have believed that, too – in general – but had never really considered the alternatives that she provides."

"I must say it is an interesting twist that I have never contemplated."

"She takes it all a step further. She cites the male's predilection to maim or

destroy others that are for any reason not to his liking, and the female's rather opposite, basic bent toward compassion and belief in working things out. Without this balance infused by the female's gentler disposition, she believes the males would have killed each other off millennia ago. So, the male's intense, built in, need for sex, necessitates the presence of more or less willing females. And, to keep males from killing each other over who gets a given female, the more women there are the better; there is less cause for fighting so caring for them works to preserve the male population."

"So, she's contending that it is the male's sexual need, driven by the same testosterone that leads men to destroy each other, that has in fact saved the species."

"Yeah." Fascinating, isn't it? A double function for the male hormones – creating the family unit – albeit unintentionally – and the desire and willingness to protect it from all intruders."

"Probably not a logic tight argument but certainly a take worthy of exploration. Does she challenge your basic philosophic beliefs?"

"She's a strange combination, philosophically. A conservative, evangelical, evolutionist, nudist, who is on a mission to improve personal and planetary health."

"Sounds like TNT sizzling in a furnace."

"She spends much of her mental energy tying it all together into a workable, compatible, system. I kid her about her compartmented mind and advanced prowess at rationalization. She's aware of the apparent inconsistencies."

"Again, challenges for you?"

"The same old spiritual vs real world explanation thing. Frankly I'm tiring of it. The more the god guys rant on the less impressed I am especially by the anti-evolutionists. To paraphrase Shakespeare, "It seems they are protesting way too much, the way folks do when they fear their beliefs are on the brink of dissipation."

"Quite a paraphrase. William tended to leave more to the imagination of the audience."

"To their imagination or good sense. I'm beginning to have my doubts about people's good sense. Nobody seems to think through the things they say they stand for. Even most of the discussions with the others at Harvard come down to them defending their original points of view. You can't have growth producing discussions in that kind of a defensiveness driven atmosphere."

David tried to offer explanations.

"Many people don't want to grow. You don't need to, remember, when you are sure you possess the ultimate truth. Also, people tend to become more protective of the old beliefs in times of uncertainty and danger. That, of course, is just another way of saying that they are less open to new ideas – especially those that threaten the security brought about by their dear, long held, beliefs."

"It seems to me that in times of crisis – like the ones in the World today, which are pitting ethnic against ethnic and religion against religion – that it is the honest and open consideration of *new* ideas that is exactly what's needed if things are to be resolved peacefully and for the long term. Quite clearly the old ideas aren't working all that

well."

"You're right of course, Kit. Unfortunately, history suggests that we first opt to pull back into our own parochial, philosophical, enclaves and that it is not until some legitimate, respected, voice from *within* our group calls for reform that it begins to develop."

"That, or all out war to attempt the destruction of some powerful competing belief system."

"Yes. And down through history *that* has happened on more occasions than either of us wants to contemplate," David agreed.

"So," Kit said looking David in the eyes, "where do *you* find the basis for your belief that there is a basic goodness in man? It is becoming more and more apparent to me that your Ari may have been right. Man is a greedy, selfish, insular, being, fully unmoved – lazy if you will – to search out new and improved belief systems, values, and ways of relating with one another."

"Something has sure put a bee in your bonnet, son. I'm pleased about that, you know."

"Yeah. Keep the kid's anxiety at the highest possible pitch so he can *grow*. I think I'm sick of growing. I know. That puts me into the same category of folks I've just been ranting against. Maybe it supports Ari's position. How about a new topic?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

The approach to Rimini was a straight line, northwest over the deep blue Adriatic Sea with a last minute hard left descent into the airport. There had been a fleeting moonlight view of San Marino rising like a jagged, shadowy, cone from the irregular terrain at its base. The scene hinted at a generally eye-pleasing mixture of the dark rock outcroppings and the green foliage that cradled them. The light of day would soften the edges and work the subtleties of hues into a more vibrant display.

It was 4:30 in the morning when they had at last arranged themselves into their room. So Kit wouldn't think the trip had been a complete letdown, David had booked a top of the line three room suite.

"Now this is more like what I'd expect a 'Savior of Mankind' to deserve," Kit said walking the rooms, nodding his approval. "Old but substantial and functional even if opulently ornate."

"I'm glad you approve."

"Always willing to offer an astute, studied, evaluation."

"And have been since those first words of yours."

"And what were they?"

"When you were two and I laced up a new pair of shoes on your feet, your response, accompanied by the vigorous shaking of your head, was, 'No like!'"

"And?"

"You removed them – along with everything else you were wearing – and promptly beat a path to the bathroom where you deposited the lot of it in the stool."

"Even at that tender age I was wise enough to seek the freedom of nudity."

"Or cantankerous enough to beleaguer us with your impish antics."

"I can live with either of those."

David's phone rang. It was Alex.

"Just a couple of words of warning about San Marino."

"We'll listen to anything you got."

David motioned Kit close to listen.

"The natives all seem to have leaned to drive in bumper car arenas. They don't slow for pedestrians, curves, or other perils on the road. I mean it – *they don't!* Second, the government has placed virtually no fences, or walls, or other guardrails to protect

sightseers from falling to their deaths at the edges of the mountain. Their reasoning goes something like this: Railings provide a false sense of security and unthinking people will flip over the top or slide beneath them. For whatever reason there are almost no such accidents. Perhaps requiring people to rely on their own good sense instead of over protecting them, actually works. A problem for socialism, Democrats, and lawyers, perhaps.”

“You added that just to keep me awake pondering it all night, Big Al,” Kit said. “Not funny!”

“Night, night!”

He hung up chuckling – also for Kit’s benefit.

“I love that guy, you know, Unc. I’ll get him good eventually but I love him.”

“Tell me when you’re ready to get to work.”

“I think that would be now. A plan of action here at the outset seems warranted?”

“Yes, such as it can be with no more to go on than we have.”

“I’d vote for an immediate dose of either food or sleep,” Kit said.

“We both overslept on the flight. Let’s eat in one of the restaurants here in the hotel.”

David removed the menus from the desk drawer.

“Looks like the choice is rooftop coat and tie fancy or basement slashed jeans informal.”

“Pizza and spaghetti?”

“*Lo Scantinato* – the basement. Promises the best spaghetti and meatballs on the face of the Earth plus beautiful, buxom wenches to serve your every need.”

“Spaghetti and buxom meatballs sound like winners to me,” Kit said grinning.

“You misplaced the adjective.”

“Not in *my* fantasy I didn’t!”

Over the best spaghetti and meatballs on the planet – with sides of French bread, ravioli, and the thickest marinara sauce they’d ever experienced – they set the general plan. After . . . whatever meal that might have been . . . they would pick up the rental car and head for San Marino. As they ate, Kit read the highlights from a brochure he had picked up in the hotel lobby.

“Thirty thousand people live over there and thousands more Italians enter every day to work. The third smallest state in Europe after the Vatican and Monaco. Four towns: San Marino up top, and three at the base of the mountain – Serravalle, Borgo Maggiore, and Domagnano. Primarily Roman Catholic, Italian is the official language, Euros the currency, tourism the biggest industry. It was said to have been founded in 301 AD which makes it the oldest, on-going, country in the world. Highest point is the summit of *Mount Titano* at 755 meters – about 2400 or so feet. Says they maintain some small mountain villages with picturesque medieval streets and people dressed to match. Tourist traps, I assume. Parts of the fortress are approaching two thousand years old. Some of it has been refurbished and houses museums and such. You think that’s where we’ll find the next clue?”

“Don’t know, Kit. We need to ascertain if the phrase, ‘*King’s Way*’ means anything, or is generally known there. If so, we may be on *our* way. If not we’ll have to look for some more abstract connection, I guess.”

“King’s Way. Could mean the road, I suppose – the way the Kings got to the fortress.”

“A private road?”

“I see the problem. Lucky to have cut one road for *all* to use getting up there.”

“We also have the last part of the clue – # *I right flamer*. We need to find out if the term ‘flamer’ may be a local idiom or reference.”

“Okay, then. We have some starting places. That’s good. It’s as near to a plan as we can hatch at this point. When do we leave?”

“Showers, clean duds, then rental car. Ready to leave here?”

“Can’t leave an Italian restaurant without a cannoli. I think it’s against the law here, isn’t it.”

“I’ll pass and risk arrest.”

“I’ll have two. That way the authorities will probably go easy on you.”

One cannoli in the stomach and one in his pocket, they went back to their room and cleaned up. As they dressed, Kit talked.

“You know what the most puzzling thing was to me when my body changed from that of a boy into a man?”

“I can hardly wait. What?”

“How, after doing absolutely nothing for twelve hours, I still stunk like I’d been playing football for days.”

“Ah, yes. Those amazing, masculine, sweat glands.”

“I have a hard time seeing the evolutionary advantage of stinking sweat.”

“It only takes on that bad aroma after a half hour or so – when the invading bacteria begin dying. During its first fifteen minutes its sweet smell tends to have an aphrodisiac-like effect on females.”

“Really? So, a little active foreplay actually works to the guy’s advantage. Who’d a thought?”

“More realistically it’s one of the reasons the female wants to cuddle close to her man afterwards – assuming he was clean to begin with.”

“You are a never ending supply of fascinating trivia, Uncle David.”

“As are you, my friend. The Trivia Twins – Useless and Worthless.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Route 72 west from Rimini was wide, paved, and generally pleasant to drive. In less time than it had taken to secure the car, they found themselves at the boarder of San Marino. A cursory look at the passports and a broad smile from the checkpoint attendants and they were on their way.

They first came to Serravalle, the second largest city. The highway skirted it to the north and they did not enter the city proper. The generally straight and long gentle curves of the road to that point suddenly gave way to zigs and zags, ups and downs and a

good sampling of the drivers about which Alex had warned them. Kit was at the wheel and in most instances resisted his inclination to sit on the horn and express his displeasure with the other drivers. The rodeo-like atmosphere continued right up into San Marino.

Kit pointed.

“The three towers of the fortress. Guaita, Cesta and Montale. I’m not sure which is which. I think Cesta is the highest one. It houses the Museum of Ancient Arms – a one of a kind display not to be missed if a history of the devices men have invented to kill each other off in ever more efficient ways is high on your list of pleasures.”

“I’ll pass – unless one of those gadgets is called a ‘flamer’.”

“Shall we park?”

“Looks like we have little choice. The road into the main part of the city seems to be more or less permanently blocked off.”

They parked and were immediately approached by several street venders offering such things as models of the fortress in the form of paperweights, its image on a variety of goods, and dolls dressed in medieval costumes of the area.

Most spoke English which made conversation both more relaxed and more accurate.

David purchased a pair of dolls – a boy and girl – and left them in the car. It had been more of a ploy to engage the young lady in conversation.

“Can you tell me if the phrase, “King’s way,” means anything special here in San Marino?”

“If it does I’ve never heard it. I’m sorry.”

“How about the term ‘flamer’?”

She lowered her head and giggled. The younger boy who accompanied her provided the answer.

“It means boys who like boys. You like boys?”

“Not in the way that I believe you mean. Thank you.”

Kit and David began moving up the hill toward the fortress. A hundred yards into the walk the boy from before arrived at their side, having run to catch up.

“The flamer you asked about. My sister and I got to thinking after you left. There is an ancient weapon that is often referred to by that name. It is like a primitive flame thrower. It went through many stages of development. You can see it at the Weapons Museum in the second tower – that’s Cesta for sightseers.”

David quickly found a twenty dollar bill and handed it to the boy.

“It’s not Euro but it’s good. Can you take us there?”

“Sì. For twenty American I can take you anywhere and back again. Of course in our small country nothing is more than ten kilometers from where we stand. You keep walking up the cobble stone path. I must go back and tell my sister; then I’ll catch up.”

“Speaks great English for a . . . what . . . eleven or twelve year old?” Kit said.

“About that, and yes, he does. I’ll bet he has a story.”

No more than five minutes passed and he was back right there bobbing along side them.

“You run but you don’t pant,” Kit said. It was a question.

“I’ve run the slopes all my life. Got good lungs. I love to run. Someday I’m going to win medals.”

“You were born here – you’re a citizen of San Marino?” David asked easing into the boy’s story.

“Sì. I mean yes. You two seem bright enough to catch my drift even in Italian.”

“Sì,” Kit answered his smile assuring the boy all was well without exposing the fact he had just expended his entire Italian vocabulary – unless spaghetti and canola counted.

“Your English is impeccable – you know impeccable?”

“From context I’d say it means really great – flawless, maybe. My mother would be proud to hear that. She was American. A doctor. Volunteered to help in Africa for six months and was killed by the renegade soldiers.”

“We are so sorry . . . I guess I don’t even know your name.”

“Salvatore. I go by either Sal or Sam. I prefer Sam – it’s what Mama always called me.”

“You have a father.” It sounded like a question as it left Kit’s lips.

“Yes, also Sal. He is a teacher. Born here like me – or is that like I? Still get the subtle stuff like that confused.”

“For what its worth it would be like I – born here like I was, not like me was,” Kit said assuming there was some sincerity in his question.

Sam nodded appreciatively.

“Papa and I are Sammarinese – the old stock that have inhabited this mountain for two or more thousand years. We make up about three quarters of the population – the rest is mostly Italian of course.”

“What was your first language?”

“Hard to say. Papa always spoke Italian to me and from Mama it was always English. A good plan I’ve always thought. I also speak French and German like most European kids. Next year I start Russian.”

“Your sister is very beautiful,” Kit said.

“Yes she is and she is taken – that is she has a steady boy friend. She did ask me to get your name, however. Louigi is gone to Paris for the summer.”

“How rude of us. This is David, my Uncle. I’m Kit.”

“Good to meet you. Salvatore Samuel Guccione at your service.”

“Lot’s of visitors today,” David said noting the crowd.

“We count on them for much of our income.”

“The doll business pretty good, is it?”

“Yes. My grandmama makes them; my sister, Valencia, and I sell them when we’re not in school. They look just like the costumes of the villagers – in the medieval towns we maintain to up our *quaint factor*.”

“Quaint factor. What a wonderful term,” David said.

“I believe it is of my own construction. I’ve never heard it actually used here.”

“I’ll make sure to give you a footnote should I ever write about *the quaint factor\**.”

“These walls begin the area we refer to as the Fortress. It’s actually made up of three main towers built hundreds of years apart, and row after row of protective walls. The ones we will come to first are the youngest – added later than the others. It’s a progressive thing like that as we work our way to the oldest part in the central area. Successive kings just kept building protective walls. Seem to have worked since we’re the oldest country in the world.”

“Smart kings or strong walls?” Kit asked joking.

“Maybe neither, actually. It’s a killer great position on top of this steep mountain. Me and my friends could fend off an army with nothing but rotten eggs from up here.”

They moved on for a hundred yards at which point they came upon the first actual gate-like structure. Beside it sat a large stone perhaps three feet tall and two wide. It was shaped like a tear drop. It caught Kit’s eye and he walked to it.

“The crying stone,” Sam said. “I don’t know its story.”

“There are carved words on the back running top to bottom. Some help, guys. My Italian is a little non-existent.”

“Let’s see,” Sam said. “I didn’t know about it.”

“L'entrata del re, The Entrance of the King.”

David and Kit looked at each other. Kit put it into words.

“The King’s Way, maybe?”

“Maybe.”

He turned to Sam.

“Anyway of finding out what the story is about that phrase?”

“Sure. Bart will probably know. He’s a guide up in the second tower.”

Kit took several photographs before they moved on.

Bart was gray of temples and wore thick, wire rimmed glasses. He was slender – gaunt perhaps – and looked to be in his seventies. His quick, smile worked to give his angular, generally unattractive face a pleasant, friendly, aspect.

“Bart, I’d like you to meet my two newest friends, Kit and his Uncle David . . . from the United States, I assume.”

“Yes. Indiana,” David said offering his hand and again feeling embarrassed for not having established that with the boy.

“How may I help you?”

Sam took over.

“The crying stone. What can you tell us about the inscription on the back?”

“Ah. Yes. The back which is really the front.”

The other three looked puzzled.

“Originally the stone sat on its side at the entrance used by the King of the day – hence the inscription. After he was killed in battle, the queen – two dozen years his junior – noticed that if set upright the stone would appear tear shaped. She ordered it reset with the inscription out of sight since the king would never enter there again. It was

to remind the people that her eyes would forevermore be laced in tears for her dear departed husband. Three months later she married her coachman and they and their twelve sons lived happily ever after – as such stories must always end.”

“Thank you,” David said. “One more thing, if I may.”

“Certainly.”

“What might be the opposite of the king’s entrance? My question is difficult to phrase so it makes sense. If not the King’s Entrance, than what?”

“I don’t know, really. There were dozens of entrances. None of them specifically set aside for a particular person or class that I know of.”

“Okay then. Thanks again. Can you point us in the direction of the Flamer Display.”

“The weapon, you mean?”

“Is there something else by that name?”

“Roughly translated it was a locally used designation for the fish oil lamps back a hundred and fifty years or so. When carried through the winter winds the vessel containing the oil inside the glass panes tended to spill and it would flame up becoming too hot to carry, often being dropped and starting fires. I haven’t heard the term outside the pages of obscure history books since I was a lad.”

“Thank you a second time. You’re a fountain of information. May I dip into your resources one more time?”

“Certainly.”

“Would there be any such lanterns still on the premises here?”

“Hmm. There is one in the museum of relics down in Montegiardino. If there are any here, I assume they would be in the bowels of the fortress – down in the dungeons and grain storage areas. They would be fully useless I’d think after all these years. I cannot say that as a certainty – that there are or are not any there, you understand. It is not an area open to the public. It is a dangerous mixture of weak and crumbling stone work and is home to rats the size of large cats. Not a safe or pleasant place to be.”

“Okay then. Again we thank you for your time.”

“Pleased to have been of help. Don’t let *Sam* lead you astray, now. He’s been known to cut legal corners from time to time.”

It had been a clear invitation – direction, perhaps – to use the boy if they decided to go ahead and investigate the forbidden bowels, as he had characterized the lower area. They all understood the old gentleman’s message. David tipped him generously.

They left the museum area and went back outside.

“Bart seemed to have great confidence in your skills in certain areas,” David said looking directly down into Sam’s face.

“I’ve been known to be places some folks would rather I wasn’t.”

“And if I were to guess, I’d say you probably know the lower off limit area fairly well.”

“And you probably would not be wrong. When Mama died I sort of withdrew for a while. I needed a place of my own away from everybody. I fixed up a place down

there. Papa knows about it – has all along. He didn't give me his blessing but he didn't forbid it. I always take a cell phone when I'm down there. It's a small country. Not a whole lot of options when it comes to carving out your private space."

"Lanterns? Flamers?"

"Truthfully I can't say I've ever seen any, but then I've kept pretty much to just the area near my place. For safety sake I don't go very far inside. Several tunnel-like halls at the very bottom. They lead to stone staircases that go up into the fortress at different places and to different levels. As many have collapsed as remain. I'd stay out of them. What's your interest, anyway?"

David gave the song and dance about the international treasure hunt for a children's charity – actually less a falsehood this time around than last.

"Well, if it's for kids we have to make this thing work," Sam said his interest clearly captured. "I still don't understand why the lanterns, but that can be your business. When do we go?"

"How soon can you be ready?"

He grinned.

"I been on it for three minutes."

"Lead the way, then."

Kit was amused at the interplay between the boy and his Uncle. His next family project was to bring a new cousin into his life. He just hadn't figured how to do it.

\* \* \* \* \*

They took a trail, which Sam assured them led to one of the medieval hamlets. They just would not take it all the way. It wound to the right, around the base of the Fortress at a very steep slope. At a point where it curved through a wooded area, well out of sight of anybody, Sam led them off the trail to the right through a healthy stand of bushes. Once beyond them the woods crept up the side of the mountain becoming mostly scrub by the time the trio reached the lowermost wall. It was more like a retaining wall than a defensive structure.

"To the left," Sam said, pointing. "Just beyond the outcrop of rocks."

He continued to lead the way. A small boulder dislodged from somewhere above, tumbled in their direction as if to prove the points previously made about the rampant deterioration and accompanying dangers. It made believers of Kit and David who took on a suddenly cautious approach.

"You'll have to duck," Sam said as they approached an opening into the rock wall. "Ten feet stooped over and then we'll be able to stand."

It occurred just as he had laid it out. The tunnel was straight and remained dimly lit from the light outside.

"Stop a second while I make some light."

In just about that amount of time a large bowl candle came to life and its two inch floating wick provided plenty of light to illuminate the small room. The walls were narrow slabs of rock seamlessly fit together. The ceiling was constructed of huge slabs of rock spanning the ten by ten foot expanse. Sam had covered the hard packed dirt floor

with many layers of black, plastic, tarps weighted down around the edges by short segments of six inch logs. There was a gap or cleft near the bottom of the wall to the left which served as his fireplace. He explained that a fissure in the rock above served to vent the smoke. It was quite chilly – perhaps forty five to fifty degrees. He lit a small fire.’

“After an hour the candle would bring the temperature up all by itself. I got a store of blankets and some pillows in those trash bags in the corner. It’s really pretty cozy. I got lots of books – they’re in bags as well – too damp in here you see. Have to keep things moisture proofed.”

“Looks like boy heaven to me,” Kit said nodding his approval.

“Thanks. Nobody but papa has been here before.”

“We feel honored, then,” David said, “and your secret is certainly safe with us.”

“They don’t torture prisoners here anymore do they?” Kit quipped as if to say if they did he wasn’t so sure he might not give the place up. “One question, though. What’s that odd odor? Not musty like I’d expect. Pleasant even.”

“It’s like moth balls. An ancient recipe my grandmama makes. Seems that it works moderately well on moths but super on rodents. I lined the entry tunnel with the stuff and I’ve never seen a rat in here.”

It was worth a round of smiles.

“What about the other entrances?” David asked.

“Maybe that’s it, Uncle David. Other entrances. Entrances for others. Ways in for those *other* than the King. *Not* the King’s Way.”

Sam listened puzzled but fascinated.

“A very good possibility, Kit.”

He turned back to Sam.

“Bart indicated there were lots of entrances.”

“*Were*, lots of entrances. Few are still open. Most have either collapsed or have filled up with debris. Maybe six left down here. All within a hundred meters.”

“You say you haven’t really explored inside any of them?”

“Right. I scouted this one thoroughly and papa even gave his approval. The others I’m not so sure of.”

“Will you show us the others?”

“Sure. Don’t you want to eat first?”

“Eat?” David said puzzled at the suggestion.

“Yeah. I got quite a larder here in my cold box.

He slid a thick slab of wood aside revealing a two foot by two foot hole in the ground.

“Stays about fifty in there all the time. I got apples, cantaloupe, oranges, wieners, and lots of canned stuff – beans, soup, chili, meatballs.”

“Some of that fruit sounds pretty good to me,” Kit said. “It’s been a good while since we ate.”

The pillows were broken out for seats and a stash of paper plates and plastic ware was soon distributed.

“Like your beans hot or cold? Got ham in them.”

“Cold is fine for me,” David said, really wanting to speed up the process.

It was a feast of ham and beans, French bread with home churned butter, apples and oranges all amid the sweet smelling aroma of grandmama’s amazing almost moth balls.

“This is actually a lot like the meals people were eating here seventeen hundred years ago,” Sam said. “Makes me feel like a part of history, you know.”

David slowed his pace and took time to put the moment into the perspective suggested by the lad. It felt right.

With things appropriately re-stowed inside Sam’s Place, they returned to the light of day – appreciating the warmth of the sun, which was, by then, directly overhead.

“Two to the south and three to the north,” Sam said cryptically.

“Let’s look north,” David said making the choice toward the nearest edge of the mountain.

The scrub was tough and sharp and it took some degree of care and caution to navigate their way northward along the wall, or what was left of it in many cases.

They came to the first opening – stone pillars and lintel in construction. Kit removed a flashlight from his backpack. Sam had brought one along from his ‘place’. They entered, Kit first, then Sam, followed by David. It seemed the appropriate order though none could have said why.

The room, such as it was, resembled Sam’s in structure and size. There were halls angling northeast and southeast from the side walls. Kit hesitated and pointed to the opening on the south. David nodded.

“Sam,” he said. “You have no duty to be in here with us considering the possible dangers.”

“Seems like an adventure. My life involves very few adventures.”

It had been his way of saying, ‘I’m in’.

The stone-walled hall was generally clear of debris. Kit’s lead light caught the green reflection of rats, eyes and sent them scrambling along ahead of them. There were small nooks recessed into the walls every so often at shoulder height – probably where the lanterns had once set. None were to be seen.

Fifty yards into the passageway they came upon a pile of rubble – just room enough for the rats to slither through and then turn to taunt them with high pitched squeals through their huge sharp teeth and saliva dripping mouths.

They turned back. No words had been needed to give the direction.

A similar problem was encountered in the second hall and they were soon back outside headed for entrance number two.

The room inside was much larger with four stone columns spaced to support the roof. A single passageway, wider and taller than the others, opened straight ahead of them. They entered.

The floor was paved with flat hewn stones as if intended to carry heavy loads – grain on large wheeled carts perhaps. The lantern nooks alternated right and left.

“Look here,” David said stopping to examine the remains of rusted metal and soot covered glass that had once been a lantern.

Kit lifted Sam so he could see – a kind and thoughtful gesture that flowed naturally from his approach to living.

They continued to a large metal door. Rusted off its hinges, it sat askew and immovable, blocking the way. Again they turned around and headed for the outside.

Entrance three was dangerously close to the edge of the mountain. Years of erosion had crept the mountainside right up to and under the corner of the ancient wall. The ground was a mixture of small stones and earth – loose and unstable to the foot. Sam was the first to point out the potential danger.

“Never been this close before. The floor may be gone inside. I’d say don’t go in but I know you will.”

“Properly stated,” Kit said. “*We’ll* go in and *you’ll* stay out here.

“Better yet,” David said, “The *two* of you stay out here and I’ll go in.”

“That’s odd,” Sam said pointing to the large, stone, lintel spanning the door.

“I see. You do that?” Kit asked.

Sam shook his head.

“Do you know the word?” David asked.

“Sam shook his head.”

The exchange had been in reference to the recently cleaned stone surface that had a word carved into it.

“It looks like the letters, S I R F O,” Kit said using his finger to remove even more dirt from the ancient indentations.

“SERVO would be Italian for ‘serf’ – like the king’s working-class subjects in medieval times,” Sam said. “But, I don’t recognize this other spelling.”

“I imagine it’s the same word in some earlier form of the language – of Sammarinese, perhaps,” David explained. “That seems very promising – in its way the slash-side of the King’s Way.”

Kit perked up and nodded. He knelt and removed a ball of twine from his backpack.

“Five hundred feet of top flight kite string. No pun was intended there. Tie one end to your belt so we don’t lose you, okay.”

“Good idea,” David said nodding his approval.

That done, he entered, one flashlight in his hand and the other in his rear pocket for back-up. Sam’s supposition had been correct. A large portion of the floor had slid away down the mountain side leaving the wall of interlocking stones hanging in mid air – a tribute to the builder’s craftsmanship he thought.

After assessing the situation with the floor – the problem laying to his left – he concentrated the beam to his right. It illuminated another passageway, narrower than any of the others with a hard packed dirt floor. The erosion and sloughing off of the ground beneath the floor had left a ledge only four feet wide. Keeping his back to the wall so as to not put weight on the outer edge of the pathway, he inched his way to the right where

the floor eventually widened at the point it met the tunnel door.

He entered the passageway and stopped to survey the situation. The first ten feet of the walls were laden with niches similar to the ones in the other hallways they had explored. He counted six rows of six on each wall. Apparently many were needed to light the way for dozens and dozens of serfs as they entered to work in the fortress. They may have carried them to light the way inside and then replaced them in the little shelves as they came out later on.

It was then that he spotted it in the first niche to the right just inside the hall. First look suggested it was not an original fixture. David reached up and removed the lantern looking at its bottom during the process. An envelope was taped in place. He removed it and slipped it into his shirt pocket for later examination. Well, *hopefully* for later examination.

There was a rumble behind him and the taut string went limp. He turned to see the rest of the floor in the entry room giving way and rushing down the mountain side in front of him. There was no ledge left to give him access to the door. He moved as far toward the outside entrance as he could. It was still thirty feet away across a gaping hole. It was not really a hole but the new, sheer, side of the mountain dropping several thousand feet to the valley below.

Kit's head appeared at the door.

"Ouch!" came his assessment of the situation. "You okay in there?"

"I'm fine. Got the envelope, in fact. Any suggestions?"

"Sam went for help. Apparently they have a rescue team on call."

The next voice was soprano – Sam, squeezing into the entryway below Kit.

"I ran into a guy not fifty meters from here. I told him we needed help. He said we were in luck because he just happened to be your guardian angel."

"Alex?" David said surprised and relieved.

Alex appeared in the entrance above Kit.

"The three stooges I do declare," David said his characterization moving the others to a quick chuckle. "What you doing here?"

"Think I'd just set a couple of tenderfoots free on the side of a treacherous mountain?"

"Apparently not and we thank you for that. Got any ideas?"

"Lots but most of them involve beautiful young topless girls on a lazy beach several hundred miles southwest of here."

"Seriously, please!"

"I have gear in the four wheeler I rented. Sit tight and we'll be back in twenty minutes – we meaning Kit and me. I assume our young friend here will stay and keep you company."

"Me?" Sam said. "Sure. Everybody says I'm great company."

"In twenty, then," Kit said, clearly reluctant to leave.

David waved him on and took a seat on the floor. Sam also sat, curling himself against the door frame, legs propped up on the other side.

“Can you see this lantern here in the beam of my flashlight?” David asked repositioning it.

“Sure can. It’s like the one in the museum alright. Looks new, though. How can that be?”

“Not sure. I agree about the new part. On the bottom it has some letters stamped into the metal – initials of the craftsman, perhaps – POD. That ring any bells?”

“Yes and no.”

“Lots of help, Pal,” David said his smile telegraphed in his tone.

“In one of the hamlets there is a metal worker who signs his work PUD. I know him very well. Goes by the name Prince. Canadian I think. Been here for longer than I have. When I was a little kid I used to think I wanted to be a metal crafter, too. That was before everybody started pointing out to me that I had too much potential to do that. Sometimes I think this living up to your potential is a bunch of crap – pardon the slang – you know the reference?”

“Yes. I imagine crap is crap wherever English is spoken. There’s another saying, you now. Be true to yourself.”

“And another one. Be prepared to live your life feeling guilty if you don’t live up to your Mama’s expectations.”

“I’m unfamiliar with that saying.”

“It may be original with me.”

He smiled and shrugged.

“But not the first time the situation has reared its ugly head – if I may use the trite phrase.”

“Guess I’m too young to know about that.”

“I’m sure your Mama’s first wish for you would be that you find happiness.”

“She seemed very happy being a pediatrician. I imagine I could learn to be happy being one as well.”

“Perhaps. You have a few years yet to work it out. What does your papa say about it?”

“He tries to remain neutral. I think he thinks that way he won’t influence me unduly one way or another.”

“How do you react to that?”

“Usually by ignoring the problem and retreating to my place. Feeling like I don’t have any help in it.”

“Have you tried cornering him on the subject?”

“No. He’s still grieving the loss of his wife – Mama.”

“He’s no longer her husband but he *is* your father. Maybe you need to nudge him into realizing that. A person is almost always happier living in the dynamic present rather than wallowing in the static past. Do you understand my words?”

“And there meaning, I believe. Yes! Thank you. You’re wise like Prince. I’ll miss you when you leave.”

“I’m sure we could be great friends if our situations were different.”

Sam nodded and continued as if David were his most trusted confidant.

“Have you noticed how most folks seem to believe that what’s been best for them will also be best for you?”

“Yes. I can say that I have noticed that.”

“Hope I never get that way. They don’t seem to stop and think about how much pressure that puts on a kid.”

“I’m sure most adults wouldn’t want to be doing that.”

“It’s hard to think about Mama having any faults but if she did, that was the main one I think. That’s sort of funny. Hers was trying to make my mind up for me and papa’s is not being willing to help me make up my mind up at all.”

“You are a wise lad. You think about important topics don’t you?”

“Ever since I was a little kid. Mama called me her worry wart. I told her it wasn’t really worrying – just examining legitimate concerns. I think there’s a difference. Do you?”

“Oh, yes. I think you have that very straight inside that bright young head of yours.”

Sam grinned and nodded. They continued chatting until Alex and Kit returned bearing coils of rope and backpacks filled with all the right gadgets. Kit looked in.

“You okay?”

“Fine. I had excellent company. He kept my mind completely off the problem.”

Sam grinned and gave David a wink and a thumbs up.

Alex appeared, removing both Kit and Sam to make room for his own large frame.

“There are several approaches to getting you out of there, one of which does *not* involve TNT.”

“Let’s go with the quieter one, then.”

“Here’s the plan. We have to extricate you either under that suspended wall or through this door. It’s good to have a second choice in case the first approach fails. We’ll try the door here first. Is there anything in there to tie the end of a rope to?”

David looked around.

“Not a thing, I’m afraid.”

“Anything you could jam a four or five inch thick stick of wood into? A place it would hold and take your weight.”

“The floor is dirt. Maybe I could pound a pointed stick into the ground.”

“I don’t like dirt. Too instable. Anything else?”

“Just inside the hall here there are little cubbyhole like shelves carved right into the walls – on both sides. If I had a strong piece of wood about five feet long I think I could force it into a pair of those – one end on each side – across the hallway. Get my drift?”

“Yes. I’m going to toss you a ferry rope. It’s light weight like clothesline. Tie your end around one ankle to anchor it. I’ll hook things to it here, hold it high, and slide them over to you.”

“Very clever.”

“Survival 101.”

“I’ll take that as information and not as a put down.”

“Your choice.”

The ferry rope line was established. The first item that came David’s way was a sturdy trash bag.

“Put the lantern in it,” Came Kit’s instruction. “We’ll get that out here to safety first.”

“Glad to know your priorities,” David joked.

The lantern was ferried outside. The line worked just as advertised.

“The clue?” Kit called back inside.

“Safe inside my shirt pocket.”

Next, David received a small saw, and finally a more or less straight, five inch thick, six foot long, freshly cut branch. David placed one end in the upper corner of a ceiling level niche and brought the other as close as he could to the one opposite it on the other wall. He sawed off a short section and tried again. His plan was to ere on the too long side. It was. He removed another small portion. Still too long but he was learning how to make it work.

“Third time was the charm, as has been said adnausium,” David called to the others. “I have a tight, secure fit here.

“Great,” Came Alex’s response. “Next comes the harness – like used in helicopter rescues. You will strap it on and sit in it.”

“Got it. Now what?”

“Now, I’ve secured the end of some sturdy, weight bearing, rope to the ferry line. You pull it over and secure the end to the center of that chunk of tree you just forced into place. Tie it well. Your life will depend on it.”

“You paint such cheery pictures.”

Alex ignored David’s comment understanding that it was an attempt to lift his own spirits.

“Got it. Give me a few minutes here to secure it.”

Six knots later he was ready.

“Everything in place over here.”

“Get into the harness. Give us a few minutes to tie our end of the rope to a tree out here.”

“Take your time. Remember, my life will depend on it.”

David managed a quiet chuckle to himself.

A few minutes passed. David moved the clue bearing envelope from his shirt pocket to his pants pocket thinking it would be safer there just in case . . . in case of *what* he neither knew nor really wanted to contemplate. Alex appeared at the door.

“Two more things for you to do. Clip the harness onto the rope. Then tie your end of the ferry rope around your chest. I’ll use it to help pull you in this direction as you hand-over-hand yourself toward the door.

A few minutes passed as David checked and rechecked everything on his side of the experiment.

“Okay. Ready here.”

“Just start walking down the pile of rubble until your feet leave the ground. Then begin pulling yourself in this direction. You may have to reach up and move the harness clip forward from time to time.”

“Here I come – *Olly olly oxen free* – or whatever that kid game expression used to be.”

Only David and Kit knew the reference but it made no difference. The five minute journey through space seemed like fifty to David. Feeling those massive, strong hands of Alex at last dig into his shoulders and pull him to safety was an experience beyond words.

“I’ll just sit here and tremble for a few days,” David said forcing an on again, off again, smile as he sat back against a boulder.”

“Kit felt for the pulse in his uncle’s neck.

“Heart beating. Pants dry. I’d say you came through that in great shape.”

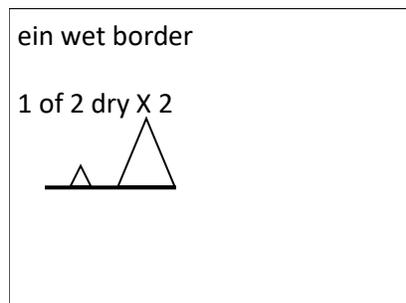
He leaned down and administered a full out hug – fully uncomfortable to both but neither wanted it to end.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Before they left they exchanged hugs and email addresses with Sam, then caravanned back to the hotel. Although the endeavor had not taken long, it had been the most exciting and exhausting leg of the journey. By mid-afternoon they were in their room ready to examine the next clue.

They sat on the couch. David held the card between them where they could both get a good look.



“Do you get the idea these clues are getting more difficult as we go along?” Kit said turning it upside down for emphasis.

“A clue is never difficult once you have it deciphered, Grasshopper.”

“How did that Grasshopper thing get started, anyway?” Kit asked.

“How do any of our inane interplays get started?”

“Grasshopper understand. Amazing how the Great Master’s questions provide immediate enlightenment.”

“And don’t forget it!”

They shared a face to face smile.

“Tell us what we have here, Kithopper.”

“Okay. *Ein wet border*. With a year of German under my belt now I’d say that ein means one and gives us the further reference to a German speaking country.”

“The wet border could mean it is next to – abuts – an ocean,” David said. “Germany itself has one wet border in that sense – the North and Baltic seas to its north.”

Kit went on.

"1 of 2 dry X 2. Wet and dry. If wet refers to some body of water in the first part, then dry . . . I got nothing."

"It's *two* dry somethings but only *one* of those is to be of interest to us," David said trying to keep Kit thinking.

He picked up the pad of paper from the coffee table in front of them.

"Do you suppose it means this: (1 of 2 dry)<sup>2</sup>. One of two dry that quantity times two?"

"I doubt if it's that mathematical," Kit said back in the game. "Let's look further. The drawing is all quite obvious, of course."

"Enlighten me!"

"The surgeons are now half way through a breast enlargement operation."

David let it pass and pressed on.

"Probably either a top view or a side view of some geographic structure. A map? Roads?"

"Roadside boobs?"

It broke them both up. When they recovered, Kit had an idea.

"Maybe a vertical slice through a country. See. A low lying plain to the left – probably west if it's a map – and it has a small hill or mountain outcropping on it. Then to the west side of the country is a large mountain or maybe mountain range."

"Feasible. Plausible. Interesting. A fascinating interpretation."

"But . . ."

"No but. I like it."

Kit sat up a bit straighter and talked through the final element in the clue.

"Domino slash checkers. Domino is in all *upper* case and checkers is in all *lower* case. I assume the slash is *just* in case."

The absurdity notwithstanding, it sent Kit into hysterics which was always infectious. Again they eventually came to their senses. David was the first to speak.

"Typically on these clues, the final one or two are specific to the location of the clue and often are meaningless until we are on site and can gather more information. Let's begin in earnest with the first several lines – usually they identify the country."

"Glancing at that second line just now the phrase, one of *two countries that are both double dry*, came to mind."

"Very good, Kit. I hadn't gone there, yet. Remember the term from geography – Double Dry?"

"Afraid not. Fortunately you must, right?"

"You know '*land locked*'?"

"Sure. A country that has no boundary on an ocean. I'm not following you, though."

"A Double Dry country is one that sits between countries that themselves are land locked – twice land locked – double dry."

"I get it. Can't be many of them can there?"

"Crank it up and see what you can find."

A minute later Kit had found some information and began reading.

“The only two doubly landlocked countries in the world are Uzbekistan and Liechtenstein. How can this country be doubly landlocked – double dry – and still have one wet border? Let me pull up some maps. Uzbekistan first. Part of its northeastern border – and it’s a really strangely shaped country – crosses the Aral Sea. Not really enough to say it has a whole border that is wet, though.

“On to Liechtenstein – that’s fun to say – Liechtenstein!”

“Are you polka-ing fun at it?”

“Really bad, Unc. We’re just not *that* desperate yet.”

“I withdraw the pun and urge you to hurry on to the next map, lickity-splitenstein.”

“I give up folks. After a certain point it becomes hopeless until sleep resets the old codger’s head.”

Kit continued searching through cyberspace.

“There we are. Ah! The inexplicable becomes immediately explicable. The entire western boarder of the country follows the Rhine River. Across from it is Switzerland – a place you’ve always promised to take me by the way. The eastern border is shared entirely with Austria.”

“Find a topographical map so we can determine plains and mountains. The Rhine Valley could certainly be represented in the drawing as the flat western section.”

“Got one. You’re right. The wide river plane gives way to an equally flat, low lying, plateau inland. The lower mountain is most likely the *Eschnerbert* at about 730 meters in height. The main mountain ranges to the east peak out at *Graukspitz* at about 2,600 meters.”

“And,” David continued from memory, “They speak German – that can explain the ‘ein’. I’m convinced. You?”

“Seems we’ve been in this paragraph before. Yes. I’m convinced. It’s off to Liechtenstein, then.”

“Probably not. May not have a suitable airport. Get Connie on the phone.”

“Connie my man. Got work for you, and goodness knows you deserve some, letting Alex do all the tough stuff here.”

“I can hang up you know.”

“But you won’t. You love conversing with me just too much. Here’s the poop. Next stop Liechtenstein. David wonders if there is an airport.”

“Let me check my magic everything about land, sea, and air travel gadget here. . . . Looks like our best bet will be to fly into St. Gallen in Switzerland. It sits about fifteen miles from the border up north and to the west of course. Sort of a disappointment.”

“How’s that?”

“A three hundred mile flight at the most from here. I’ll have to forego those wonderful bunks on the plane.”

“When do we leave, Uncle David?”

David looked at his watch. Can they be ready by six – flight plan and all?”

Kit passed on the information.

“He thinks so. Can probably be in there by seven at the latest. Arriving in the light of day for a change.”

“Packing time?” Kit said more than asked as he closed his phone.

David nodded.

“You doing okay with this hectic schedule?”

“Me?” I’m the resilient kid, remember. It’s pops we’re all concerned about.”

“Pops is doing fine. I’m eager to end this wild goose chase and get on to the more important stage of rescuing Ari.”

“Yeah. Me, too. Poor kid.”

Ten minutes saw them packed. Thirty five more had them well fed back at the basement café. They arrived plane side in their rental at the stroke of six.

“You guys get to eat?” Kit asked as they entered the cabin.

“We’re waiting to see what the Switzerland chefs have to offer us,” Alex said. “I assume we will stay at St. Gallen?”

“Yes. I arranged rooms while we ate. We will use it as our home base – the *Schöne Ansicht* which I believe translates roughly as Beautiful View.”

They were soon in the air heading NNW across the lush fertile lowlands of northern Italy.

“So, fill me in on everything about Liechtenstein,” David said unbuckling and shifting the recliner so he could sit back.”

Kit got to work on the laptop.

“Okay. Population about 35,000. Life expectancy eighty – one of the highest in the world. Was established within the Holy Roman Empire in 1719 and became a sovereign state in 1806. It is closely aligned with Switzerland using the Swiss Frank as its currency and depending entirely on Switzerland for defense – who, as I recall, does next to nothing itself in that area. Lots of light industry and some high tech stuff. Need more workers than they can provide so two thirds of the work force commutes daily from Austria, Switzerland and Germany. The prince lives in a castle on a mountain top – mostly quarried stone, cathedral-like in appearance. Says the country has a very tourist friendly road system. *Vaduz* is the capitol – sits about midway north and south close to the Rhine on the plain. The climate is milder than might be expected due to a dependable southerly wind stream out of France up the river valleys. There looks to be maybe eight major towns mostly west of the mountains – none of which can be very city-like given the small total population. We should feel right at home. At its widest point in the south the country only spans about five miles. Land area is three times that of San Marino about equal to DC then.”

“Thank you. I feel filled in.”

Kit put the computer aside.

“Where do we start? Has to be with DOMINO and *checkers*, I guess. That’s really the only clue left.”

“I’m banking on *domino* having some idiosyncratic meaning among the locals,”

David said. “Probably something fully unrelated to the game with black and white playing pieces. If it referred to the game it would be Dominos with an S. Anything in that laptop that might provide a starting place?”

“Let me take a gander.”

Kit went back to work. David went to sleep. The plane soon landed. Kit had found nothing.

Leaving the others to tend to the plane, David and Kit took a cab to the hotel. The last minute reservations had not garnered either the best rooms or the promised beautiful view. The two room suite was functional however. A small sitting room, a bedroom with two single beds, and a cramped bathroom with shower.

Kit’s German had been sufficient to handle the front desk, the fact of which the boy was clearly proud.

“A year ago I wouldn’t have known an *ein* from a *vier* or *fünf*.”

“You navigated the language very well. It’s German in Lichtenstein as well. You should get a good work out.”

“You speak fluent German, Uncle David. Feel free to jump in anytime you see I’m drowning.”

“Ich springe nach rechts innen, sobald Sie unten für das dritte mal gehen.”

“Perhaps you better jump right in well *before* you see me going down for the third time.”

“Very good, *Heuschrecke*.”

“Very funny! *Grasshopper* – I get it.”

“I’m ready to shower and hit the sack,” David said. “My little escapade in the gravel pit today seems to have sapped me.”

“You did great. I guess I didn’t tell you.”

“And I failed to express my appreciation for your assistance. Thank you.”

“It’s really great to have a relationship like this where we don’t have to say things like that. I mean we just know how things are. Is that how it is between you and Molly?”

“Pretty much. It gets more dependable with time.”

“May I ask how one marriage partner knows when the other wants to have sex?”

“You may if a generic answer will suffice.”

“Oh. Yes. I didn’t mean to imply I wanted details of your intimate relationship.”

“I was kidding, Kit. We know each others mind – you and me – remember?”

Kit shrugged and flashed a sheepish grin. His growing wisdom kept his mouth shut. David continued.

“It is the wrong question. The male is almost always ready – eager – for sex so the question has to be more like how do they communicate a mutual desire for intimacy.”

“Okay. *That*, then!”

“Sometimes it becomes routine. Go to bed at night and have sex. Sometimes it is more a matter of consummating a romantic time together – maybe after an evening out together, or an evening *in* together, or after a picnic, or a walk or anything that makes you feel close and stimulates your desire to be even closer. You just learn each others signals.

Think of romantic closeness rather than sex and you'll just about always know. Of course there is one other way."

"And that would be?"

"To tell your mate you'd like to have sex."

Kit smiled realizing he had been over thinking the topic and therein overlooked the direct and obvious approach.

"See that we're up by five, Kit. Need to keep after this thing."

"Five it is. I'm going to watch TV and see how functional one year of college German really is."

"And maybe catch one of their nude news casts?" David teased.

"Two for the price of one. Hard to beat – no pun intended."

"Good night."

\* \* \* \* \*

Six thirty saw them on the road to Liechtenstein. The traffic rived that on the bypasses around Indianapolis at rush hour.

"All the Swiss going to work across the river, I assume," David noted.

Across the bridge, at the border check point, there were three no-stop lanes for workers with 'stickers' on their windshields and one for the rest. Even so it was no more than a cursory opening of the passport and handing it back with a broad smile and lingering wave.

A few miles further on they came to *Eschen* a small town which presented a less than attractive mixture of the old and the new – wide streets, narrow streets; new buildings, old building; tarnished smoke stacks and spotless small businesses and homes.

"Let's begin at a cafe," David suggested. "Job one is to get a lead on Domino."

Despite the amount of incoming traffic, there were few cars parked along the main street in the non-industrialized section of town. Kit found a spot in front of the first cafe they came upon.

It had been a good choice – small, cozy, clean, with just enough quaint factor\* to please the tourist. Wireless internet was a plus.

David ordered light. Kit had the works.

While waiting for the meal, Kit cranked up the laptop.

"An email from guess who?"

David shrugged, the possibilities being virtually endless.

"Sam!"

"What's on his mind?"

"I'll read it. I went to see Prince. He says he made the lantern for a skinny, pale skinned, American about six months ago. Paid cash. Prince is not into keeping receipts so he did not have a name. When it left his place it had his initials, PUD, stamped onto the bottom. Somebody must have changed the U to a O. (*an* O, I suppose that should be. Ha! Ha!) Just thought you might be able to use that information. Don't forget me. Sam'."

"I'll 'e' him a thank you," Kit said.

"And reassure him that we won't forget him."

David engaged the waitress in German – a plump older woman with rosy cheeks and closely cropped, off the shelf blondish hair. She knew about Domino and said more information would be available at *Adolf's* down the street.

After breakfast they headed on foot to find the referenced establishment. It was a compact men's club. The sign in front boasted of a running track, a pool, exercise machines and powerful Swiss masseuse. The day fee was the equivalent of five US dollars. They entered.

It was soon obvious that there had been a misunderstanding with the waitress. *Adolf's* was hosting the national Dominos tournament – apparently a men only event. Still, they paid the day fee and went into the huge sitting room where the occupants had clearly not yet learned about the hazards of tobacco.

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\*Term originated by one Salvatore Samuel Guccione, Sammarinese citizen of San Marino.

The air was thick with blue cigar smoke. There was a clothes check booth by the door where you could leave some or all your duds. Those heading for the pool stripped to the skin. Kit and David stayed as they were, although a swim did sound tempting to Kit.

They mingled, asking about any other Domino reference. David had to wonder if perhaps they were at the right place and just needed to understand the *slash checkers* reference. No one seemed to know about any other meaning.

"While you work this room, how about if I go for a swim and check things out there?" Kit asked.

"Okay. Back here in a half hour. And you do understand there will be no young ladies in the pool at a men's club."

Kit grinned and left.

David continued to move from one area to another asking his question over and over. On schedule, Kit returned, toweling his hair dry.

"I got something. An old guy – and I mean a beat the life expectancy chart by a mile, *really* old guy – bobbing around down there, said there was a river boat by the name *Domino*. It was a floating entertainment center. Games, dancing, cards, bands, singers, sightseeing, and, he confided with a chuckle, prostitutes to comfort us young guys. Sounds a lot like the old showboats of the Mississippi."

"Does he know where it is?"

"No. He's not even sure if it's still in operation. It used to dock in a slip at the wharf straight west of town. I got the idea time has all run together for him."

"Get dressed and let's move on. Good work, by the way."

"Speaking of *by the way*, he invited us to a naturist party this evening at the Family Spa on the north edge of town. Naturist – that does mean nudist doesn't it?"

"It does, usually with a wholesome, family, twist. We'll have to wait and see where evening has taken us."

"You come along?"

"If either of us goes, we both go."

Kit nodded and went to get dressed.

The wharf was less than a five minute drive from town. The river was busy with boats – large and small – moving in both directions. One slip offered sightseeing trips. They approached the ticket booth.

In German, David asked what was known of the Domino boat. The girl was in her mid-teens and *almost* in her string bikini. Kit was happy to stand and look. She didn't know about it but pointed toward the boat and the grandfatherly figure working there beside it on the dock. David walked in his direction. Kit reluctantly followed.

"We're seeking information about a pleasure boat – the Domino," David said, again speaking in German. "Do you know of it?"

"I do. Not a working boat anymore. She was something back in her heyday, however. Beer from twelve countries she used to boast. Gambling, naked dancing girls. Enough to stop an old heart just remembering."

"You have been on it then?"

"Oh yes. Worked it several summers when I was about the boy's age."

"Is it still intact somewhere?"

He nodded.

"Follow the path to the south end of the Wharf. She still sits in the water but doesn't leave shore. It's a second class dive now. A shame. She had such dignity back when."

"Thanks for the information. May I pay you?"

"Goodness no. Just remembering those dancing girls was full payment."

He chuckled and went back to work.

They walked south.

"Don't walk too fast or we'll over shoot it," Kit said. "The whole country is less than fifteen miles long."

Presently they came to *Pirate Pete's*. It had to be the old Domino renamed. It was a hundred feet long and thirty wide. The cabins ran down the center with a walkway around the periphery. A small, permanent bridge allowed them access to the foredeck. No one was there. David pushed open a door in the front room and they entered.

"Hello! Anybody here?" Kit called out.

Still nobody appeared.

"It's probably a night time place," Kit said.

David nodded and walked across the room to a door in the rear. He opened it and, after hesitating to look around, entered. A single electric bulb hung, lit, from the center of the ceiling. It contained gaming tables and the walls were heavily – if not tastefully – draped. There was a door to the right which opened out onto the walkway around the cabins.

Outside they came upon several more doors – all led into individual rooms – some appointed like bedrooms and others set up for gaming, drinking, and relaxing.

At the rear they came upon a wide staircase leading to the second – the top – floor. It had a single row of rooms down the center with a much wider deck along the sides and out front. A band shell was built into the front and a dance floor spread out around it toward the front and side railings. The compact wheel house sat at the very front of the deck. They opened the door and entered.

There were windows front, left and right. The huge wheel was front and center. Beside it to the right a brass call tube through which the captain could communicate with the engine room, below deck to the rear. At the back of the little room was a small table flanked by two wooden chairs. On the table was a Back Gammon board with a partially completed game in evidence.

"You know what's on the other side of a Back Gammon board," Kit said.

"I suppose we'll be excused for disturbing the game," David said nodding.

"Kit slid the pieces onto the seat of a chair and turned it over to the checker board."

"Slash checkers," Kit repeated looking and re-looking from side to side of the foldable, playing board as though the envelope was somehow hiding from him.

"Let's think about the uses of *slash*," David said on his way to an idea. "There are four generally accepted methods of showing the division function – the slash, the bracket, the division sign with its bar and dot above and below, and the horizontal line. When the line is used folks often say some number is *under* some other number. If we substitute the slash for another indicator – the line – it might read *under checkers*."

"A bit convoluted – opposite from where I ended up, in fact – but I think I follow," Kit said. "Let's just see what's under the checker board."

Together they flipped over the small table.

"It's a bingo!" Kit said enthusiastically. "There's that familiar ivory envelope taped to the underside. Good thinking! Less than three hours in the country and we have the clue. *They* get harder and *we* get better."

David removed it and held it in his teeth while they righted the table.

"Let's take it back to the hotel to work on it," Kit said. "I don't want to be distracted as we pass the Bikini girl."

"Distracted from what – working on the clue or the Bikini girl?"

"If you have to ask you're more ancient than I thought."

The Wheelhouse door opened behind Kit and a gruff looking, scruffy, older man with a red beard, and costumed like a pirate stood there pointing a shotgun at them.

"Double barreled – one for each of you. What's your business here?"

"Looking for the captain, actually," David said. "Doing research for an article on old river boats. This *was* the *Domino*, wasn't it?"

"Who's asking?"

"I'm Professor Lawrence – David Lawrence. This is my research assistant, Kit. I have ID if you want."

He lowered the shotgun.

"I'm Pete – Pirate Pete. As close to a captain as you'll find. I own the old tub."

"As you can see we made ourselves at home. We apologize if that was inappropriate."

"Never locked up. Honest folks around here. Kids sometimes use it like it's a play house. Okay during the day. By night it comes to life. Dancing, bands, good beer and beautiful women."

"*Naked* women?" Kit asked before thinking.

"Depends on how deep your wallet is, son."

He chuckled a high pitched chuckle. Kit shrugged and didn't pursue it.

Pete went on about the boat's history for another fifteen minutes. Kit took some pictures to lend authenticity to the cover story David had concocted when confronted with the shotgun.

By noon they were on their way back to St. Gallen.

"What do you think about growing old," Kit asked out of the blue. It had been prompted by the three elderly folks they had just encountered.

"Inevitable, unless for some reason I don't live long enough to experience it. I'm not sure where you want the question to lead."

"I got to thinking about the old guy there at the pool. He seemed so happy. He couldn't move real well in the water but he just floated and moved from group to group talking with everybody. And the party tonight seemed important to him. I guess I just hope I don't let the obvious infirmities of old age keep me from enjoying life as long as I have it. He sure seemed to be doing that. The same for Bikini Girl's grandfather and Pirate Pete."

"Good for them! That would be my hope as well. Is this a worry or an observation?"

"Some of both, I guess. I'm not all that hot on dying. Neither of us believes there is any kind of existence after death but you seem comfortable with it and I'm still a bit distressed by it. The idea of *not being* is tough when you're my age."

"It's tough for most folks at *any* age. The human mind has a basic directive built into it – to keep its person alive. To succumb to the idea that someday it won't be alive is contrary to its basic purpose regardless of the facts it may be fed. If left to its own preferences it would never contemplate the state of being dead. Whenever we do or believe things that go against the deep mind's liking in *any* area of our belief system it sends us anxiety or guilt signals to tell us to stop doing that. That's the basic reason it takes a while before the mind gets used to new ideas even when they are not as important as the life and death issue. It is that deep mind directive built into our DNA that is one reason – if not the basic reason – religions promising life after death have been so popular down through the ages.

It prompted an insight from Kit.

"Many theologian-types point to the universality of that feature in religions as proof of a spirit realm – of a god's presence or intervention. What you are saying is that a more reasonable explanation is based on that predisposition that resides right here inside everybody's physical mind."

"Lots more, but that's Deep Mind 101."

"You'll furnish books when we get home?"

"Of course. You should begin with *Deep Mind Mastery*\*. There is a positive side to the anxiety you're feeling."

"And that would be?" Kit asked.

"It helps you keep your mind open to other possibilities."

"Like heaven, hell and purgatory, you mean?"

"And who knows what other new and wonderful things – a universal life force, for example, or an ethereal connectedness among beings."

"You're pulling my leg."

"Not really. You know I always keep a mental crack open so I can investigate and contemplate new ideas and data that may contradict or modify or enhance my current beliefs on various things."

"That in itself gives me the willies. It's like admitting you can never really know anything for sure."

"And that would be a BINGO, son. Oh, and one more thing. The more we've talked the faster you have cranked this thing up. It's not the autobahn so I imagine 85 is frowned on."

"Sorry. Heavy topic, heavy foot."

"Very good. Original?"

"As far as I know."

They returned the rental and headed for a restaurant just down the street from the hotel. It promised a six piece German Band and five courses – one from each continent.

"Well, I guess you've fulfilled your promise to bring me to Switzerland, Unc."

"No. This can't count. I'll tell you what. If we don't get back here together before you get married, I'll send you and your wife here for your honeymoon."

"Really? Great.! Let's make every effort *not* to return together, then."

"You're putting your wife before your uncle?"

"You could say its all *relative*."

The music was fun. Kit took a turn on the tuba and David beat a mean base drum. The food was delicious. David's intent had been to begin work on the new clue but it was soon obvious a few hours of mindless relaxation was more important.

It was going on three when they finished the walk back to the hotel.

"That was some '*Alpine Fling*' or whatever you did so well with that gorgeous bar maid, Uncle David."

"She *was* made well, bar none, wasn't she?"

Back in the room Kit opted for an immediate shower.

"Not sure what they used as a disinfectant in that pool but it's still clinging to my body and may, in fact, have begun to reproduce. Let me get rid of it quickly then we can get down to work. No dawdling, I promise."

He laughed his way in and out of the shower. Then, David took his quick turn under the soothing stream while Kit drip-dried in the sitting room and opened the

envelope to make himself familiar with its contents.

There were five lines.

"Gibberish!" He said placing the card on the couch to await David's return.

He positioned himself on the floor for sit ups and had soon counted off fifty. Then turned over and did the same number of fingertip pushups. He proceeded to use the rest of the time doing jumping jacks figuring the flapping through the

Charlotte gave up 64 Talk <sup>3</sup> No hidden accounts Stacks of leafs Holy 1781
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air would assist in the drying process. It seemed to, for by the time his uncle appeared he was sit-on-the-couch-dry.

"Gibberish, of course," he announced as David entered the room a towel draped around his neck hanging down onto his chest.

"Of course. Otherwise it would present no challenge. They've all been pretty simple, actually. More reason to believe it is not the finding of the boy that will be the major task."

"You keep saying that. More!"

"I don't know more. All of this chasing around the globe may just be time filler while some big business deal is consummated, or whatever. That may then be it – the old man distracted, the deal finished, the boy freed. I hope it's that simple."

"But you doubt it."

"I feel a more sinister undercurrent running through all of this. The tall, thin American has shown up on Nauru and in Liechtenstein. The initials were changed on the lantern. The use of small countries – maybe for legal or safety concerns or their generally lax border identity checks. The underlying theme of using semi-cryptographic material needing decoding – that being one of my specialties. It would seem someone had to know I would be selected by Ari to find his grandson."

"Because of the way the clues are put together in code?"

David nodded.

"It's almost as if somebody had my Ari's ear throughout our globe-hopping experience last summer. There are so many similarities."

"Perhaps we could find out from Mayo's if he had visitors while he was there," Kit said. "Maybe get names and such."

"Maybe. Not sure how that might help."

Kit nodded in at least partial agreement.

David finished drying his hair and took a seat on the couch.

"Okay. What do we have here?"

Kit sat also, holding the card where they could both see it.

"It seems Charlotte somebody gave up 64 something-or-others," Kit began trying to make sense out of the first line.

"See what you can find about Charlottes combined with the number 64."

Kit searched for several minutes while David made himself familiar with the other elements on the card.

"Got nothing, I'm afraid. Lots of Charlottes and you wouldn't believe how many pages there are devoted to her apostrophe 'S' Web."

"Let's move on then. *Talk to the third power*. Talk, speak, communication . . . what else?"

"If a noun it could mean a speech or maybe an informal speech. A trio of speeches or speakers."

"Interesting. Talk requires language. What if we think about it as language to the third power."

"Maybe just code for three languages," Kit suggested.

"Very good? Yes? Perhaps a country that uses three languages,"

"But most European countries use at least three languages," Kit said downplaying that line of thought.

"What if we look for a country that has three *official* languages. That would probably narrow the field. Most have one official language with the others as merely supplementary."

"Interesting, as somebody I know might say," Kit said mocking his uncle a bit.

"Not sure how to find that," David said.

"How about this site about the official languages of all the countries in the world?"

"That would seem like a good starting place. Cut it down to the smallest of the countries and see what you get."

"Is Luxembourg small enough? Let me go to Luxembourg. Nearly a thousand square miles – that's about two thirds the size of Rhode Island. Forty two miles tall and thirty two wide. It has three *official* languages: German, French, and Luxembourgish."

"Anything about a Charlotte?" David asked.

"This is really getting to be tooooooo easy."

The Grand Duchess Charlotte abdicated the throne to her son in - get this - 1964."

"I'd say that's a lock. Let's move on down the list."

"No hidden accounts," David read from the card.

"These website thumbnails of countries seem to often include information specifically about such things as that and money laundering and so on. Let me pull up the CIA's public overview and see what I find. Here we go. Bank account's *can* be anonymous similar to the Swiss arrangement. That's a blow to our theory."

"It may mean something else. This guy has often thrown in abstract clues. Let's go on."

"Stacks of leafs."

"Since we've determined before that our clue giver does not misspell things, my initial inclination to change leafs to leaves is probably incorrect."

"I agree," David said. "And stacks? Leaves slash leafs are on trees or scattered on the ground or in *piles* not stacks. He is too precise to make that kind of inappropriate substitution."

"Leaf," Kit said standing and beginning to pace. "Gold leaf? Being singular you couldn't really have a stack of leaf anyway, could you? Although, he did make it into a plural form, didn't he?"

"Leafs of a book?" David offered tentatively.

"A stack of leafs in a book?" Kit said. "Still doesn't sound right."

"How about books, containing leafs, in the stacks – like in a library."

"That seems plausible. Good going, Unc! Now which library? Every town probably has one with a section for every language."

"It could also refer to a bookstore, I suppose."

Kit moved on.

"The last line: *Holy 1781*. If we're talking books, a holy book in central Europe would probably be a bible. A Bible published in 1781 you think, David?"

"Sounds likely. But as you pointed out, Kit, which book store or library?"

"That clue must be back in line three: *No hidden accounts*."

"Aside from Switzerland what comes to mind when you hear 'hidden accounts'?"

"Aruba. The Cayman Islands. A half dozen South American countries. Even Nauru has a history of hiding money for foreigners."

"Pull up a map. Let's get a feel for the layout of the country and the locations of the cities. There doesn't happen to be a town named Cayman or Aruba or Switzerland does there?"

"There is a region called Little Switzerland in the mountainous region west of Echemach and south of Mullerthal. Actually, it seems to be Mullerthal that goes by that nickname."

"Make note of it as a possibility. Anything else?"

"No Aruba or Cayman. Cayman in German would probably begin with 'K'. Let's look down the line. Hey! There is a small town that goes by two spellings: Kehmen and Kiemen. In German the pronunciation would be close to 'Cayman'."

"That it would. Find the yellow pages and put your German to work. Find libraries and book stores, there. See if any specialize in bibles."

I took several minutes.

"Okay. I found a national yellow pages – one of the perks of being a small country, I assume. Give me a minute here. Bookstore would be Buchhandlung in German. What would it be in French?"

"Librairie - a i r i e."

"If that's bookstore what's library?"

"Bibliothèque."

"I'd vote to reverse them but then nobody asked me when they were inventing French. How about a bookstore in Kehmen named *Leafs*?"

"I'd accept that. Anything about what they handle."

"Livres nouveaux et utilisés"

"New and used books – that *could* include old Bibles, I suppose."

"We could call ahead," Kit said.

"I'd rather not. If there is a book waiting for us there and it contains the envelope I'd rather not risk having them find it."

"Good thinking. You're doing a lot of that on this trip."

"I think it's time to make that more routine call."

"Connie?"

David nodded.

"Let's try for five a.m. Find out how close we can fly into to Kehman. Where is it on the map, by the way," David asked.

"Right up here in the center of the northern half of the country. Bound to be an airport close by."

"Set it up, then."

The call was made. Connie preferred to fly into the city of Luxembourg in the South but still only about twenty five miles from Kehman as the crow flies.

"Connie says it's about an hour's flight. Five a.m. is fine. He suggested a hotel, *Das Gebirgshotel*. The Mountain Hotel, I'd say."

"So would I. Do you want to practice your German and make the reservations?"

"Zweifellos, mein Freund."

"*Certainly?* You're getting pretty fancy."

"Danke."

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\*The Secrets of Deep Mind Mastery, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, The Family of Man Press, ISBN: 1-885631-51-0



## CHAPTER SIX

*Leafs*, as it turned out, was a small, beautifully appointed, shop, specializing in English written books. The woman who greeted them as they entered introduced herself in English as Gretchen, the daughter of the owner. She looked to be David's age, was pleasantly bespectacled, and all smiles.

"David and Kit," David said in response, pointing back and forth. "How interesting to have an English Book Store here."

"English is our fourth language which means it's really our second since everyone speaks the other three. Is there something special or do you want to browse?"

"We're interested in old bibles and are seeking *one* in particular – it was printed in 1781."

"Oh! You are Dr. Lawrence, then. The Bible has been set back for you. I assumed you had phoned in the reservation yourself. I wasn't here at the time. Papa took the call."

"I'm glad the message got through, at least," David said not really knowing what was going on but clearly needing to play along rather than question it."

They followed her to the counter. She reached underneath and removed a book wrapped in brown paper, sealed with transparent tape.

"I may examine it of course," David said as if asking permission to open it.

"Certainly."

He took it to the reading area. Kit followed and they sat beside each other around the corner of a table. Kit produced a pocket knife and carefully slit the paper and slipped out the bible.

"Looks old." He said.

David donned his reading glasses and looked over them at the boy as if to say, 'what did you expect of a book printed over two hundred years ago?'

Kit understood, shrugged, and grinned.

They found what they were expecting hidden between the last page and the back cover. It was one of the same ivory envelopes they had been collecting along the way.

David opened it and peeked inside to make sure it held a card with a clue. It did. They stood and went back to the counter. They did not *have* to purchase it.

"The price, again?" he asked.

"Thirty six thousand dollars American."

Kit gulped. David calmly reached for his credit card – well, Ari Senior's credit card. The transaction was completed within minutes and they left.

"How easy was that?" Kit said once out on the street.

"How expensive was that?" David said. "I thought we could give it to the library at Manford College back home."

"A nice idea. A church school. A Bible. Expensive beyond anything they could ever afford. A very nice idea. Anonymous, I assume."

David nodded.

"What was it again that Grandpa said about that?"

"That your charity wasn't truly charity if it offered you some personal gain or recognition; if it did, it slipped into the self-serving category and one should not try to fool themselves into thinking it was, in fact, anything other than self aggrandizement."

Kit nodded thoughtfully.

"That seems very IRS friendly – lots fewer deductions."

David smiled and nodded. Kit continued.

"Let's not lose it," he cautioned sounding more like a mother than a nephew.

Back at the hotel they went right to work.

OTROS MINUSCULE

12:00 high

SOLO BELFRY @ itsnoline

**X**

PLA + CDA over!!!!!!

They were sitting beside each other at the writing table, positioned in front of a wide window, which commanded a *beautiful view* they had not found at the hotel by that name in Switzerland.

Kit began.

"Otros is Spanish for 'another'. I assume Minuscule means 'tiny', probably in French."

David nodded.

"Another tiny? And split between two languages."

"Perhaps indicating two *countries*?" David added, a question in his tone.

"Between Spain and France would make it Andorra in the Pyrenees Mountains. Let me find the poop on it."

In short order he had information on the screen. A whopping 167 square miles – mostly mountains. Back to the smallest ones it seems. *Andorra La Vella* is the capital and has an airport. Main industry is tourism and that basically amounts to year round

skiing. It has slopes as high as 8,000 feet – among the highest in Europe. It has seven political divisions – like states or counties or townships I guess. One web site calls it, ‘A nano-nation with more mountains than culture’. Has no income tax and the average life expectancy for a woman is almost ninety – a few years less for a man. Skiing must be good for you. Warm, dry, summers in the lower elevations. Population something over seventy thousand. The official language is Catalan – I must admit I've never heard of it. French, Castilian Spanish, and Portuguese are the main languages. English is generally understood. Uses the Euro for money. Some of the stone structures date from 900 AD – that's eleven centuries ago!"

David turned back to the clue card.

"Line two. *Twelve o'clock high*. Sounds like something out of a western. Line three. *SOLO BELFRY @ itsnoline* over X. It's a pseudo email address with no *dot whatever* at the end.

"*At, its no line*," Kit said breaking it up into its most obvious parts. I get nothing."

David tried.

"Let's think about the X. It could represent an unknown. It could mark a spot – a spot *under* that odd email address."

"That makes sense, structurally," Kit said. We still have the esoteric top line. How about the bottom line on the card? *PLA + CDA over!!!!!!*. What could be up with the six exclamation marks?"

"Six. Well this makes clue number six, country number six. I suppose it could be a coincidence – six exclamation points just being used to emphasize something in a most dramatic fashion."

"I doubt if this guy deals in coincidences," Kit said.

David raised his eyebrows and nodded.

"Wait!" Kit said sliding the laptop back in front of him. "I saw something about those initials there in the bottom row as I was scrolling through the website. What are they again?"

"PLA + CDA," David said.

"Where was that?" Kit went on searching . . . "Ah. Here we are. Political Parties. Two of the most popular go by those initials."

"One party, plus another party, followed by *over*. I have it," David said. "Do you?"

"Not even close."

"Talk it out."

"Okay. Well. It's constructed in two parts. There are 'the parties' and 'over'. Got it! *The party's over!!!!!!*. Think we are to take that literally?"

"I'm sure of it. This may be the place we find young Ari and learn of some sinister scenario we must follow from here on out."

"You're bound to add foreboding complications at this point, aren't you?"

"Hope I'm wrong. A phrase like, 'The party's over,' could just be his lighthearted way of saying, 'Bingo! You've won the game.'"

"At any rate if the last line is a special note to us unrelated to the clue, then we need to get back to the upper portion," Kit said.

"Pull up a map. Let's see if visualization helps us any."

The Map appeared almost immediately as did Kit's commentary.



"This one has the state boundaries on it. They like fan out in a circle from the center of the country to the outside – like they pivot around a central point."

"Like the hours on a clock face?" David asked.

"Yes. Very much like that. Oh! The twelve o'clock high reference, you think? If twelve o'clock *does* suggest the clock thing then twelve o'clock would be at the top in *Ordino* – the state or province or whatever."

"There is some way of getting a satellite view up close, right?"

"Right. A virtual trip most anywhere on the planet thanks to the guys at Google."

"Set it up for us to take a trip around Ordino. I have an idea."

"Ideas are good. This will take a minute."

.....

"Here we go – from south to north."

"What features stand out?" David asked.

"Mountains and snow," Kit said not certain where his uncle was going.

"And lack of snow?"

"Yeah, and lack of snow. Green valleys"

"And the line between snow and no snow?"

"Yes that, too."

"See if you can find a bell tower standing pretty much alone along that in-between line."

"Okay. And all this comes about why?"

"Solo tower at *its snow line*."

"So. A sound alike clue. Very good. And the X?"

"I'm guessing it indicates the boy's location – under or beneath the solo bell tower at the snow line."

"Like we may really be there, finally?"

"We'll know shortly."

David started to speak; Kit interrupted.

"I know. Call Connie and tell him it's time to goose the goose."

David acknowledge the witticism with a smile and nod.

Kit was immediately on the line.

"Andorra, Connie. How far?"

"Let's see . . . About 650 miles as the crow flies and we can fly there just like the crow. Two hours tops. And we will fly into . . . Andorra City. When do we leave?"

"When?" Kit asked David.

"Two?"

"Can we leave by two?"

"Or shortly after. Anything special."

"Climbing gear, I suppose. We think we have located the boy."

"Really? Great!"

David spoke.

"We will very likely need a five seat helicopter and we will most certainly need Alex to accompany us from here on out."

The message was relayed to Connie and from Connie to Alex.

"About time, really," Connie said, coming back. "He's way overdue for some ridiculously dangerous, life-threatening, superhero-type, undertaking."

"Hope it won't come to that, even to satisfy Big Al's basic macho needs, Kit said. "A quick in and out is what I have in my play book."

"I'm with you, Son," Connie said. "See you at the plane at two."

Kit folded his phone and placed it on the table.

"I'm suddenly a little apprehensive. The first time, really, on the whole trip. Well, maybe just a little when you turned the side of that two thousand foot mountain into a gravel pit back in San Marino."

"Order food up through room service, Kit. We can eat while we pack."

"Pack? We never seem to really unpack. We either have to buy new clothes or get our wash done. I'm down to my last clean sox. See, nudism would be so much simpler."

"Put that high on our list for the hotel in Andorra."

"Nudism? Great!"

"Down boy. Getting the washing done."

“What were we talking about?”

“ Food! My stomach's growling.”

“How about kraut and bratwurst?” Kit said struggling to restrain his grin.

“Something a little less odoriferous. We're going to be contained in a small cabin on the plane remember?”

Kit smiled. It had been his put-on from the start – a fact David had failed to note. He was understandably preoccupied.

The food was ordered.

“So, do we have a plan?” Kit asked as he sniffed at selected pieces of his clothing in order to assign them to the definitely wash or could wear again sections of his suitcase.

“Find the tower, find the boy, find our way to safety.”

“And, pick up any further directives or information from the Pod Man?”

“The Pod Man?”

“P O D. The way the initials were changed on the lantern. Why was that, do you suppose? It was almost like he was trying to leave us a clue or something.”

“I've been working on that. I've come up with only one very unlikely possibility. It's probably time to investigate it. Pull up the Harvard alumni web site. Go to my undergraduate class and find the list of graduates. Then I'll take a look.”

Suddenly several things slid into place in Kit's mind. He found the list and made a simple, one word, announcement.

“Oliver.”

David looked surprised. His full out frown gradually mellowing into a smile.

“You've been with me in my suspicion all along?”

“No, actually. Not until just now. Suddenly a half dozen pieces of the puzzle rushed together. Paul Oliver Donner – the guy you went to Monaco with. Equally interesting is his nickname – *Ikk*y, from Ichabod Crane, perhaps, the tall, thin, pale, gangly character in the Headless Horseman – the one who has preceded us at several stops?”

“An exact replica. The very unkind joke was that it was fortunate he could remove his head in order to get through doors. Six feet ten and maybe two hundred pounds after a big meal.”

“Doesn't sound like a very athletic frame. I thought he was a swimmer?”

“He cut a uniquely narrow path through the water and his long arms propelled him at phenomenal speeds. I suppose his size 22 feet served as built-in fins. You have to remember, back then swimming as a sport wasn't nearly as high tech as it is these days.”

“Why would he be doing this? I thought you two were friends. ”

“Associates; never really friends. Competitors; never really team mates. As to why, I can't be certain. Some convoluted need for revenge, obviously.”

“So, this is really about you, not Ari senior. Why get the Stephanopoulos boy involved?”

“I can only guess. He hated Ari from the day they met. He wanted me as a friend and thought Ari bought me away from him. Ari had everything and squandered it. Paul

had nothing. Worked eight hours a day and carried a full load at Harvard."

"One of the brightest, I imagine, then."

"He was – *is* that. A social failure. Not sure if he ever married though I would doubt it. We may be jumping to conclusions, here. Somebody else could be using his identity to conceal their own. *Lots* of folks disliked him. Put more accurately, I suppose, *nobody* really liked him."

"You always have to go and complicate things."

The bellboy arrived with the cart containing lunch. David tipped him. He took an envelope from his pocket and handed it over.

"For you from a very tall gentleman who left it at the front desk."

He left. Kit pressed close over David's shoulder as he opened the envelope – ivory – and perused the contents. It was a single card containing a verse, of a kind.

Hardly, Vardly,  
Puddin' and pi.  
Leardly, Beirdly,  
You princes shall die.

"What in the world is that?" Kit asked.

"Let's set out the food on the table and I'll translate it for you."

"You already know its meaning?"

"Pretty clear and erases all doubts about who our adversary is."

With the plates and dishes arranged they began to eat and David began his explanation.

"*Hardly, Vardly* was our code for Harvard. At seventeen we thought it was hilarious. Brains and good taste don't necessarily go together.

"*Puddin'* refers to the Hasty Pudding Players – you know, the drama group known for outrageous productions. I was a member. Paul was blackballed in a way. And pi. Pi refers to a circle. There was a group of drama students who called themselves *The Circle* – hung out in a cafe together. Things like that. I was a tangential part of the Circle. Paul was not.

"*Leardly*. He and I both tried for the part of King Lear our senior year. I was selected he was not.

"*Beirdly*. Sharon Bierdly. A girl he desperately wanted to date. I didn't know that at the time I asked her out. We dated maybe a dozen times before realizing our philosophic positions were just too different around which to maintain a comfortable relationship.

"*You princes shall die*. I have to interpolate here. Sometimes he referred to Ari and me in a derogatory way as the Princes. I assume he has now transferred that title to Ari's son."

"A really twisted psyche, huh?"

"Seems that way."

"How is he financing this?"

"No idea. If it has been festering all these years it may have been in the planning stage for a long time. Perhaps he saved just for this final confrontation. Like I said. That's only a guess."

"Clearly he wanted there to be no mistake about who he was. Why didn't he just say so from the outset?"

"To tease a bit? To frustrate me? To provide a mystery for me to solve little by little? To prevent his apprehension before phase II got underway. I can't be sure."

"Seems he wanted to make sure you didn't quite."

"How's that?"

"Offering bits and pieces of clues about himself along the way thinking that would keep your appetite whetted. Wouldn't he have known you'd have stayed the course for the boy's sake?"

"Like I said before. Paul was a social failure. Completely self-centered. Lacked compassion. Probably sociopathic – at least asocial. He was a people user. He knew me well as a person. He probably was just incapable of believing some people really are basically compassionate, unselfish, helpful, beings."

"So this may be a test of all that?"

"Perhaps, partially, at least. It now seems like an all out, to the death, war of a sort. You should go home."

"Yeah! Right! And chicken eggs should hatch dragons. We're in this. I'm of age. I make those decisions for myself now. Forget that and let's just get on with it."

David put his hand on Kit's arm and squeezed it, nodding.

"Paul has set this up in an interesting way. Risk my life to save Ari's life while also risking Ari's life, and yours."

"This will all play out under the bell tower, you think."

"I doubt it. Like you hinted, there has been a growing element of torment involved. If he has this much animosity built up against me, I'm betting he has lots more in store for us. My *quick* death would not adequately satisfy him."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do you have a theory yet about how to remove that strap, Alex?" David asked as they settled in high over central Europe."

"One. But removing the lad's arms and legs is probably not an option."

"That tough?"

"It's no amateur set up. I'm sure I've located the triggering device and the remote receiver. I've made calls to some experts. Several are working on it. A number of possibilities. It could be designed to explode when wires are cut like you suggested. It could also be designed to blow if some signal from the transmitter is cut off. For instance, if we locate the master transmitter, just turning it off may in fact trigger the explosive."

"The same thing if it moves beyond the range of the transmitter?" David asked.

"Yes. It's doubtful if that could happen in this day and age of satellite

communication. With these phones we were given, for example, we'd have to be deep inside a lead mine to lose service."

"And that works both ways," Kit reminded them. "Never being out of range means always being in danger of having it detonated remotely."

Alex cocked his head.

"I'm still not sure why or how the harness comes into play."

"Nor are we, completely. Initially we were told that if we sought outside help the boy would be blown up. That was probably a crock because the Pod Man is really after me. If it is to explode he probably wants me nearby."

"*Pod Man* is our code for the mastermind behind this?" Alex asked seemingly uninterested in how it had come about.

"As good as any," David said. "We think we know who it is and it has almost *nothing* to do with Ari Senior and almost *everything* to do with me."

"Something tells me you don't believe it is about to be over – with the location of the boy, I mean," Alex said.

"We should know for sure within hours."

David turned to Kit.

"Show him the map we marked with the bell tower location."

Kit handed it to Alex.

"Smack dab in the center of the area known as Ordino. And here's a decade old picture of the bell tower we're seeking. We think the boy is being held beneath it or in its base."

"We have minimal history about the tower," David added. "Seems to have once been a part of a monastery that made wine. I am assuming the wine cellars were probably below ground to maintain a more or less constant temperature. That may be where young Ari is being held."

Alex nodded and began laying out the initial steps of the rescue mission.

"Job one when we get there will be to locate all the entrances to the area below ground. Basements and caves are very tricky – dangerous places to be meeting an adversary who knows the floor plan. Do you have warm, travel, clothes for the boy?"

"No. Hadn't thought appropriately about that," David said. "We'll get some immediately upon landing."

"Once we locate him and have our first few safe minutes, we will spray his straps – front, back, and edges – with a hard, waterproof plastic coating. Moisture short circuits things and not knowing what's in store for us we can't risk that."

"Good thinking," Kit said. "What else?"

"I've brought hand weapons for each of us. I know how you both abhor them but this time we have an innocent child to protect. The bottom line has changed from last summer's mission."

David and Kit looked each other in the face and nodded, confirming they would go along with that.

"Connie will ferry us near the site in a helicopter – he has one reserved and

waiting at the airport. It's why he chose the one he did rather than one closer to our area of interest. He knows an administrator there. Can get whatever we need on a moment's notice."

"Great. Connie certainly has the connections, doesn't he?" Kit said beginning to show his anxiety by standing and fidgeting and offering meaningless prattle.

"Can you show me the approach terrain on a virtual look see?" Alex asked.

Kit soon had things ready.

"Flying from south to north starting at the southern border of Ordino. Alternating mountains and valleys in east-west succession. If we follow this main north-south valley we pass west of LaMassana, Ordino, Arans, and Liorts. Then it's east north east to the tower half way up that first mountain. There it is in freeze frame. I can't get a real good close-up of the tower and grounds around it. The resolution cubes. I'll print a copy at low res and see if our copier will do some magic for us. Got fuzzy logic installed this trip. Should help. I just figure that to have the lay of the land as it is today will be better than depending on a photograph taken who knows how long ago."

"We can fly in low along the river and then set down about here."

Alex pointed.

"That will leave us just a short climb up the mountain. Is this a today or in the morning outing?"

"When will we lose daylight?"

"Between seven and eight," Kit said having anticipated the need for that information. Andorra and Spain are at the extreme west of an artificially stretched time zone to encompass all of western Europe.

"And we'll arrive at four and get into our hotel by five. We need to eat. Better wait until early morning – say five? There is no way to know how long this is going to take."

"Sounds fine," Alex said nodding. "Take clothing in layers. It will start out hot and gradually get down to somewhere between thirty and forty – may seem warmer due to the updraft generated winds I imagine we'll encounter – dry hot air rising part way up the slopes."

Alex went to join Connie in the cockpit.

"Not much to do now but wait, I guess," Kit said, pacing.

"See what publications Donner has. I haven't kept up with him in any way."

Kit sat at the computer and began searching.

"Looks like he's continued to be interested in the tiny countries. Lots of articles on their sociology. No books that I can find – odd for a professor, I'd say."

"Can you pull up a couple of the pieces so we can get a flavor of what he's saying?"

It was soon done. Kit printed copies of what appeared to be the more general treatises and they began reading.

"Does it seem to you that he's come to really strange conclusions, Uncle David?"

"It does. He finds them to be happy, contented, mutually helpful people and

berates them for it.”

“Right. In this one he lists a dozen expectations they tend to hold, which he refers to as fatal faults engendered by misguided, inappropriate, interpersonal relationships within the smallest countries. Trust, compassion, altruism, mutual helpfulness, openness, and on down the list of traits you and I consider socially positive.”

"I see he replaces those with approaches which in general suggest guardedness, mistrust, and the revenge mentality," David added. "Try to ferret out his motivation."

"Here's a starter," Kit said reading aloud. "To expect others to act and react to you in positive ways leaves the person and the country open for the worst possible consequences."

"In other words don't trust anybody because there are a few out there who can't be trusted," Kit said paraphrasing what he thought was Donner's intent."

He continued.

"He goes on to cite Germany during the Second World War and Russia during its expansion period after the war. Later he cites what he calls the United States expansionist policy in the Middle East. He also uses that as an example of what he terms the forced dissolution of opposing philosophies."

Kit had another aside.

"I guess it's a caution against the tendency he sees for strong countries that don't like the way another country governs itself to think they have the right to crush it and replace it with their own version of the truth."

"And where would you stand on that last issue, Kit?"

"It's a tough question. It seems necessary to differentiate between people-sanctioned governments and those imposed upon them against their will."

"Lots of people in the United States today would say our own government is going off in a direction that is not according to their wishes and that we can soon be caught up in an oppressive regime that will remove the individual rights we have enjoyed since our inception. Should those folks seek help from another super power to invade us and set us straight?"

"It's different. We have means of remedy – elections. Afghanistan, for example, gave the people no real voice at all before our invasion."

"In that case it is much deeper than politics, though, isn't it? In some ways those folks were used to being told how they must live according to their faith as interpreted by the holy men of the area. It wasn't so much a case of not liking it as it was a case of needing to allow themselves to be governed according to how they believed it must be – comfortable or not."

"Ah! The religious thing," Kit said.

"When a large segment of a population believes its citizens must be governed in accordance with *their* religion – Islam, Christianity, or what have you – all lines blur. It has – up to now at least – been the ultimate strength of the United States – separating religion from government."

"That line's blurring now, too, though isn't it? There are some religious forces in

our country that are vehement in their contention that their version of the truth must govern. That all our citizens must live under laws that reflect *their* beliefs. That *my* beliefs, if they are different, have no legitimate place and don't have to be considered. It's scary. It's like that force in our society is becoming our own version of the Taliban. Like they are trying to replace our democracy with their theocracy"

"People who believe they know the ultimate truth and therefore have the right to impose it on everybody else, are history ignoramuses. It is impossible that they have read history with an open sincerity aimed at understanding the facts. In every age a few believe they are right and that those who came before were wrong not realizing that in the next age, *they* will be those who are looked back on as having been wrong, replaced by some new version of right."

"So, how do we go about achieving a society of fairness?" Kit asked.

"In the old days it was easier. If one didn't fit in with the beliefs of one village he could move on and find one to his liking or start a new one that met his needs. It was one of the pluses of isolation.

"We can no longer do that in this day and age of instant global communication. We often know more about what's going on in the lives of movie stars we've never met than we do what's going on in the house next door to us. Sections of the globe that had lived in the secure, unchallenged, knowledge that their beliefs were right – because there were no competing beliefs – no longer have that source of security."

"And insecurity fosters all kinds of defense mechanisms. The most serious of those is the attempt to stamp out opposing beliefs so there will no longer be that basic source of anxiety."

"And to set out to obliterate another group one has to . . ." David let it hang.

"Foster hate," Kit said with no hesitation. "Hate is like the only wall some folks know how to build to protect themselves. You and I actively seek out what's different and study it to see if it holds things we can use as we continue to build our philosophy and way of living. That concept clearly scares the hell out of many other groups – most, in fact.

"They, or their leaders at least, don't feel comfortable allowing a one on one comparison of their belief system with other belief systems – well, I mean honest, open, *un-spun*, comparisons. It's not a fair approach to just preach how some other belief is wrong. It has to include the specific basics as to how that group has come to believe as it does – without pre-judgment. It is unfair to say that since some group doesn't begin with our god or our view of the universe as the basis of their values then nothing that follows from them can possibly represent the truth."

"So is hate the number one problem of civilization today, you think, Uncle David?"

"I think we have to go back a step. You've already touched on it. *How do we come to feel the need to teach our children to hate?* That's the basic question and until we can find those sources and fix them hate will be preached and encouraged in every hamlet on the planet."

Kit nodded and thought aloud.

"Again, it sounds like it is the fear of learning about legitimate challenges to ones beliefs. 'If I don't listen, then mine can't be challenged. Even better, if I get rid of the group promoting those 'anti-my' beliefs or at least legislate them into powerless insignificance, then I'm protected forever as are my children. If, however, I can't annihilate those who espouse that conflicting philosophy then I can at least protect myself and my children by engendering such intense hate toward them that none of my people will ever associate with them – therefore never hear the possibly threatening basis of their beliefs'."

Kit had another thought.

"Sounds like a playground argument. 'I'm right and you're wrong' and the gathering of actual facts upon which to solve the dispute is never considered as an option. It eventuates in the escalation of verbosity and volume with nobody changing their mind. Each party leaves the confrontation being patted on the back by his supporters because he didn't lose."

"Have you and Allison talked about hate?"

"Oh yes. She makes a good point about it. She says hate depersonalizes. By that she means hate is a way to structure relationships so the other person actually becomes a non-person – a being but not one worthy of compassion or love or protection – not one to engender guilt if you hurt or kill him.

"For her it stems from her characterization of god. She believes god only has two basic stances – emotions, perhaps. One is love and one is hate. If god loves you – a state you have to earn by living according to his laws – he passes good things your way. If he hates you he intentionally torments you or takes your life. Once you enter his hated category you become a non-person and therefore deserve no favors – in fact, you no longer really deserve life and certainly no positive afterlife.

"Her god is quick to hate so she believes – being made in his image – people should be quick to hate as well."

"And love?"

"You are born loved. You have a set number of misdeeds you're allowed – nobody knows for sure how many that is or at what age god starts counting. Once you've used them up you automatically and forever enter the hated category."

"Forgiveness? Doesn't divine forgiveness play a part in her conception of religion?"

"It does but only during that phase where you're working through – learning through – your allotment of misdeeds. Each one of those is forgiven *if* you ask. Once past your allotment it's Hatesville for you."

"Heaven and Hell?"

"Heaven is an eternal, positive, care-free state for the beloved. Hell simply means the lack of an eternal life."

"As interesting as all this has been we need to get back to Donner," David said.

"Right now it appears Pod Man is playing god – threatening to kill you, like he

did," Kit said trying to tie it all together. "That certainly suggests hate to me."

"I *do* believe it is probably based in Paul's conception of right and wrong. People have always rejected him. That was certainly not right but he was a very unlikable person. He, however, put the blame for his unhappy social life and personal relationships on others rather than looking within himself to see if he could modify some things."

"You're saying he believed his social approach – rude, brazen, blunt, tactless – should *not* have been a basis for rejection by others?"

"I guess that's what I'm saying, Kit. He and I used to talk about our rights to be ourselves and I agreed with him on it up to a point."

"Up to the point of where he began hurting others, you mean?"

"To some extent, although he never went much beyond hurting their feelings. Where he contended that everybody should accept him regardless of his personal traits, I contended that although he had the right to be himself, he had to live with the consequences. If he offended people, people had their own right to stay away from him. They had the right not to be made uncomfortable by him."

"And his reaction to that?"

"He'd say he had the basic right to be honest with others about how he felt. I agreed and said by that same token they had the right to be honest with him and say they didn't want to spend time around such a person. He always contended it was two very different situations. *He* was reacting to his need to be honest – an essential, basic tenet if society was to survive – one he apparently now believes does not exist. *They* were reacting to their need to be comfortable. He didn't believe people had a right to be comfortable when there was so much ill going on around them in the world."

"Sort of a logical, illogic," Kit said.

David nodded and smiled. "As was that last sentence of yours."

Kit grinned and continued.

"So, do you think Pod Man has developed a case of megalomania?"

"His way is right and all others are wrong, you mean?"

Kit nodded.

"It wouldn't have been much of a step from where he was when I last knew him. His basic approach to dealing with what he saw as unfair actions directed toward him can be characterized by the cliché we hear so often from the non-thinkers of the world – 'Don't get mad, get even.'

"For several reasons it is the single most devastating philosophy members of any society can hold. It sets up a straw man suggesting there are only two ways to react when you feel you've been wronged – get angry or take revenge. The socially constructive alternative might be, 'Don't get mad, work to solve the problem or prevent it from having to happen again. Nobody in the history of mankind ever changed their ideas about anything by being punished. It made them angry. It made them dislike the person inflicting the punishment and his kind – however that may be construed. But it never changed a basic value. It may so terrify one's subconscious that the person is unable to act in any contradictory way but it never truly changes the basic value.'

“The second reason is that the revenge philosophy puts into motion a chain reaction of *hurt* and *hurt worse* that never stops. He hurt me so I’ll hurt him more. Then the other person responds by saying the same thing, and so on into eternity. Revenge never solves a problem or improves the state of mankind. It can only worsen things.”

Kit nodded having heard it before.

"Why did you hang with him if he was such a distasteful person?"

"He interested me. When he was off his soapbox we had some good times together. I suppose part of me always hoped he'd see some wisdom in the model I tried to present, and if I weren't there with him he couldn't experience the model. Who knows; he may have been thinking the same toward me."

"Did you know he hated you?"

"No. Perhaps I should have. It must have put him in such an uncomfortable bind."

"What bind?" Kit asked.

"Me being the only person in his life who was willing to spend time with him and he hating that same person – the only one with whom he could meet his needs for socialization."

"You feel compassion for him, don't you?"

"Certainly. I'm not entirely sure how he came to have the twisted personality he has but he did. I was always bothered by his deep down unhappiness and his need to blame it on everyone else. I'm saddened to see people so intractably unhappy. I did what I knew to do to help change that. Perhaps that was my mistake – trying to force my view of social normality onto him."

"And now he's out to kill you."

"So it seems."

"You know what I think?" Kit said not waiting for any indication of interest. "I think you blew his mind, continuing to be nice to him when nobody else would. You came to represent everything he couldn't believe in – people being nice, supportive, friendly to one another. You were the piece of the puzzle that didn't fit, the extra thumb that wouldn't slip into his glove. That's why I think he has to kill you. To get rid of that one roadblock to his theory. Sort of the opposite position from that taken by your Ari."

"But even if he succeeds, the memory will still be there. He can't get rid of what has been."

"But he's not going to realize that until it's too late for you."

"You're right. So we just have to outsmart him here. And that won't be easy. He is simply brilliant."

"And we really can't begin the outsmarting process until we know what he's about to be up too. *He's* had years and years to work this out while *we* have to fly by the seat of our pants moment by moment."

"We flew that way pretty successfully last summer, Kit. I assume we can do as well now."

"You seem so confident."

"And why not? We're the only two, related, Indiana, boys who have ever finished the freshman year at Harvard number one in their class."

"How did you find out about that? I was gong to spring it on you sometime when things seemed right."

"The Dean of Students is an old friend. I'm afraid I knew before you did."

"That's okay I guess. I assume I knew about that little, pink, bald spot on the top of your head before you did."

"Really? Maud never mentioned it."

Kit grinned as David rubbed his head.

Connie spoke over the intercom.

"Five minutes to set down. Get strapped in – pardon that expression. Temperature is a balmy 79 degrees at the airport."

"I guess this is finally it," Kit said releasing a long, deliberately serious sigh.

"Like you said, we have every reason to be confident. What we can't accomplish with our smarts, Alex can supply from his experience."

For old time sake Kit closed his eyes during the landing. He didn't know why for sure. Perhaps there was some security in closing out the realities of the World one last time while he had the chance."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

While Kit busied himself in the clothing shop picking out several layer optional outfits for himself and young Ari, David made a large cash withdrawal against one of the credit cards. Not knowing how the next few days or weeks were going to play out he wanted to have plenty in reserve.

Back in the room David split up the cash among the four of them. Kit and Alex loaded a small back pack for Ari with clothes and minimal supplies and rations. Alex and Connie then returned to their rooms while David and Kit opted for dinner at one of the several cafes near the hotel.

David enjoyed the traditional Spanish cuisine. Kit enjoyed the abundance of feminine flesh flaunted during the floor show. He had no idea what he had eaten.

Back in their suite, David turned in. Kit opted for a *long* shower.

The alarm on Kit's phone roused them at 4:15. They ate at the hotel restaurant and at 4:45 entered a cab for the airport. They found Alex and Connie near the spot they had left the plane. It was five sharp and Connie had just begun coaxing the big blades to life.

"Is the element of surprise important?" Connie asked.

"Not really. I'm relatively sure he already knows we're coming."

"Okay then, we'll fly at a thousand feet rather than hugging the ground. No need to frighten the country folks. Local rules state we can't fly low over or near the snow covered slopes for fear of causing avalanches. I can get you to the exact spot marked on the map or even a few hundred yards closer."

"Closer the better," David said.

The three strapped into their seats.

"I'm to stay and wait for you?"

It had been Connie's assumption intoned as a question.

"Yes. We'll keep in touch by phone. We just don't know what stipulations, if any, may be imposed on us. Best case scenario is we find the boy, return here, and you zip us away to safety."

Connie nodded, eased back on a lever, and the little craft rose into the air, nose dipped slightly as it moved forward and up into the air.

They had donned shorts and T-shirts for the initial phase of the journey with

insulated jump suits, gloves, and head gear rolled, ready to carry with them. The trip covered less than ten kilometers and fifteen minutes later they were back on the ground.

The barren mountain side rose in front of them as a rugged, brown, wasteland between the lush green valley and the pure white snow above. A few of the hardest small trees sprung from crevices and dotted the stone face, adding some hint of life to the slope.

The bell tower stood as a tiny, dark gray, column rising against the snowy backdrop. The sun had not yet found that western slope and wouldn't for several more hours. The deepest shadows retained the blue hues of night.

They began by viewing the tower and its surrounding grounds through binoculars. Kit was in charge of the camera and took several shots through the telephoto lens. The area appeared deserted – deceptively so, they believed.

"We should meet no resistance until we locate the boy," David said. "Then, I have no idea what to expect. I imagine some written communication outlining the ground rules will be provided. Perhaps the boy has been told what to tell us."

"You're bound and determined that this is going to be difficult, aren't you?" Kit said.

It really wasn't a question.

"Somebody's in the opening at the top of the tower," Alex said. "He probably has binoculars, himself. See the glint of light there."

"So, we are being watched. What a surprise," Kit said.

The three of them moved up the slope. It got progressively steeper yet less boulder ridden as they climbed higher. A half hour into the climb, Alex suggested they put on their cold gear.

"It'll cool down in a hurry now as we approach the snow line. The rising hot air will be behind us, pushed away from the mountain by the cold air tumbling down from up top."

"No skiers," Kit observed.

"Snow layer is too thin," Alex said pointing. "See the rock outcroppings sprinkled around up there. The north slopes will be the best ones this time of year."

As they came within a hundred yards of the tower they stopped and surveyed it again through their binoculars. Kit took pictures.

"Fifty feet high would you say?" Kit asked.

"About that," Alex said. "And three meters square. All quarried, gray stone, probably interlocking or it wouldn't have stood this long. See the low, wide, pile of stones to the right? Probably the remains of the church or abbey. It collapsed long ago."

"Instructions, Alex?" David asked.

"Let's circle the area several times drawing each new one in closer to the tower. We have to find entrances and exits to whatever may be under ground here."

"They'd have had to chisel the cellar out of solid stone mountain wouldn't they?" Kit asked.

"That or it's built over a natural cave or crevasse. Monks are traditionally patient

folks. If it took them a hundred years to carve out the spot that wouldn't have bothered them in the least. One monk used to spend a lifetime making just one copy of the Bible, remember."

Kit nodded.

"I should have asked earlier, Uncle David, but do you know of any reason that Pod Man chose Andorra for this showdown?"

"None. We may find out soon or it may have been a whim."

They began circling the area. No opening was found first time around. Alex closed them in by ten yards and they walked another circle spread out side by side so they could examine the entire swath.

Half way into the fourth circle Kit found a hole and the remnants of a wooden door – like a cellar door on the older Indiana farm houses.

"That's one," Alex said marking it on a makeshift map he was drawing as they went. They moved on.

Two more openings were found on the surface of the ground. One had a door more or less intact. Alex opened it with a pole and left it open.

"Why open?" Kit asked. "Why use the pole?"

"If it's rigged to explode when opened I'd rather get that out of the way now. Also, we need to make sure they are all open for us to use for our exit. So far each one has a descending stone stairway still more or less intact."

They arrived at the base of the tower. It had one opening which had recently been fitted with a new, heavy, wood-plank, door. Alex motioned them back as he slowly pushed it open with the end of his pole.

He entered. David and Kit followed. It was dark. They broke out the flashlights. A new ladder had been put in place to reach the top of the tower. Alex climbed to the top to make certain it was now empty. It was.

There was a stairway descending east from an opening in the center of the rock floor. Alex took out a small, thick, rod-like device and began moving it from place to place ahead of him as he began descending the stairs.

"An explosive sniffer," he explained over his shoulder in anticipation of Kit's question.

Kit nodded and followed. David brought up the rear. They both felt an uneasy moment as Alex unbuttoned the leather cover on his holster.

At the bottom of the stairwell was another door – also of recent installation. Satisfied it was not booby trapped, Alex pushed it wide open. They lit the area beyond with their lights revealing an underground hallway carved from the rock of the mountain. There were open doorways – open arches – at irregular intervals along the right wall.

They approached the first one and looked inside. It led into a small vacant room with no signs of recent occupancy. The second revealed a short hall with another arched opening off to the left some twenty feet into it. A flickering, blue, light emanated from inside.

Alex moved to where he could peak around the corner and get a look at the

interior. He motioned the others in ahead of him.

"It's the big *bingo*, guys," Kit said walking over to the boy reclining on a cot, reading.

"Ari, I presume," Kit said.

Their sudden presence startled the lad and he sat up scooting back against the wall.

"Is there a David among you," he asked in English.

"I am David, your father's friend. You seem to be expecting me."

"Father said if I ever got into a sticky spot you'd fix things for me. I've just been waiting. My father's word was always good."

He stood up and offered his hand all around. David made the introductions.

Ari was dressed warmly and there was a kerosene heater that kept the area at a pleasant, shirt sleeve, temperature.

"Do you know why you're here? Have you seen the person who brought you here?"

"Paul brought me here. Abe stays with me while Paul goes places. I've not been told why I am here but I figure I've been kidnapped, probably until my Grandpapa pays some amount of money."

"Have they told you the reason for the harness – the straps?"

"You know about that? Yes. If I try to leave here they'll blow me into a billion pieces. I decided not to call their bluff."

"A wise move," Kit said.

"Do you know where they stay – what room or whatever?" Alex asked.

"No. I'm not allowed out of this room."

"How have you been treated?" Kit asked.

"Fine. All the food I want to eat. Pop to drink. Dozens of books to read – I love to read. Just about everything I could need except for Mama and Sponge Bob Square Pants."

David looked blank. Kit explained.

"A loveable, cartoon character that comes close to living out your philosophy."

Alex felt the need to move on quickly.

"Son, there is one thing we need to do to those straps immediately. We need to spray them with a hard plastic coating to keep them dry. We don't want moisture short circuiting them. You understand?"

"My father said I could trust David with my life so if he says okay, okay."

David nodded and Ari began removing his clothes, feeling the need to offer some explanation.

"This outfit is not what I'd have picked out, you understand, and I've never worn long underwear before but it's been good and warm and there aren't many girls that stop in for me to impress."

There was no way to allow for any feelings of modesty the boy might have. It was immediately obvious that he had none.

Alex gave instructions.

"Kit, slide this piece of plastic bag under a section of the strap to protect Ari's skin while I use the spray. Then we'll move on to another area."

It took well over fifteen minutes until Alex was satisfied. He worked carefully – meticulously. He examined the small canisters in front and the several pieces of gadgetry on the back of the main belt. After another five minutes he pronounced it dry and Ari redressed – *sans* the long johns.

"Now slip into this jumpsuit," Kit said offering to help. "It's cold outside in the snow."

"Where are we, by the way? They put a hood over my head the whole time from home to here."

"Andorra," Kit offered. "You know about Andorra?"

"A very small country in the Pyrenees between France and Spain. I've been there skiing several times. Wonderful snow."

"Well, you've been in Andorra – you *are* in Andorra."

Ari continued wiggling into his new outfit.

"What do you know about your captors?" David asked.

"Paul is probably American from his English. He's the tallest man I've ever seen. Abe's English is not so good. I tried Greek, German, and Russian on him but he didn't seem to respond. Spanish worked but I get the idea his first language is still something else. He didn't reveal it."

"You are quite the observant lad," David said.

Kit broke in.

"There was to be some communication for us here."

"Oh. Maybe this," Ari said pulling a large brown envelope out from under his mattress. "Paul said to make sure I gave this to anybody who came after me. It was like he was expecting somebody to come and wasn't going to stop them from taking me. Doesn't that seem odd?"

"It does," David said. "There are many odd things about all of this but we can go into that later."

He opened the envelope. It contained several typed sheets.

"I suppose since we're all in on this together we can all hear it at once."

He turned to Ari.

"It may be frightening but you are Ari's son and I believe you can handle it. Okay?"

The boy nodded forcefully, perhaps too forcefully in his attempt to demonstrate that he could live up to David's expectations.

Ari and David sat across from each other over a small wooden table well lit from a gas lantern hanging above it from the center of the arched, cave-like, ceiling. Kit opened a line to Connie so he could also be a part of the reading. He placed his phone on the table near David. Then he and Alex took seats on the cot. David began.

So, David, you found the prize, the prince's prince. Congratulations, I suppose, although any eighth grade student could have done as well given sufficient time and the same resources.

I'm also sure you know with whom you are dealing. I would be interested in knowing at what point you first suspected me. In all likelihood I will never hear about that. I suppose you have your theory as to why I've involved you in this. Let me leave no doubt.

At the same time, I hate and admire most everything about you. I hated your relationship with Ari Stephanopoulos and yet I admired your ability to get along with him – learn from him – teach him. I appreciated your willingness to associate with me and yet I hated the fact, for it suggested a possible flaw in my conceptualization of the human race.

Normal human's are self-serving beings filled with both the automatic, mandatory, rejection of those differing from themselves and vengefulness toward those who provide obstacles to them. You have never seemed to fit that picture. You represent a very frightening, fully misguided, minority of our species. Well, we're about to find out if that's really true.

You spread false hope that traits such as love, compassion, and mutual helpfulness are basic to the human psyche. You suggest those traits can be mobilized to save the human race from destroying itself.

In so doing you leave the species vulnerable to extinction at the hands of the unreasonably violent people. People must maintain an ever present vigilance against the innate malevolent motivations of others, some of whom will, without question, move against them to obtain what they have and will quash any belief systems that differ from their own. Those who cross one must be punished, defeated, or annihilated before they can do the same to you.

Punishment and the fear of punishment are the sole basis of all motivation. Society will only survive when all factions fear each other equally. It is how we survived the cold war – our finest hour as a species, I believe.

I understand that you advocate the untenable positive incentive approach to motivation. You fail to recognize that it merely represents the absence of punishment so punishment remains the basic motivator even in your scheme of things. Working for a reward is merely working so you will not be deprived of the reward – not remain in the unpleasant state of want – the basic state of being punished, if you will.

A drowning person may think he is searching for air – something positive – when in reality he is attempting to avoid the negative – lungs filled with death producing water. Man's entire life is actually spent trying to avoid all the negatives including the ultimate negative, death, itself. Misguided religions often try to turn even that into a positive.

To prove my point to you I have set up a contest of sorts. It will require you to experience the most severe kinds of fear – punishment driven fear – pain driven

fear – deprivation driven fear. By the time our contest comes to an end you will have realized that I am right and you are wrong.

Right now, you believe you will do whatever is necessary to protect those with you – the boy, your nephew, your two staff people. Believe me, the time will come when you will only be thinking of yourself, leaving them behind in a second as you make the final desperate scramble to save your own life.

Here are the details. In a few minutes the bell will ring in the tower. From that moment you have fifteen days – three hundred sixty hours – in which to get the boy safely to his mother's home in Athens. You will choose your own route from here to there. I will give you six hours head start and then my associates will come after you. They will be armed with a variety of weaponry including explosives and long range hunting rifles. They are schooled in dozens of ways to kill both rapidly and slowly – and particularly enjoy the latter.

Any one of several acts on your part will trigger the explosives on the boy: (1) entering an airplane of any kind – he is wearing an altimeter; (2) attempting to capture or disable any of my men; (3) contacting anyone for help outside the five of you.

If you *should* manage to deliver the boy to his home without losing any of your associates – and I am certain you will not – you have my word that the explosive device can be deactivated by remote. After that, you can remove the strap with no fear for his life. To deactivate the device wait for the white canister to glow red. (I will do that remotely upon verification of your arrival.) Then, turn the cap of that canister clockwise one full turn. Wait thirty minutes. Then the straps may be cut.

However, when you deactivate it on Ari's strap, know this: Some number of minutes after that deactivation, a similar charge, which will be secured to my waist, will be automatically set off. I will arrange to be in a children's hospital at that time, in the midst of a group of sick youngsters. So, in saving Ari you will be killing me and all of them.

Although *you* will be our prime target, David, I reserve the right to kill, maim, or capture and torture any of your party. *See how fear motivates you!* See how there is no possible *positive* motivation in all of this. See. I am right and you are wrong.

I know your mind. Don't think that you can just wait here to be killed and send the others on their way to safety. I won't play that way. If at any point it seems to me you are not making a legitimate attempt to escape, the explosives on the strap will be detonated.

How will I know where you are, you are wondering? To make it interesting I have installed a homing beacon on the strap. Like all people I will do what I can to see that any contest is tipped in my favor. However, I will contact the homing device only at midnight Andorra time. It will transmit your location to me during a fifteen second time period each night. That will be sufficient to keep track of you in

a general way and still keep it within the bounds of a semi-fair contest of cat and mouse. The cat always maintains the upper hand, of course. There is no doubt about the eventual outcome. It is nature's way.

Everything about the remote arrangement is dependant upon a body temperature sensor implanted under my skin. If I should die and my body temperature drop, the explosives will be automatically detonated.

The design of this contest should tell you how much I hate you and how dangerous I think you and your books are to the survival of mankind. The hate is, of course, doubled because of my admiration for you. I hate you for being someone I have to admire.

Upon *your* death, of course, the strap can be deactivated immediately.

You will read this and undoubtedly mark me as insane. I am sane in my world, David – the real world – where it is you and your kind that are insane. I want to prove all of this to you before you breathe your last. I *will* do just that! At the end you will believe! -- Paul O. Donner

Ari was the first to respond – not in the way any would have predicted.

"Cool! Sounds like we're off on a real adventure. I've never had a real adventure before and I've decided being imprisoned here really hasn't had the necessary elements to qualify as an adventure."

The others exchanged glances.

"You *do* understand the dangers involved, Ari. It won't be a picnic," David said.

"Yes. My father and I have great confidence in you, though, and I'll do whatever you tell me to do. I'm sure you'll get me home safely."

None of the others shared the boy's firm confidence but they wouldn't let on for his sake.

The jumpsuits were reversible. Alex had suggested the yellow side out for the climb up the mountain. The camouflage side suddenly seemed more appropriate. They changed at Alex's suggestion.

"I think Granpapa Ari made one miscalculation," Kit said. "We have four phones and there are now five of us."

Alex smiled.

"You anticipated the problem didn't you?" Kit said.

Alex removed a phone from a zippered pocket in his suit and handed it to the boy.

"You know how to use these things, I assume," he said.

"Yes. In fact I enjoy reprogramming them to do all kinds of neat stuff. "

"A fellow techno-nerd," Kit said offering a high five, a move that seemed to be part of the universal kid language.

"In that case, nerd boys, fix the rest of these to speed dial Ari's phone as number six."

They had finished the task faster than the two senior citizens of the group could have found the manual.

David picked up the phone and spoke to Connie.

"You heard?"

"I did. Sounds like we ditch the helicopter here and proceed on foot."

"You're willing to accompany us, then."

"Of course. A guy can only take so much cavorting with naked girls along the beaches on the Riviera before he needs a change of scene."

"I don't believe that for a minute but thank you for your decision. When the bell tolls set your chronometer for 360 hours. We're on our way. Assemble what maps you have there and set out the survival gear in four piles. I want Ari to be in charge of a coil of rope that he can sling over his head and under his arm to carry across his chest. That way he will have it available for us on a moment's notice."

"Got you. It will all be ready when you arrive."

Connie understood the rope was to provide a special feeling of team member importance for the boy without putting undue burden on his small, young, frame.

As they left the tower, the bell chimed. It meant Paul was probably right there, a mere fifty feet above where they stood. It might as well have been half way around the globe. David controlled his urge to look.

The boys set a countdown clock on each of the phones. They then hurried down the slope toward the helicopter unzipping as they approached the valley floor. Privately both David and Alex had begun contemplating strategy.

Connie had a map laid out on the top of a nearby boulder. It centered on the Mediterranean Sea and included the islands and ports from Gibraltar to Turkey.

"Thirteen hundred miles as the crow flies from here to Athens," Connie said having done the measurement while he awaited their arrival.

"If we could average four miles an hour walking that would take us 325 hours," Kit said doing some quick figuring in his head. That clearly won't work."

"I'm opting for a water course," David said. "Talk to me about that Alex, Connie."

Alex began.

"That has been my thought as well. We can island hop. We'll need a nondescript, sea worthy, boat."

"Probably several along the way," Connie pointed out. "We may well need to shed one and find another any time the Pod Men get a fix on us."

"I assume Paul will assume that we will immediately begin working our way east toward Greece," David said. "I, therefore, suggest we move southwest to some small port on the Spanish coast."

"That will tip our hand immediately," Alex said.

"Wherever we go our hand will be tipped every midnight," David said.

Kit had a different configuration to suggest.

"It seems to me that every little bit of misdirection we can provide should help us, right," he said looking from face to face.

They all nodded ready to listen.

"How about this for a beginning, then. Ari and I head overland, east north east from here, to a few miles inland from the coast just south of Perpignan France."

He pointed as he talked.

"You guys go directly southwest to the area of *Tarragona*, Spain and make everything ready – get the boat, supplies and work out our eventual course to Athens. You come back up the coast in the boat and pick us up a few minutes after midnight at the extreme point of this little peninsula. We'll flash Morse Code for Pod Man so you can find us. After his mid-night position reading tonight, Pod Man will think we are heading east, overland. Then, by boat we had back Southwest to Majorca from where we really begin this adventure."

The men looked at each other and at the map. Connie made some measurements and estimated the time line.

"If we all push it we can pull it off," he said after a few minutes.

"Okay," David said. "Sounds like a very good initial ploy. One change. Alex will accompany Ari. Kit, you will come with Connie and me."

Kit accepted the decision without expressing his disappointment. David took some of everybody's cash and tucked it away in Ari's jeans pocket. By then the others had each stripped to the warm weather clothing with which they had begun the morning.

"Roll up the jump suits," Alex suggested. "We'll keep them with us not knowing what we may be getting into."

They began arranging their gear. Ari had a question – of a kind.

"I really gotta take a pee. Since I've never been out on an adventure like this how should I go about such a thing?"

The men smiled at the lad's innocent, open, honesty.

Kit provided the one step education.

"Tell you what. I need to relieve myself as well. Let's go over there and see if we can hit that tree from six feet away."

"A peeing contest! This is so great! "

The contest over and all vital parts appropriately stashed, the two groups said good-bye and started off in different directions. Alex and Ari had close to a hundred miles to cover. Even at a brisk trot they would have no time to rest. They needed to catch a ride at least part way.

The others were looking at a hundred and fifty miles through northeastern Spain, following long narrow valleys that followed swiftly running streams.

"Horseback," Connie said. "Probably three changes of mounts between here and there. Should be plenty available along the way."

He was right. For fifty Euros the poor men of the valleys would have sold their wives. They made excellent time and, well before 6:00 had secured supplies and a sturdy old twenty foot wooden boat with a steam engine that could be fired with either wood or coal. A built-in distiller gave them the option of using sea water for both drinking and for the boiler.

They set to sea immediately, wanting to leave behind as few witnesses to their

presence as possible. Connie had opted away from an internal combustion engine believing that gasoline or diesel fuel might not be easily available along the isolated route they planned.

Kit had soon mastered the arts of stoking and steering and set a leisurely pace east, staying well out to sea to maintain secrecy. The three of them worked out a possible route to get the boy home. It was understood that the actual one would depend on what transpired on a day to day basis.

The general plan was to keep moving, resting in shifts, and traveling with haste for the eighteen hours following midnight each day. They towed two wooden rowboats in case of emergency – initially they were loaded with bags of coal. The smoke stack puffed black circles of smoke and the engine chugged at a gentle, steady, tempo – just the way all children’s books describe it.

As it neared midnight, Connie assisted with the navigation. They traveled close along the irregular, generally isolated, coast.

"There's the point," Connie said indicating it with his finger. Disengage the propeller and let's just sit here until we get the signal."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex and Ari became fast friends and enjoyed conversing in the Greek language, which they shared. Ari soon proved he would be no extra baggage. He exhibited great stamina and picked them up and put them down right along side his new friend at they maintained a speedy trot along the streams toward the coast.

Several hours into the 'adventure' one of the many skier's busses appeared on the road ahead. Alex flagged it down and they were soon occupying marginally comfortable seats and making good time toward *Pepignan*.

"That Paul guy surprised me, you know?" Ari said.

"How's that?"

"Like he has two personalities. He was so nice to me. He never raised his voice or came close to hurting me. He apologized for inconveniencing me and told me not to be scared. He seemed really bothered by seeing me naked while he and Abe installed the strap and took the pictures. He kept covering up my genitals with a towel. I'd let it slide off and he'd put it right back. I sort of got a kick out of that – a grown man embarrassed by such a thing. On the other hand he also said if I tried to leave he'd blow me up. In general, though, he seemed like a good guy.

"Then David read that letter. My gosh! The man's loony, you know. I'm just eleven but even I know wakko when I hear wakko."

"Who seemed to know the most about putting that strap on you?"

"Abe. I think it was Abe who made it. After it was all connected up he was the one who . . . I'm not sure what to call it . . . took readings with some electronic gadget. He plugged a phone into something on the back of the belt and then called a number on his cell phone. For a few minutes it was like he was making some sort of adjustments on one of the gadgets back there. After a little while he clicked something closed and said it was ready and working. It was Abe."

"Did they mention batteries?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Did they say anything about it that was of interest to you?"

"Just that they could blow it up anytime they felt like it no matter where I was. *That* caught my attention."

"I can imagine."

"I think there is beginning to be a problem with it. When we were running, it started to rub me raw between my legs and over my shoulders."

"I hadn't anticipated that. I should have. I'm sorry."

"No sorry to it – that was one of my father's favorite expressions. He'd say, 'No sorry to it. Just get the job done!' "

It had been delivered somewhat comically in the lowest voice a young soprano could deliver.

"Once we get off the bus I'll wrap those spots on the strap with cloth and lubricate the skin with Vaseline. We'll have you fixed up in no time."

"Thanks."

"So, tell me about yourself," Alex said.

"Well, I'm eleven and I really like myself. I'm very smart and that is just the fact, not bragging. I speak five languages and love to draw and paint. I've enjoying tinkering with computer programming since I was just a little kid. I'm a bastard but you now that, I guess. My father and mother both say that is no reflection on me so I should not let it influence my self-concept – so I haven't.

"I am just beginning to enter puberty – some new hair here and there in odd places and my boy parts seem to be working over time trying to turn into man parts. I'm looking forward to when my shoulders widen. My father had a great body and I hope mine will be too. I suppose that's more than you figured you'd get from that question, huh?"

"Yes, but then, the answer to a question is always in the other person's court."

"I miss having my father to talk with. We talked almost every evening no matter where he was. So, it's just very comfortable having you here to talk with. Mama's great but she's a girl, you know?"

"The comfort factor is mutual, my friend."

Ari beamed and nodded, turning his head to look out the window.

"Turning north," came the driver's voice as he jerked the bus to a halt. The trailing cloud of dust caught them, engulfed them, and rushed on ahead. David had requested the stop so they could get off and continue their trek toward the Mediterranean.

They hefted their backpacks and left the bus. Alex looked at his watch. It was almost nine. Darkness had pretty well closed on them. They walked on along the creek, which had grown much wider than it had been upstream. Once out of sight of the road they stopped and Alex attended to Ari's blisters and raw skin. It had been caught before serious damage had taken place.

"Feels lots better, Alex. Thanks. How long 'til we meet up with the others?"

“A little over three hours. I estimate we are about thirty minutes from our rendezvous spot. Let’s break out some grub and eat. We need to be right here come midnight. A few seconds before you will need to begin walking northeast. In that fifteen second interval that Paul mentioned he can not only fix a global location but he can also track the direction of movement. We want him to believe you are moving just opposite from our actual course.”

“I got it. Just say when. If I run will that be easier for them to track?”

“An excellent idea. Yes.”

“I know a little about global positioning devices. I figure I can run fifteen to twenty meters in fifteen seconds. That will give them a nice long arrow growing in the wrong direction.”

“Long *and* convincing. That was excellent thinking.”

“Like I said, I’m brilliant. It’s not to my credit, you understand. It’s just what happens when two brilliant people, thoughtfully, decide to create a child together. A brilliant bastard – *neither* of which are of my doing.”

Alex chuckled and nodded into the boys face.

“I’m glad you’ve come into my life. I am enjoying our friendship.”

“Really? That’s great. Me, too.”

Midnight arrived. Ari ran like the wind for a full minute just in case there might have been some small difference in the clocks involved. He returned to Alex puffing and smiling.

“Take *that*, Paul *Bad Guy* Donner,” he called out as he dropped to his knees in the grass.

“Back into our gear,” Alex said. “We still have a good run to the point where we’re meeting the others.”

“You really know where the point is, right?” Ari asked as they gradually settled into a comfortable trot.

“I know right where it’s *supposed* to be,” Alex said smiling into the darkness.

“I’ll take that.”



## CHAPTER EIGHT

It was going on 12:30 when Kit pointed into the darkness ahead.

"The light. There! Dot dash dot, dash dash, dash dot dot, dash, dot dash, dash dot. That's *pod man* if I ever saw a pod man coming out of the black of a moonless night."

He engaged the propeller and slowly moved in the direction of the repeating flashes. Connie returned a quick recognition signal that he and Alex had used many times before.

"Good timing, guys," Ari said, all smiles. "We just got here ourselves. I love this running."

They were standing on a small wooden pier where several boats were moored.

"The boat have a name?" Ari asked as Alex handed him down to David.

"The *Ari VII*," Kit said off the top of his head.

"Cool! Like me. Oh! You just made that up, didn't you."

"Guilty," Kit said, helping him remove his back pack and the coil of rope.

"Give me another minute," Alex said as he jumped down into the largest of several motor boats.

He untied it and pointed it on a course parallel with the coast. He tied the steering handle in place, started the motor and with a hand up from Connie entered the newly christened, *Ari VII*. The motor boat took out straight as an arrow.

"One more little misdirection effort just in case they are watching the coast line for us."

Kit turned their boat around and headed back out to sea. A few minutes later Connie gave him a compass setting. He turned the craft into it and kept a steady course.

Ari soon migrated back to Kit's side and before long was handling the wheel.

"We need to sleep when we can," Alex said. "It's a twelve hour ride to Majorca. I'm going to suggest that David and I sleep the first six hours and then we'll trade off with the rest of you."

With a round of nods the plan was set. There were closely stacked triple bunks toward the center of the boat along the left side as one faced front. (*Port* for the seaman.) Opposite them was a cabinet of similar dimensions the top of which supported that side of the flat, corrugated, metal roof of the otherwise open craft. There was a wooden bench seat a few feet back from the pointed bow with storage drawers below it.

The metal water reservoir tank was two feet in width and stood six feet tall just to the rear of the bunks. The boiler tank with the steam engine on top, sat opposite it with the small furnace directly below. A small generator took its power from the pistons. The navigator had a clear view straight ahead above the wheel and between the bunks and cabinet. Behind him was a coal bin several feet front to back and the width of the boat. There was a padded bench seat across its front which spanned the boat. The engine beat a quiet, soothing, rhythmic, cadence.

The door to the furnace had adjustable louvers. Open, the fire roared inside building up steam pressure and speeding the craft along at a promised top speed of close to twenty knots. Closed, they quieted the flames and reduced the speed to that of a leisurely Sunday afternoon outing. Kit had them open wide and the boat was cutting a sizeable wake across the generally calm surface.

Kit determined that pitch dark in the middle of an ocean was simply pitch darker than on land. They were running blind – not wanting to chance the use of lights. It involved only minimal risk of hitting anything and the point of the bow was metal reinforced from top to well below the surface. He felt safe running full out as he was. Apparently Connie agreed. He made no mention of it as he sat forward keeping a watchful eye on the 180 degrees before him.

Kit watched the rear and from time to time pointed to the compass indicating Ari needed to make an adjustment. The need for such cues soon passed. The boy kept to an accurate course.

"You have a father, I suppose?" Ari asked.

"Two and a half of them you could say."

Ari gave him an over the shoulder glance that offered a skeptical brow.

"My natural father died when I was two. My mother remarried when I was four so I got a second one. I suppose I've always thought of my Uncle David as my main father, though of course he's not. So, I figure at least two and a half."

Ari smiled and nodded.

"I guess I was luckier than you then, huh?" Ari said.

"How's that?"

"I had ten years with my Father before he died. I had the chance to get to know him really well. You probably can't even really remember yours."

"I see. Yes. I suppose there is something in what you say. I'm glad that you had that much time with your Father."

"I'm sorry you didn't."

"Thank you. I've been fortunate to have really great substitutes, however."

"Good. I'm glad. Boys need fathers. I hadn't fully realized that before. Your mother?"

"My mom is the greatest. She overflows with hugs and kisses and never fails to nag me about stuff I need to be nagged about."

Ari's face broke into a broad smile suggesting that he understood.

"Yeah. One of those things you hate on the surface but appreciate deep inside."

"You are a wise eleven year old, Ari."

"Thank you. I like hearing I'm wise – for my age, of course, you mean. I had nothing to do with being smart but I figure I have most everything to do with being wise. What do you think about that?"

"I guess I agree. Probably hadn't ever given it sufficient thought until this moment."

"Your welcome."

"I thank you."

"So, you and David are really close, huh?"

"Birds and bees close."

"I guess I don't understand that idiom."

"I figure a boy always has a special bond with the man who is willing to talk with him about the facts of life. I've bent Uncle David's ear on that topic for more hours than I can count. Still do sometimes, in fact."

"We're talking about sex information, right?"

"Right."

"I'm just beginning to be interested in that, myself. I find I'm spending more time looking at naked girls and women at the spas and beaches than I used to. My Father made sure I knew all about the how to do it part. I'm still not really sure about *why* you'd *want* to do it, however. He assured me that one day I'd wake up and it would all be clear to me. I check that out first thing every morning. So far nothing."

"Don't be concerned. Enjoy being a boy. It's an absolutely fantastic time of life."

"Yes it is and I *am* enjoying it."

He rubbed his eyes.

"You look tired. Why don't you go get some sack time? I'll handle the wheel."

"Probably should if you're sure you can take care of everything."

"Tell you what. Before you leave, fill up that furnace for us. Then I'll be all set back here."

That done, Ari administered a lingering hug and meaningful kiss to Kit's temple.

"Thank you for what you are doing for me. I love you."

"Love you too, Squirt. Now, get some shut eye so you'll be alert and ready for action in the morning. You're expected to carry your own weight around here, you know."

"Yes, I do. That's what makes it so great! I've been overprotected all my life. Suddenly it's all different. It's like you guys believe I'm something more than just a rich, brainy, brat. It's something I've mostly known but have always wanted to prove, you know?"

"Yes and you're welcome," Kit said mimicking Ari's previous comment.

The boy climbed into the vacant top bunk and was immediately asleep.

"Boat approaching from starboard – that's right for you landlubbers, Connie said."

He kept the craft in sight through his binoculars.

"Shall I cut the engine?" Kit asked.

"Keep her steady for now. Let's see what she's up to. Surely she can't see us."

Kit realized he had been holding his breath. His heart was pounding. He gasped a sizeable catch up breath. The lights appeared as tiny specks. He squinted to keep them in focus, watching them move slowly in a path that might intercept them in several minutes.

"Now?" Kit asked repeating his former question.

"Patience. We don't make much noise but what we do travels dozens of miles. Any change in tempo could provide a clue we are out here somewhere. As it is, we're just part of the background ocean sounds."

"Fascinating. Didn't know you were such an accomplished seaman."

"A flyboy has to do something to relax during his off hours. Also, I flew for the navy."

Within minutes the specks crossed well in front of them and kept to a straight path to port.

Again it was Connie.

"There is an old Italian saying, mostly just popular among boys Ari's age but its essence is excellent advice. *Non bagni mai i vostri pantaloni fino a che non ci sia senza dubbio circa il pericolo.* Never wet your pants until there is no doubt about the peril."

"I should have that emblazoned on the back of my hand. I tend to pre-worry over potential bad stuff – more the little things really than the big things. Uncle David's been after me to relax about it all my life."

"What's your impression of the kid?" Connie asked.

"Bright. Energetic. Loving. Compassionate. Wise beyond his years. Apparently less scared about all this than seems reasonable. Things like that, you mean?"

"Yes. Things like that. Hard to see how a boy with so many positive characteristics could be the son of the Ari that gave us such fits last summer."

"I have to assume two things," Kit began. "His mother is one fantastic human being – something Ari VI suggested to David was, in fact, true. Second, I really believe my uncle had a positive influence on him in the area of parenting. One of the last things he said to Uncle David was that his son was being raised to be one of the good guys. He seemed pleased with that even though he had been willing to kill him off with all the rest of us. It's a bothersome part of the puzzle."

Connie nodded. Kit assumed as much, though couldn't see him. They continued in silence for some time.

As the hours passed, Kit grew confident that they had given the Pod Men the slip for the time being. How that would help in the long run he wasn't sure. It was something that would have to be replicated each and every day. Once located, they would have very little chance of surviving.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was David at the wheel as they pulled into a small, isolated, cove on the eastern edge of the Island of Majorca. The island's southern beach would be overflowing with suntan seeking vacationers from the four corners of the globe. The North and western

coasts were open and vulnerable providing no hiding places. Alex knew of the well hidden cove and they tied up to a tree in shallow water.

"Rise and shine you swashbuckling sons a the sea," David said in his best – though hardly adequate – pirate accent.

Ari had been allowed to sleep through the second shift. He immediately expressed his displeasure about it.

"Am I going to have to set my own wake up calls? I want to pull my duty like the rest of you."

"Sorry," David said. "It won't happen again. We need to reload the row boats with wood for the next leg of the trip. Pile it high. We don't get nearly the heat per unit of volume from wood as we did from coal. Alex may have a source of coal on Minorca. That's three hours from here. We need to be underway by two – that gives us an hour to take on the wood and fresh water.

"After briefly touching land on Minorca we will set off for Sardinia across nearly three hundred miles of open sea. Our next mid-night will occur about six hours into that fifteen hour trip. My plan is to keep a steady course for Sardinia at that time. We fooled them with misdirection the first time. I hope they will learn from that and assume we are actually heading any direction but the one we are showing them."

"Cool." Kit said. "Misdirection without misdirection."

"Kit you come with me," Alex said. "Bring two buckets."

Kit looked at David who shrugged and nodded. They left the others gathering wood.

Alex explained as they walked.

"I picked this spot because just inland a hundred yards or so there used to be a copper sulfate deposit."

"And you enjoy visiting the occasional copper sulfate deposit?" Kit said, really asking for some clarification.

"Tonight we will no longer have the cover of the dark of the moon – there will be a slip of light up there. If my source for coal has dried up on Minorca we will also not have black coal smoke. It will be white from the wood. White can be seen against both the green of the sea, if they are searching from the air, and against the black of the sky, if they are in boats. By sprinkling copper sulfate on the fire during the time we think they are searching close to us . . ."

". . . The color of the smoke will turn dark green," Kit said finishing the explanation. "You are really good. It will be nearly invisible against both the water and the sky."

They soon returned to the boat each carrying a heaping bucket.

"Dirt?" Ari asked.

"Magic dirt," Kit said with a grin. "I'll explain later."

"And you *do* understand that I don't believe in magic dirt, don't you?" Ari said some bit of irritation showing through his tone.

Kit winked.

"There should be a shallow fresh water lake just up there," Alex said pointing. "While Connie and David take the canvas flasks up there and fill them, the three of us will get this wood securely stashed. We should be able to be on our way again a bit ahead of schedule."

With everything stowed, they were on their way at two o'clock sharp. Again, it was Kit and Ari sharing duties at the wheel. Connie provided the compass heading.

"So, what grade are you in?" Kit asked.

"I'm afraid it's an irrelevant question," Ari said in all seriousness. "My teachers come to my home so it's not like I'm in a class in a school. My books are mostly ninth year texts. I'm some below that in languages – except Greek of course and English. My father always spoke to me in English."

"Friends?" Kit asked shifting the conversation a bit.

"Not many. On Saturdays my language teachers import a van load of kids from one of the consulates so I can practice speaking their languages. I like that. It's more like a play day. We swim and play Frisbee, catch, and football – that's soccer in American. The kids change from week to week so I haven't really had a chance to get close to any one of them. It does keep my social skills sharp though, I think.

"My best friend is Casey – his father is our grounds keeper; our home sits on top of a ten acre hill so there is a lot for him to do. Sometimes Casey and I help him. I enjoy that. He comes over every afternoon after his school lets out and we swim and talk about boy stuff. He's not as smart as I am and I have to say that is really refreshing. We like to be with each other just as kids – none of the upper class or lower class, or smart or dumb, or other junk that gets in the way of things. He's a year older so knows about stuff I don't – sex stuff and things like that. He's stronger and faster. That provides good challenges for me. He kids me about coming in last. I tell him he's wrong; I always come in at least *second*.

"Coming in first was always important to my Father. I think he missed out on a lot of the pleasures life has to offer because of it. Mama is more laid back as you Americans phrase it. Her motto is, 'Get your work done before you play but then play hard and enjoy every second of it. Play is play and not competition'."

"Sounds like you have a very wise mother."

Ari turned and smiled, nodding at Kit.

"She is. Brilliant, wise, and loving and those were probably stated in reverse order of actual importance."

"Ari, you are like the ultimate proof to me."

"Huh?"

"I've been lots of places around this world in the past thirteen months and I've met lots of people. I've come to know many others from many more places during the school year just past. In other words, I've had the chance to meet and sample kids from all over and you know what?"

"What?" He was clearly eager for the too long delayed answer.

"Good people are bred everywhere. Sometimes I tend to get so caught up in all

the bad stuff I see happening around the globe that I forget that; but then I meet somebody like you and hear about your mother and your gardener and his son, and it's like the ultimate proof that every single day good people are sprouting up everywhere."

"My father and mother agreed before they created me that I was to be raised to be one of the good guys in the world. I can't imagine being any other way so I suppose they have succeeded, haven't they?"

"From what I've seen there seems to be no doubt about that."

"Thank you. That really means a lot. I've read some of your Uncle's papers on social philosophy. My father insisted. I don't pretend to understand all he has to say, but I understand enough to see why you turned out so good yourself."

Before Kit could either blush or respond Ari continued on a practical note.

"Should that have been *well* instead of *good*?"

Ari smiled. In that instance 'good' would refer to a positive state of *being* – 'well' to a positive state of *health*. You made a good choice by not selecting well."

"You're a lot of fun. If we don't get blown to smithereens, this adventure is going to be super great," Ari said, only positive tones in his delivery.

Kit thought better of exploring the *smithereens factor* – the boy seemed to be dealing with it in a pretty satisfactory manner.

"How long until the next midnight check," Ari asked.

"It's about three, now, Andorra time – and that's the time we're staying on this trip. About nine hours 'til midnight, then."

Ari nodded.

"We will be in the same time zone until we reach Greece," Ari said. "Just studied about that. It was set up more as a convenience for travelers and so businesses can more easily carry out transactions across the European political divisions than to accurately reflect actual moments in rotational time."

"Do you realize that you often sound like a thirty year old?"

"Been accused of that before. I am what I am."

He grinned.

"Actually that's good stuff to know. Thank you. It will make planning and record keeping easier, won't it? "

"I suppose. This being my first globe-trotting adventure, I'm not sure what things are really important. Do you have a girl friend?"

The question seemed a strange add-on to the topic of conversation.

"Yes, I do. Do you?"

"No. Not into that yet. Casey is getting there fast. He talks more about girls than I really care to but friends listen to what's important to their friends. Is she pretty?"

"My girl friend? Yes. Not Miss America beautiful, I suppose but beautiful to me."

"You miss her, I'm sure."

"Yes. I miss her. I've had practice though. We've been half a continent apart during the school year. I saw her at Christmas and Spring break."

"You must really love each other to put up with that."

"You think that's true?"

"From what I've been able to learn the main reason to have a girl friend is to be able to kiss her and maybe touch her in places where boys and girls are different. Can't see how you could do any of that long distance."

Kit chuckled.

"What? Am I not right?"

"You are right up to a point. The kissing and touching is great fun and if that's all you're after then you're right; a long distance relationship would not work. But, when you love somebody it goes way beyond the kissing and touching. It's *love* that makes it work for us."

"I'll do my best to remember that. Of course it's all still at the abstract level for me, you understand. I'm not stirred in anyway yet by kissing or touching girls – I've tried – and as to that kind of love, I don't have a clue."

"You're wonderful, Ari."

"Thank you. I've always thought so. Not sure why you do but it seems very comfortable, so thanks."

"Ari," Alex called back from where he was sitting at the front of the craft. "You want to fish – catch dinner for us?"

"Sure. Not sure I know how, but I'll bet you can show me. I'm a quick learner."

With some reluctance he turned the wheel over to Kit which was fine with Kit who needed something like a compass course to concentrate on. All that talk about kissing and part touching had compelled his mind to take leave of the real world of the moment.

By five Ari had landed a half dozen, foot long, whitefish that Alex assured him would be wonderful eating. Oddly, the boy thought gutting them ranked right up there with hot fudge sundaes and smelling fresh baked bread. Alex wrapped the dozen filets in wet canvas to keep them cool until they reached land and could arrange a fire on the beach.

That took place at five thirty. Ari and Kit built the fire from drift wood washed ashore in the tiny cove Alex had located. Alex and David left to find coal while the others fixed the feast.

"Used to be a coal reserve just northeast of here," Alex said. "Not used much anymore since oil has overtaken the cruise ship industry. Should be lots of leavings if we can find the spot."

David really wanted to ask how he knew so much about the little secrets of the islands but chose not to, figuring it would come out if Alex was moved to talk about it.

"That's it," he said pointing just beyond a shanty – a structure that in every way defined 'shanty'.

An elderly man clad in what was left of a tuxedo stood, separating with some difficulty from the chair, which through years of comforting had molded to his substantial form. He was smoking a pipe and wore an age-old black top hat. He would have seemed

more at home sitting on a Mardi Gras float.

"Charlie? That you?" Alex said making directly toward him and offer his hand. They embraced.

"David, this is my old friend Charlie. He's sort of the caretaker of this place. Charlie, we need some coal. The good, long burning stuff not the cheap, soft, junk."

Charlie's white eyes danced against his black face and he pointed to a pile a few feet away.

"Twenty bucks for all you want."

"Twenty it is. We'll need a cart to carry it back to the shore."

"Behind the building. No charge if you return it."

"Need one or two wooden dinghies or something suitable for pulling behind a little steam powered tug."

"Got some. I'll go with you and show you. Cost you twenty apiece."

"One more thing. You haven't seen us."

"Like the old days, huh? I haven't seen you. No charge."

Alex handed him a hundred Euro bill. The old man tucked it into his shirt pocket neither inspecting it nor showing any inclination to offer change. It seemed *no charge* in his version of the language meant forty Euros.

With the coal delivered and two additional row boats secured behind their boat, they were ready to eat.

They all agreed Ari had caught the best six fish in the sea and fixed them as well as any seafaring guy had ever fixed fish. Ari knew they were putting him on but enjoyed it, accepting it as some sort of initiation.

An hour after arriving they were on their way again. Kit turned in first, followed by Connie and David. That left Alex and Ari running the show. Alex handled the wheel until they were around the southern edge of the Island heading east for Sardinia. At that point he handed control over to Ari. Alex continued to sit at the rear. Ari stood at the wheel, quite conscientious about his duty.

"As I understand it," Ari began, "At midnight we are staying the course, right?"

"Yes. That's the plan."

"Where do you suppose the bad guys are right now?"

"Not sure though I imagine confused wherever they are."

"You think they followed our false lead back in France?"

"It is the only lead they had – us heading by land across southern France."

"And when they spot us at midnight tonight we're counting on them to suddenly get the idea we led them astray last night, right? So they will think we are doing the same tonight."

"That's what we're counting on, yes."

"What if they don't? It seems like we should have a plan just in case."

"We do."

"Can I hear it?"

"Not only can you hear it I'm counting on you to help me get us prepared."

"Okay. Bring it on."

Ari's serious, almost somber, demeanor immediately brightened to enthusiastic.

"Just before midnight we will all get into our camouflage jump suits. Between now and then you and I will fill all the pockets in all the suites with coal. Then, see the roll of flexible, clear plastic, hose up front . . .?"

"Yes. That small hose?"

"Yes. We will be cutting it into two meter lengths."

"I think I understand. Can I guess? *May* I guess? Whichever guess?"

It was worth a short smile between them.

"Go for it!"

"We are preparing to abandon ship. We'll put on the weighted jump suits that will hold us down under the surface of the water. We'll breathe through the tubes. We'll have to attach the tops of them to something that will float and hold them out of the water, right?"

"Very good. Yes. You figured it out. If we are approached it's over the side. You swim?"

"Yes. Very well. We have an Olympic sized pool in my back yard. On occasion I have jumped into it from my third floor bedroom window. Mother frowns on that."

"I can imagine."

"We will lose the boat. How will we get to Sardinia?"

"We will cut the largest of the small boats loose to stay behind with us. Then we'll rig this wheel to take the steam boat in a wide circle. It will eventually come back and find us."

"Unless the bad guys tamper with it."

"That's why we're keeping one row boat in our vicinity."

"Not a very reassuring back up plan."

"Sorry. I'm willing to hear better if you have it."

Ari smiled.

"I'll get to work on it. I assume those five pieces of drift wood you brought along from that last beach will be the floats for our breathing tubes."

"Once again you have things pegged. We'll attach the ends of the tubes to the wood with dental floss – first aid kit."

Before the hour was over they had everything prepared and laid out for quick use.

It grew dark and by ten the only visible entities in their universe consisted of the slip of a moon sitting low in the eastern sky and a billion stars parading themselves against the blackness of space.

"I've seldom seen the sky this way – so dark and clear with just the stars," Ari said. "My house is on the north edge of Athens. The lights of that city are bright at night and don't allow this kind of a view of the heavens."

"It is beautiful – peaceful – isn't it," Alex agreed.

"Hope it stays that way. How deep is the sea out here?"

"Doesn't really matter once it's over your head, does it?"

Ari smiled and nodded. Someday he would still look it up but for then Alex's practical approach seemed sufficient.

By eleven the other three had awakened and Kit busied himself opening canned food and passing it around.

"Have to settle for pork and beans, Alex. Couldn't find any broccoli in the cabinet."

"I have been known to toss bigger guys than you into the sea."

"But none as immediately loveable as me, I'm sure."

Kit mugged a forced, full-faced, grin. It lightened the moment – the moment that was nearing midnight.

"Into the jump suits," David announced as the hands on his watch snuggled close at twelve. "Alex and Ari have rigged our breathing tubes in case it comes to that. Once underwater be sure to blow out first to get rid of any water that may have entered while the tube was being positioned."

Alex had several last minute suggestions.

"Once in the water we will need to remain close together. Tilt onto your backs at a forty five degree angle. Move no more than necessary to remain afloat. If you are weighted down too much, drop some coal until your buoyancy seems right to you. Grouped together in our camouflage, we should resemble as small school of fish from anywhere above the surface."

"Questions?" David asked.

The others shook their heads.

"One last thing," Alex said. "Wear these green, knit, ski masks. It wouldn't look right for them to see a human head bobbing along with the fish."

"Might scare them off!" Ari offered, no humor intended, so all grins and giggles were quashed.

Ari was immediately into his mask. The others waited to see if there's would be needed.

"You look like a little frog, Squirt," Kit said teasing Ari.

"Cool. I'm sure they aren't going to be out gigging for frogs."

Twelve thirty arrived.

"I've been thinking about Paul Donner's finances and how that may affect things," Kit said. "If he is financing this himself – and who else would assist in such an insane undertaking – and if he's been teaching in a small college for the past fifteen years at about forty thousand dollars a year take home that would come to six hundred thousand dollars. Figuring his cost of living at a frugal twenty thousand, that would set his possible savings at about three hundred thousand. He had to fly to all the places where the clues were deposited. To do that in a timely manner just before we arrived he'd have had to have used a global capable charter plane. Say ten days at fifteen thousand dollars a day for the plane and crew; that cuts him down to one hundred and fifty thousand.

"Then he had to have the strap designed and built – I figure maybe ten thousand more for that leaving him one hundred and forty thou. What does a top of the line

mercenary go for these days, Alex?"

"For short assignments like this I imagine something in the neighborhood of a thousand dollars a day."

"Okay, say six men over the fifteen days Pod Man has allowed us – that comes to another ninety thousand cutting his margin back to fifty thousand. What I'm trying to get at is that he really doesn't have the finances left to get very fancy during the actual search for us. Maybe a few days of helicopter rentals or a high speed boat of some kind and enough for his own transportation and communication network."

"Your saying the playing field may be more level than we've been contemplating," David said.

"That's what I've been thinking," Kit said nodding.

Somewhat humorously, Air scooted closer to Kit as if to say, 'I think from here on in, I'm betting my bacon on Kit, guys'.

"Actually, that's very good thinking," Connie said. "It probably means if we're being chased by air, it will be a small surveillance plane – a biplane perhaps. If by sea there will be no periscope involved – probably, as you said, a medium sized speed boat. On land a four wheel drive vehicle or two at best."

"The part that is somewhat confusing is where he said we are not allowed to fight back or harm his men," Alex said. "Talk about stacking the deck in his own favor."

"But," Kit said, "He didn't say anything about his men hurting *themselves* or each other or encountering naturally malevolent forces."

That was met with a joint, lingering, ahhhhhhh!"

"We'll need meticulous rules of engagement," Alex said picking up on the idea. "It cannot even smell like we may have been involved. Better still, whatever happens to them must happen when we are no where close to them."

"This is like the puzzles my philosophy teacher poses for me," Ari said, enthusiastically.

"Generic suggestions?" David asked.

"Water in the fuel tank," Kit said then explained. "Could take hours before it caused a problem if the tank is nearly full to begin with."

"A loose oil plug that gradually empties the oil and burns up an engine," Connie added.

"Loosened fittings on brake fluid hoses," Ari said.

The others turned and stared at him.

"Where did you hear about such a thing?"

"The very first Raymond Masters Mystery Novel, the *Murder No One Committed*. I love that old detective!"

"I think we have the general idea of how to proceed," David said. "If possible, always check with at least one other team member before going off and doing something. We can leave no margin for errors."

They agreed with nods all around.

"It's going on three," Kit said. "How long do we wait to see if they're hot on our

trail?"

"Forever," Ari said. "We don't seem to have anyway of knowing where they are or what they're up to."

"Squirt's right," Kit said. "It's code red alert from here on out."

"A bit melodramatic, perhaps," David said smiling, "but that's certainly the essence of our position."

"Ari and I need to get some sleep," Alex said. "You know where we'll be if you need us."

"I'm too excited to sleep," Ari insisted.

"Then just lie down and rest. That's one step better than no sleep," Ari said, hoisting the lad up into the top bunk.

They were both soon asleep.

It was as the first glow of morning wound its way along the jagged horizon to the east that they heard the noise.

"A speed boat – big engine – not using much of its power," Connie said his head cocked to starboard. "That suggests that it could be in a search pattern. Keep an eye out for lights. If it's looking, it will be well lit."

David roused Alex and filled him in. He zipped up and lowered himself to the floor. The light appeared – apparently still a mile or more away although distance was always difficult to judge across water at night.

"Kit, fill the furnace and close the vents," Alex said. "Tie the wheel into the very gentlest turn to port – that's left."

"Yes. I'm learning."

Connie patted Ari's shoulder.

"Time to get up, son. We have spotted a boat."

The boy immediately grasped the situation. He jumped to the floor, zipped himself into his jumpsuit and began passing out the breathing tubes. The other donned their ski masks and waited.

"The boat has changed course and is heading in our direction," Connie said. He looked at Alex. "Over the side time, Pal?"

Alex nodded. "We'll gather together about fifty meters to starboard. That will be opposite from the speed boat's approach route and give them room should they circle our craft."

David completed a hurriedly scrawled note in Spanish on a sheet from a yellow pad and left it on the front seat. It read: 'To whom it may concern at Coast Patrol. My wife began to give birth. Called Air Rescue and left with them by helicopter. No time to attend to the fire here. Will find the boat later.' He added a cell phone number omitting the calling code, as might reasonably be forgotten during such a time of crisis, so it couldn't be reached. He signed it, Carlos Ramirez.

"Over the side, guys," Alex said hovering like a mother hen, shooing them on toward starboard while keeping watch back over his shoulder to port.

Their old boat had slowed to a few knots as it began its huge circular path. Alex

cut the empty dinghy loose and towed it with him.

Well before the other boat arrived, the five of them were in the water and well away from the *Ari VII's* course. David carried the coil of tubing so it would not act as a clue to their whereabouts if found on board. They submerged. Only the upper half of Alex's masked head remained on the surface as the boat arrived. With one final look he submerged.

The suits worked just as advertised once the excess ballast was dumped. It took long, deep, breaths to clear the tubes of the old air and bring fresh air into their lungs. Before long it became more or less routine.

The speed boat slowed and circled above them trailing the *Ari VII*. Again, Alex slowly brought his head up to periscope depth. The boat was unmarked – clearly *not* from the Coast Patrol. There was what looked to be a 30mm machine gun mounted on the front. He counted seven occupants – all in military type uniforms. All were armed with both side arms and rifles. None of the men matched the obvious description of Paul.

It pulled along side their old boat as it faithfully chugged its new course. One man boarded it and picked up the yellow pad. He gave the craft a casual once over and soon reboarded the speed boat. They moved away and began a search pattern back and forth along the course the old boat seemed to have followed. Each minute provided increased light. Beams from flashlights began piercing the water. One swept across the school of camouflage garbed bodies. It returned as if to examine its find. Eventually it moved on. The boat pulled along side the free floating, rowboat, which had been unloaded of coal during the first leg of the journey to Sardinia.

With the Pod Men's attention diverted to that craft, Alex moved in behind the speed boat – remaining under water. Very soon after his arrival it roared to life and took off due south.

When the sound of the propeller grew faint, Alex motioned the others to surface. They moved to the empty rowboat and helped each other climb on board.

"I can hardly wait to tell my grandkids about this," Ari said.

"Thought you weren't into the whole procreating thing," Kit kidded.

"I am anticipating that as my physiology progresses along its normal path, the process of procreation will eventually take on a high, positive, valence for me."

"He talks like a professor," Connie said, continuing the needle-the-kid conversation.

"Is that how *I'm* supposed to talk?" David said, joining in.

Ari sat in the bottom of the little boat beaming.

"What were you up to at the rear of the speedboat, Alex," David asked.

"Me. Up to something? I did get close enough to observe there was a faulty seam in the fuel tank. Tough to figure how it came apart like that."

"Tough to see how that white paint suddenly appeared in the teeth of that little pair of pliers you carry in your utility belt," Kit said, chiding him.

"I figure another half hour on their course south will find them stalled and adrift in the middle of the Mediterranean."

Six o'clock came and went. At six thirty-five Ari stood up and turned toward the rear of the boat.

"Hear that?"

They all turned an ear behind them.

"And there he comes - the *Ari VII*," he said pointing and waving as if it might recognize him.

"Well, don't just stand there, kids," Alex said. "Break out the paddles and let's move this tub to a spot where we'll intercept her."

"I realize this is merely a philosophic quandary," Kit began as he put his back into the oar, "but boats are generally considered to be feminine. That one, however, has a masculine name. Do we still refer to it – him – as her?"

"Does it really matter in the scheme of the universe?" Connie asked smiling.

"In *my* universe, yes. In *yours*, plainly not."

## CHAPTER NINE

Connie soon had them back on course and Kit had them moving along at a brisk clip. David and Ari handed out breakfast – a fresh peach, a bunch of grapes, and a pop tart sort of pastry. Kit and Ari heated theirs on top of the boiler; the others opted for a 'room' temperature offering.

Ari spoke as he munched.

"Would it help to know where Paul is?"

"That would at least bring some peace of mind to the game board, I'd say," David said. "What do you have in mind?"

"One of my first triumphs as a techno-nerd," – he turned and smiled into Kit's face – "was with cell phones. I learned how to bypass the blocked caller ID procedure and find out what phone was calling. Then I figured a way to trace a call back to the tower where it originated. Lots of folks think they have a direct hook up with a satellite every time they make a call. Actually it usually first goes to a local tower, then to a satellite only if it's a long distance call. Anyway, if we can figure out how this gadget on my strap transmits its global position – which has to be by a cell phone set up considering the financial thing that Kit laid out – then, when Paul calls in to get the position reading, we should be able to track him back to the tower closest to him."

"Kit, I'll take over back there," David said. "I want you and Ari and Alex to get on your laptop and investigate the possibility Ari suggested. We have to have one hundred percent assurance it will work without detonating the explosives or providing Paul any clue about what we are doing."

The positions were switched. David looked at his watch. 7:22.

"How long until we reach Sardinia, do you think?" he asked Connie who continued to scan the horizon for potential problems.

"Hour. Hour and a half."

"Have you been there?"

"Lots of times. A great vacation spot when I want to get away from my countrymen. Greeks are wonderful people, don't get me wrong, but we tend to be very energetic and frankly, we just wear me out."

"Will electronic parts be available, there?"

"In the cities. We are just going to touch base on the southernmost point. We will need to go east to Cagliari for such things. It sits at the head of a sizeable cove about forty miles north east of where we plan to make shore."

David nodded, and then continued on another topic.

"Are we a quarter of the way to Athens yet?"

"Not quite. Perhaps twenty percent. Probably have the easiest part behind us."

"The Pod Men will begin learning our strategy, you mean?"

"You're suggesting we actually *have* a strategy?" Connie said, kidding David. "Yes, that's what I meant. We need something new now. Ideas?"

"There's one brewing inside this head of mine," David said, "but I'll need help to

see if it's viable."

"I'm listening."

"The speed boat last night started me thinking. How fast does a top of the line boat like that travel?"

"Well over a hundred miles an hour. Some much faster. Record is actually over three hundred. Can't maintain that for many minutes however and you'd be talking about a million dollar craft."

"Would you and Alex feel comfortable handling a hundred mile an hour version?"

"We both have. Sure. You thinking of taking off directly for Athens in one of them?"

"I thought about that but I think there's a chance Paul – unstable as he is – might think we had found a way to block the altimeter on the strap and flew there. I don't want him to play his crazy or panic card. I think we have to stick to a methodical plod.

"However – here, look at the map with me. What if one of you, with Ari, took off around the east coast of Sardinia in one of those speedsters and arranged to be up here – at the northern point of *Corsica* just off the Italian coast – at midnight. Then immediately beat a path back down to here – and intercepted this boat with the rest of us on board on our planned course to Sicily. That would place the tracking some three hundred miles north of where we will actually be by three a.m. It would look like we were on our way back to the mainland readying for an overland trek to Athens."

"Very clever. As soon as you get whatever supplies you need in Cagliari the rest of us can be on our way to Sicily."

"Us?" David asked. "It sounds like you're suggesting Alex for the side trip with Ari."

"He has the better survival skills should anything go wrong. He's our man for this."

By 8:30 the coast was in sight. The island loomed unexpectedly high above the water. Connie took the wheel and guided them between two sizeable islands, *Pietro* and *Antioco*, and into a cove along the narrow land bridge, which connected *Antioco* with the mainland.

By 9:00 they were on land. Connie hired a boat sitter – a young man in his late teens. Provided everything was still in the boat when they returned, the sitter would receive two hundred dollars for a few hours work. Sardinian law was swift and severe for thieves so the plan seemed a good one. Still, they carried the valuables with them in backpacks.

It was the first real meal they had eaten since the last morning in Andorra some three breakfasts before. It was a small cafe with tables on an open air deck that encircled the little structure. The Westerner's Breakfast included meat, eggs, fried potatoes and the Sardinian equivalent of Texas toast. There was a fresh fruit bowl on the table and unlimited refills on coffee, tea, and juice.

They lingered over the meal and let themselves relax for the first time. The waiter directed them to a public bath and by noon they were back at the boat feeling fresh and

smelling less like the hamper in a men's locker room.

The trio of techno guys had put together a shopping list. A car was rented and Kit and Alex set off overland for the city. The outing should take no more than three hours provided they could find a Radio Shack or its equivalent.

Connie spent the time going over the boat doing what he could to improve its sea worthiness. They had half a dinghy load of wood left. David engaged the boat sitter to locate and have delivered the needed coal for the next leg. It would be about 250 miles to the northwestern coast of Sicily. Using all coal, the supply in the four pull behinds and the on board bin should be more than enough.

Kit pulled to a screeching halt near the dock at a little before three. They had found both what they needed and had received some free expert advice that confirmed they were on the right track and on safe ground.

"If I look older," Alex began, "It's because this young man drove the mountain roads like he was on a country lane in Indiana."

"You enjoyed every minute and you know it."

Alex didn't deny it. It was then time for Alex and Connie to go in search of a speed boat. The coal arrived and was loaded. The boat sitter – Rami by name – was most appreciative of the money.

"You need anything else?" He asked on the off chance he might make a few more bucks. "Girls? I can get you beautiful girls."

Before Kit could discuss it further, David politely declined. He did ask him to check with them about seven. They needed to replenish their supplies.

"I don't understand about the girls," Ari said once Rami was out of ear shot.

"I'll let you handle this one," David said looking at Kit. "I'm going to get some sack time."

Kit decided on the direct approach.

"You know the word prostitute, Ari?"

"Women who rent their bodies for men's sexual pleasure. Yes. I know. Oh! That kind of girls. And you said no?"

"Technically, my uncle said no, but I would have also, eventually, although I would have enjoyed looking over the merchandise. Uncle David is loyal to his wife and I am loyal to my girlfriend. I'm not sure what the other men's position is about it but that is there private business."

Ari nodded not fully understanding but having insufficient interest in the topic to pursue it.

"So what's the plan?" the boy asked.

Kit explained the double speed boat ride Ari would have later on. It clearly excited him.

"How fast?"

"Over a hundred miles an hour – whatever that is in kilometers per hour."

"Why not just take me home in it tonight?"

Kit explained David's thinking on the matter and Ari nodded.

"A kid wouldn't have taken that into consideration. It's a good reason there are adults in the world."

Kit smiled.

"I think it's time we joined Uncle David in *Sleepsy Land*. You're probably not going to want to sleep on your trip later."

Ari agreed and Kit boosted him up to the top bunk which had become his.

At five thirty Alex pulled along side in the new boat – eighteen feet of sleek, pulsing, power. They boys explored it. Kit wished he were going along but understood the constraints.

A little after six, Connie returned in the rental car. By seven thirty, with the help of Rami they had laid in supplies that would last several days.

They enjoyed another meal at the cafe. Back at the boat Alex and Ari transferred their backpacks into the speed boat and left. A few minutes later, Kit had the old *Ari VII* backing out of its slip.

"This is really a pretty brainy ploy," Kit said acknowledging the cleverness of his Uncle's plan. "Do you think we can assume they are not at this moment looking for us? Waiting for the new position."

Connie answered.

"Probably, although I'd rather we never went down that path. Vigilance has to be our guideline twenty four hours a day. And, having said that, I think I'll get some sleep. Okay?"

"Sure. David's good with the Binoculars. What compass course am I to follow."

"Oh, yes, that. Once around the southern edge of the Island keep to due east. When the speedsters return, I'll adjust it slightly south. They should intercept us at about three fifteen. When they spot us they will do a single, northward, circle to their port – our right – so we'll know it's them."

"That port and right stuff just now was for the sole purpose of confusing me wasn't it?"

"Me. Try to confuse you? Come now. Goodnight."

"Ever have your hand placed in a bowl of warm water while you were asleep?"

"Yes, actually. It's why the stiletto I carry up my sleeve is now stainless steel."

"He's good. He's quick," David said.

"And," Kit added, "I'll just bet he's telling the truth –about the weapon at least."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari and Alex took a wide turn around the southern tip of the island which directed them well away from the eastern coast. Then Alex made a sharp left into a straight line for the far tip of Corsica.

The wheel was to the starboard side of the craft behind a thick windshield and under a substantial canopy which kept the swiftly flowing air from tearing at their hair and flesh. Ample sized, tall, seats built in the style of high back, upholstered, swivel, bar stools provided comfortable up front seating for them. Lower padded seats formed a U around the area behind. It had an inboard engine that seemed to feel no pain whatsoever

cruising at just over 100 miles an hour. It took an experienced hand to control the craft – something that seemed apparent to Ari and he didn't ask to take the wheel.

The extreme noise – a combination of the motor and wind – did not keep Ari from chattering on. Alex nodded and smiled from time to time whether he understood the full messages or not.

At eleven thirty they docked close to their destination and left the boat there for refueling. They walked inland, enjoying the scenery and picking up carry along food to eat as they wound their way around a grassy flatland that abruptly confronted a sandy beach to the north. It was there they waited for midnight. Ari took off his shoes and waded in the gently lapping, deep green water.

"By next midnight you should be equipped with the tracer device," Alex said.

"I hope so. I'd feel better knowing where he is. I know that doesn't tell us where his Pod Men are but still . . ."

Alex nodded.

"The technician at the electronics store was really impressed by the way you had designed the program."

Ari nodded and smiled up into his big friends face, adding:

"With the aid of the tower-listing web site Kit accessed, we can have his general location in less than a minute. I wish we could figure a way to really get him pinpointed."

"Once we ascertain his general area we have other means of finding him – hotel registries, car rentals, credit card use."

"Cool. I hadn't known about such things. I feel better knowing that."

They walked along together in silence until 12:05.

"Ready to head back and catch the others?" Alex asked.

"It's sure nice and peaceful right here, but, yeah. Things back on the *Ari* should smell better after the showers and all."

They headed back to the fuel station.

"How will we find them out in the middle of the Mediterranean?"

"Our five phones are all fixed up with global positioning devices. In about three hours David will turn his on and you and I will follow it right to the boat."

"I wonder if Paul's has such a device in it." Ari asked.

"I don't know."

"Think you could find out where he bought it and then sneak a peek at the sales record and find out?"

"Fascinating idea. Call Kit and talk with him and David about it. If Kit could crack the code into that cell phone tower site it seems to me this should be a piece of cake."

The call was completed and Kit went to work on the suggestion.

\* \* \* \* \*

"They're on their way back," Kit announced to the others. "ETA about three and a half hours. Do you know where Paul teaches?"

"No. Like I said I lost track of him. He went to high school in South Carolina. What's this all about?"

Kit related Ari's idea.

"Paul was a MENSA member," David offered thinking it might be a starting place.

"The high IQ clique?"

"Right."

"I was offered membership but turned it down," Kit said. "They couldn't understand why. I told them I didn't need their blessing to know I was smart and that I didn't believe in flaunting it the way they did. If I'm not worthy as I am, belonging to their groups certainly isn't going to *make* me worthy – not in my mind, anyway."

"They do provide a variety of other services for their members."

Kit shrugged.

"You got sidetracked," David said patiently.

"Oh. Yeah. Here's the idea. If we can find where he lives maybe we can find where he bought his cell phone. If we can do that we may be able to find out its features, such as a built in GPD. Then it's a small step to figuring how to hack into it and keep tabs on him down to the square yard. It was apparently Ari's idea."

"What a kid," David said. "Connie, can I talk you into taking the wheel. Maybe I can be of some help in the computer search."

"Got the MENSA site," Kit replied. "Won't let me into the member's data without a password."

"Try this," Connie said, smiling more than either had ever seen him smile. "DRBITHCBWTH."

"I'm in! *You're* a member?"

"Don't spread it around."

"No problem if it's really private but why *that* particular combination of letters?"

"My Acronym for, Don'tReallyBelieveInThisCrapBut WhatTheHell."

They laughed 'til they cried.

Upon recovering, Kit searched further. "South Carolina. Got a home address, office address, and phone. If anybody's interested his IQ is almost twice that of the number of inches he is tall – 155. Teaches Philosophy at Westchester College in a small town fifty or so miles from Asheville."

"Find the yellow pages."

"I'm on it."

"Two cell phone companies there. Let me try the customer's home page. Let's see what happens when I enter his name? . . . Not known. Okay. Try the other one. . . . *Known*. Just have to get by the sign-in thing."

David offered some suggestions.

"Paul defined *pragmatic* and *simplicity*. He was mentally very efficient."

"Let me try some things, here. Make his password the name of the phone company – that would be both simple and pragmatic. Then his ID . . . let's see . . . Would

you add *vane* to his list of traits?"

"Thought that went without saying."

"Okay then, ID . . . must be some combination of exactly nine letters and /or numerals. How about, *MYIQis155*."

"Would you believe?" Kit said standing up and shaking his arms over his head.

"Not really?"

"Really!"

"Too bad it's not something we could get into the Guinness record book. What did that take, thirty seconds tops?"

"Down boy," David said. "We are only now ready to begin work."

Kit turned to Connie.

"I'll bet your Uncles didn't throw cold water on your achievements like that?"

"If they had, I would have been drenched. I have fourteen Uncles."

Kit smiled and took his seat.

"Okay. Here is the model of his phone. Here is its serial number. I'm sure I can get specs and wiring diagrams from the manufacturer's website."

"What's this, here?" David asked

"Means the phone is global positioning ready but he hasn't activated it – isn't paying for the service. Maybe all quite pragmatically he figures he always knows where he is, so why pay to be told?"

"Can we activate it without him knowing about it?"

"Until he get's his bill. Let's see what his billing cycle is. Fifteenth through the fourteenth. If it takes three days to get to him we may have until the 17th of the month. What's today? The 11th."

"Cutting it close," David said.

"Even closer if he goes to the website the day the bill's posted – cuts us back to the fifteenth."

"I imagine we can assume he's preoccupied with other things," David said. "He's pretty well laid everything on the line here."

Kit nodded.

"Can you activate it right now?"

"Just watch me. . . . bingo. Will be functional within the hour. I'll just uncheck the box that requests email verification and we should be safe from discovery for several days."

"All of this is illegal, you know," David said.

"Oh, yes, I know. On the one hand it bothers me that I'm allowing myself to bypass ethics and morality and rush in the *ends justifies the means argument*. On the other, if all the people in the World were polled about it I imagine ninety nine percent would support what we are doing in this instance."

"You're sounding pretty pragmatic, yourself – some call that wishy-washy," David said kidding but also pressing the boy to consider other issues.

"I can live with wishy-washy. It's the ends-means thing will give me fits for

months. What we are saying is that without any doubt *we* know *the truth* in the matter and Paul doesn't. I've become aligned with those religious leaders that do the very same thing – those whose case I'm on all the time."

"At any point in our philosophical development we do have a more or less coherent set of beliefs that seems best to us," David pointed out. "We are not making a crusade to encourage others to hack into computer bases and invade other people's private electronic gadgetry. We believe at this point that allowing Paul to kill innocent young Ari because the man has philosophic issues with me, and because he hated the boy's father is wrong. I'm with you on the outcome of a poll on the subject. His rules for this contest are, by anyone's estimation, improper and immoral."

"And that gives us the right to sink to his level and use improper and immoral methods?" Kit asked.

"You have always asked the hard questions, Kit. There are times when no *one* answer can be one hundred percent correct but still we are compelled to act. At times like that all one has is to act according to his best judgment. We are not out to destroy other's beliefs or to impose our beliefs on the masses like those religious leaders you were speaking of. We are out to save a boy's life and control the man who is bent on his destruction. If by keeping our eye on his position we can help make that happen, I believe we are within our moral and ethical rights. He does have his eye on *us*, remember."

Kit nodded, suddenly having several things to consider, try out, and re-file in his belief system. They chugged along quietly for the next hour each deep into his own thoughts.

At two o'clock Kit accessed Paul's Global Positioning Device. It was on and functioning.

"Would you believe Paul is in Athens? I have his coordinates. I'll have to find a map of that city – one with coordinates – preferably a zoom map. It may take a few minutes."

.....

"Looks like the '*Old Way Hotel*'. It's in the south east section of the city. Rates start at about twenty bucks a day. Would you say that's the frugal section of town?"

"See if you can find his room number," David said.

.....

"333. Checked in yesterday at noon. Reserved the room for twelve days."

"It would appear he has settled in for the duration right there."

"Something else, Uncle David. The hotel is right across the street from a children's hospital."

"Find the other children's' hospitals in the city as well. Two possibilities immediately come to mind. One, he believes he has become invisible to us and so has selected a room handy to the hospital if it should come to that final showdown. Or, he has allowed for the fact that we may have found a way to locate him and the hospital there is provided as a distraction while his actual plan calls for visiting some other

facility."

"He did check in under his own name," Kit said. "Either he is as you said confident or that, too, is a distraction and he is really someplace else under an alias."

"But you tracked him via his phone to that room."

"He could have just left it there for our benefit," Kit said.

"He didn't have the GPD activated. He would have no reason to do that."

"Unless he figured we'd be able to do just what we were able to do."

"Track it periodically, anyway, and see if it leaves the room."

"Gotcha! Good idea! Not a foolproof idea but a good idea."

They heard the speedboat before it came into view. They made no attempt to contact it. There was some chance – a slim chance, David thought – that it could have been the same one that had approached them the night before. Connie unbuttoned his side arm and David opened the cabinet door where several more were stored.

Kit distributed three breathing tubes and strained into the darkness waiting to catch a first glimpse. The Pod Men traveled in a white boat. Alex and Ari's was dark blue which would make it difficult to identify.

Suddenly it appeared with all lights on, and heading directly toward the *Ari VII*. As it closed to fifty yards it began the anticipated circle back to its left. David's phone rang.

"It's just Alex and me in case you were worried," came Ari's high pitched, young, voice. Be along side in a few seconds. I'm hungry, by the way."

Kit hung up.

"The Kid says he's hungry. Suppose his servants regularly serve him snacks at 3:30 in the a.m.?" Kit said smiling at the others.

Ari was soon back on board.

"What do we do with the speed boat?" Alex called not yet having cut the engine.

"Let's keep it around for a while," David said. "Can we tow it?"

"Sure. It's heavy but once in motion on water it'll follow along pretty much effortlessly."

"We look like a parade," Ari said, once the boat had been tied in place behind the four dinghies.

"Seven hours to Sicily," David announced trying to draw everyone's mind back to the task at hand. "We should be there by ten or ten thirty this morning."

"Some of us better get some sleep," Connie said. "I'm good for another six hours."

"Me, too," Kit said. "Let's feed Squirt and then send you guys to the bunks."

It was agreed. It turned out to be apples, peaches, and grapes all around. The night air was hot and humid – muggy is the word. They stripped to their shorts and prepared to sweat the night away.

Kit took the wheel to spell Connie who took over surveillance duty.

Dawn broke at a little after five. Its brilliant yellow reflected off the water, transforming its deep green color into richly variegated, gently swirling, golden, hues.

They had been fortunate to encounter only calm seas up to that point. The little boat could maneuver in most any size waves the Mediterranean could throw at it but a rough sea would slow them down significantly and in all likelihood capsize the fuel laden dinghies.

Kit remained uneasy about the final confrontation – the point at which the explosives would be deactivated on Ari's strap. If Paul was being truthful – not a given, Kit had decided – he, Paul, was going to be killed in the process.

How would he have come to such a decision? Perhaps he couldn't face the consequences of what he had done – punishment doled out by the courts, or living in fear of Grampa Ari's inescapable retribution. Most certainly the basis for his odd, revenge based philosophy would have been put in jeopardy if David succeeded. Maybe just the thought of having to face David afterwards was more than he could bear. To admit he was wrong was probably impossible. He'd rather die than do that. He may have twisted that necessity into some sort of proof that his beliefs would be validated when, in the end, the trusted, upright, David killed him.

Kit was particularly uneasy about that final dilemma they would have to face: Save young Ari and kill Paul and a room full of innocent children or save the children and kill Ari. Paul had masterfully set up the ultimate philosophic confrontation for David. In the end there could be no winning position for his uncle. His only options involved defeat of a kind – the killing of the innocent.

Kit figured that Paul probably thought David would weigh the alternatives – one life vs dozens, maybe hundreds – and opt to save the greatest number. It was what *he* would do. It must have been what his philosophy would require – interestingly, a positive element in and among the many basically twisted negative elements on his way to saving the world. The killing of the boy, then, would become David's doing – *his* choice – and not Paul's. If Paul were prone to guilt, that would tend to relieve him of it. Kit decided that if Paul did experience guilt it was more likely to be attached to his own failures than to compassion for others. Interesting! A social philosophy proposed to save the human species – a compassionate goal in most minds – based in a set of traits which exclude compassion.

He wished he knew more about the man's background.

Kit had been bothered by the fact that Paul had no books to his credit. His bibliography consisted of fifteen major papers in professional journals – about one a year since graduation. Why would such a vane person – who believed he knew better than anybody else about the personality and belief styles needed for mankind to survive – not put it all into books where he would receive a far wider general readership?

"He would!" Kit said out loud.

"What?" Connie asked as he continued to scan the horizon.

"Oh. Was that out loud?"

Connie smiled.

Kit proceeded to explain his question and answer to Connie.

"Pen names?" Connie said offering a new path to explore.

"Yeah! Excellent!"

Kit went back to work on the lap top, making sure he kept one eye on the compass.

He found a site out of Texas that maintained a data base of pen names attached to the author's actual names. In many instances there were addresses or at least cities given. Unexpectedly there were a dozen Donners. Two from South Carolina, one of which was Paul O.

"Would you believe, "Peggy Parsons?" Kit said quietly, for Connie's benefit.

He cocked his head as his full response.

Kit did an Amazon search on books by that author. There were four. All novels. *Vendetta, Vengeance, Requital, and Expiration.*

'What uplifting titles,' he thought.

He searched out a story summary for the first.

*Preston, an unattractive, six year old boy, loses his parents in an auto accident and he is placed in an orphanage, run by a sadistic couple who encourage the other children to pick on him. In the end there is a fire and only Preston makes his way to safety.*

Like I said, an uplifting little story. Let's see about Vengeance.

*Peter, a ten year old orphan, is hospitalized with a pituitary problem. During the six month long period of treatment the other children pick on Peter because of his size and features and ostracize him. One by one the other children begin to die unnatural deaths.*

And Requital.

*At fifteen, Patton's foster parents are killed by an intruder and Patton, fearing for his own life, runs away. The story details the boy's courageous struggle to make it on his own. His life continues to be at the center of death and destruction.*

*Expiration is set in the future. On each continent, factions are at the point of civil war. One-by-one, Princeton Donovan brings the feuding parties to the bargaining table and arranges a lasting, if unorthodox, truce. Each faction is allotted six long range missiles with atomic warheads. Foolproof, mutual inspection is agreed to. The world is saved as Princeton settles all corners of the globe into the peaceful age of the Atomic Standoff.*

Kit created a file and saved it for the others to examine later. If the stories were autobiographical – well, the last one being autobiographical megalomania based fantasy – the books should provide great insight to the development of Paul's personality and belief system. With the main characters' first names all beginning with "P" Kit thought the personal storyline idea seemed credible.

Kit had to admire one thing about it all. Paul had apparently decided it was more efficient to spread his social philosophy through fiction than through philosophic treatises. Ayn Rand had been extremely successful using that approach years before.

Kit was suddenly more determined than ever to write about the adventures he and David had shared. He would present opposing belief systems side by side and

demonstrate how each played out in the real world. That way, the readers could make their own, educated, choices. Perhaps he would change his major to writing.

He sat, lost in thought – fantasy – for the next several hours. It was Connie's voice that brought him back into the light of day.

"Rise and shine you irreclaimable, irreparable, Rug Rats," he said – his kind and sensitive way of gently coaxing the others into wakefulness.

"Good thing I don't have a pillow, Connie," Ari said stretching. "If I did I would be pummeling you unmercifully right now."

"There you go with your Professor talk again. Can't you get it through your head I'm just an inarticulate peon?"

"The inarticulates of the world have never been known to use the word, *inarticulate*, Sir," came Ari's smiling response as he turned onto his belly and slid from bunk to floor.

"About half an hour to land," Connie said as if to justify his rousting of them. The top of Mt. Vesuvius will begin rising out of the horizon any minute now."

"Food now or wait for land?" Kit asked.

"I feel the need for . . ." Ari rubbed his stomach . . . "*seven grapes.*"

The comical seriousness of his deliberation brought the others to full out laughter. Ari joined them with an ear to ear grin but without a clue as to why they were laughing.

"Give the boy his grapes," David said. "I for one am going to wait."

The others agreed with David. Each time Ari slipped a grape into his mouth the others counted aloud until number seven had been given safe haven in the lad's tummy.

Ari responded.

"This is so great, guys. Even when I'm not sure what's happening, this is so great! I got lots of spare rooms at my house. Why don't you all come and live with me and Mama – Mama and me – Mama and I – US, that is."

Again they laughed until tears bathed their cheeks – *FACES*, that is.

"How about one of you Rug Rats spelling me here?" Kit said. "My shoulders are killing me."

David took over.

"Do we want to hit port towing the speedboat?" Ari asked. "Talk about being conspicuous."

"Good point. Five minutes out you can take off for land somewhat away from us. Connie what's your suggestion?"

"My plan is for us to enter one of the many isolated coves along the south western edge of the island between *Marsala* and *Mazaira*. It's one of the few coastal plains. Sicily is mostly mountains rising straight up out of the sea. It will give us immediate and easy access to the inland area with lots of fruits and vegetables and good country cookin' available."

"How about taking the other boat on east to the first commercial dock and filling station you come across," David said in answer to the question Alex had posed. "Board it there for a day. Not sure how long we'll be here. I want our young geniuses to go ahead

and access Paul's receiver that works through the GPD on the strap. It may use the phone Kit has tapped or it may be something else. By keeping track of both – if there are two – we have a better chance of knowing his whereabouts. I don't believe Paul will allow himself to get far from the phone he uses to connect with the strap."

"And," Ari added. "We *know* he'll be where *it* is at midnight so he can find out where I am."

"Good thought, Squirt," Kit said.

"It won't take long for the boys to rig things up," Alex said. "We did a wiring diagram with the expert at the store."

With the mountain looming out of the sea ahead, Alex sped away in the speedboat veering slightly to starboard. Connie maneuvered them into a tiny cove barely twenty yards from side to side. They were soon tied up to posts front and back.

"I'd vote for food first," Kit said.

The others agreed.

They walked inland toward a wisp of smoke. Eventually they determined it was coming from the chimney of an isolated house. Connie had seemed to understand that from the beginning.

Two children, perhaps eight and ten, boy and girl, came running to meet them.

"Food. Breakfast." David said repeating it in Italian. "Is there a cafe – *restaurente* – around here?"

"Mama fix breakfast," the girl said. "Fifteen Euros will feed everybody."

"Sounds fine," David said. "Is there a place we can wash up?"

"Come with me," the boy said. "There is a well out back."

There was, and they were soon washed and dried on towels the girl brought to them through the back door – "Gratis!"

Inside they ate and relaxed. They had a take-out meal prepared for Alex and were soon on their way back to the boat. He was arriving in a rented open jeep-like vehicle as they approached the shore. Ari ran ahead to meet him.

"You would have been easier to locate if you'd have left one of your phones behind, you know."

"OOPS," Kit said. "I suppose your presence here is a tribute to your great personal skill, then."

"And you are not bowing nearly low enough in my esteemed presence. Mostly, I watched for chimney smoke, figuring that's where you'd be heading."

"Brought you a sack full of goodies," Ari said.

"Glad somebody looks out for me. I may just take you up on that spare room."

Ari's face brightened even though he figured it was just pleasant banter.

It was time to devise the next diversionary tactic. They had twelve hours.

## CHAPTER TEN

The *Ari VII* chugged along at a leisurely pace east from the cove. By three o'clock the tracer device had been completed and plugged into the receptacle on the back of the strap – the one Abe had used to make the final test after it had been secured to young Ari. In appearance it was the size of a larger model cell phone taped in place to the belt. When Paul dialed in they had fifteen seconds. First a three digit code would be punched in on the number pad. That would reveal the number from which the call was being made. Then a second, twelve digit, code would pinpoint the first transmission tower that dealt with the signal.

Kit practiced punching in the long code on his own phone until it became routine. Ari timed him. Five seconds flat. Even with the two code numbers there would be five or six seconds to spare.

Alex had arranged for coal about fifty miles further on east along the coast. The dinghies were reloaded and fresh water was taken on. By four they were ready for the next leg of the journey.

The plan was to head the *Ari VII* with Ari VII aboard east north east from *Cape Passero* on the south eastern tip of *Sicily*. That would present the image they were high tailing it straight for the Greek mainland some 350 miles across open water.

At a few minutes after midnight, after Kit had taken the readings from the strap, they would reverse course traveling back south west to *Malta*. That would amount to a trip of 150 to 200 miles in the wrong direction – out of harm's way – getting them there by ten o'clock the following morning.

In the meantime Connie would have taken the speedboat directly to Malta where he would arrange for supplies and wait for them.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Five 'til midnight," Ari announced even though he realized the other three all had their eyes on watches. Kit gave up the wheel to Ari.

"I'll get a position from Paul's personal cell phone now."

A minute passed.

"Same place it's been," Kit announced. "In the hotel."

"That's good, Right?" Ari asked.

"We think so. Mostly this strap communication will just tell us whether or not Paul is really in Athens. I assume it only takes a few towers with all those high hills in the area. The fewer the towers the more difficult it will be to pinpoint an area of the city."

"Time for me to bend over?" Ari asked.

"Yup. Let's do it," Kit said. "Drop you're drawers. Uncle David, get in close so you can verify the numbers that come up on that readout strip."

"I'm there."

"Here comes the call," Kit said.

He punched in his codes and David copied down the numbers as they appeared. It

was all over in fifteen seconds.

"At least we know he's being good to his word – fifteen seconds and out."

"Southwest, Alex," David said, "And don't spare the horses as they say in Indiana."

"Ah! *Horses*. I was figuring burros," he replied with a wink. "Hold on. Don't want anybody left in the drink to port."

A severe 135 degree turn to starboard was executed and they were on their way to Malta

"This is the wrong number," Kit said as Ari stood and hitches up his pants.

"What do you mean?" David asked.

"It's not Paul's cell phone. Let me do an area code search on the laptop."

They sat in silence as he went to work.

"Well, well. The call was placed through the switchboard at Paul's hotel. We've done better than place him in Athens, gentlemen. It may have been a fatal mistake for him."

"How's that?" David asked.

"Listen and learn old man."

"That's kind, gentle, learned, old man to you."

Kit's quick smile did not distract him from his new task. He made a call on his cell phone. He spoke.

"Yes. This is Paul Donner in room 333. I'm calling on my cell phone because my service stopped here on the room phone. I was just speaking with an important business client who called me. I need to get back to him immediately. Can you find his number – the last one I was speaking with?"

A few seconds passed in silence. David gave Kit a thumbs up. Ari dittoed the motion with great enthusiasm though was not sure why.

"Thank you. I certainly appreciate your help and my room phone seems to have come back on line. I'll let you know if there's any further trouble."

"You rascal, you," David said. "You got the number of Ari's butt?"

Ari smiled and spoke as if finishing David's statement ". . . and not just *everybody's* butt has its own number."

He did a little butt twisting dance.

"They chuckled – some because of the humor and some in release of tension."

"I'm not sure how we can use the information," Kit said, "But I figured we might not ever get another chance at it."

"I'm with you," David said. "Any way for us to get into whatever receives the code Paul will – that is, could – send to detonate it?"

"What do you think, Alex," Kit asked.

"That's all on the other side of the call-in circuitry. If it can be done it's beyond me."

"If it's all the same to you guys, then, I'd really rather not have you go fishing in there," Ari said not really kidding.

"No worry, Squirt. We want to make sure you stick around to work your wonders on the World."

"I didn't know I had any wonders to work on the world."

He was fully serious.

"You work them every day, Son," David said picking up on Kit's lead.

"Like?"

"Like that wonderful smile you flash spreading a friendly aura wherever you go, for one thing."

"That's a wonder?"

"You bet it is."

"And you're a kind person," Kit said. "That's definitely a wonder."

Somewhat uncharacteristically Alex had a comment.

"And *trusting*, taking off across southern Spain with me – a total stranger – and climbing on board that speed boat without checking out my credentials."

"Sounds like you think I'm everything Paul the Pod Man says people *shouldn't* be."

"That may be the highest compliment of all," Kit said. "*His* way will surely kill us all off. *Your* way will keep building us stronger and happier and ensure the specie's long-term, peaceful, existence."

"I guess I didn't ever stop to think about how little wonders added up," Ari said. "Someday I'd like to do a *big* wonder."

"Like?" Kit asked.

"Cure cancer. Disarm the world. Eradicate poverty and ignorance."

"Worthy goals," David said. "Keep them in mind. Someday I imagine you will find a way to do something about one or more of them."

"My father said someday I'll come into a lot of money. He said I needed to be thinking about how I was going handle it. I'm not entirely sure what he meant by that."

"By the time you have control of the money, I'm quite sure you will know what you want to do with it," David said. "Don't worry about it. Just continue on your course. It'll all take care of itself."

"That's the same thing Mama says."

"Listen to your Mama," Kit said. "We talked about that, remember?"

"The positive side of being nagged at, you mean."

"For starters, yes, that."

The conversation turned to Paul.

"What do you know about his childhood?" Kit asked turning toward David who had taken over surveillance from a seat at the front of the boat.

"He talked about it very little. Never mentioned siblings. Once something came up about Houston and he said that was where he was born. His birthday is June 15<sup>th</sup>. He is my age – born the same year."

"Born in *Texas* but grew up in *South Carolina*?" Kit said suggesting some inconsistency.

“Not everybody is born and bred in the same little town like you and I.”

“Yeah,” Ari said missing the point. “I was born and bred in a big city.”

“Look for a birth certificate,” David said moving on.

.....

“Paul Donner born June 15 of that year. One problem. The middle name here is listed as Allen. Mother Edna and Father Paul.”

“How old did that first book say the boy was when he lost his parents?” David asked.

“Six. It said he was six.”

“Move ahead six years and search the death certificates in Houston. Since he was already six then begin looking after the middle of June.”

“You’re a regular Raymond Masters,” Ari said. “He’s always having somebody look stuff up for him thousands of miles a way.”

“That’s right,” Kit said. “You’re a detective buff as well. Put your thinking hat on.”

“I must not know the idiom, ‘detective buff’. I translate that as naked detective and from the way Mr. Masters’ mass is described, I doubt if anybody would want to see the . . . portly . . . old detective naked.”

“Think of buff as meaning *well informed fan*.”

“Oh! Like a junior detective.”

“Yes. Like that,” David said.

“This is almost too easy,” Kit said. “Edna and Paul both died on July 9<sup>th</sup> of that year. Cause of death, auto accident.”

“We need those books, Kit,” David said.

“Let me see what *Google Books* will give up.”

“First,” David said, “and I’m sure this is asking too much even of this age of digital information, see if Paul was adopted sometime during the several years that followed. If not in Texas then try South Carolina.”

Many minutes passed. Ari had a question which he directed to David.

“Is there a death certificate about my father?”

“Yes. I’m sure there is. It will be in Minnesota, in the United States, where he died.”

“Mama and I keep a scrapbook about our family. At the beginning we have our three birth certificates. I figure I should enter the death certificates, too. Can I get a copy?”

“Yes. Your mother may even have a copy.”

He nodded and grew serious. He put his hands up – palms out – indicating the others should not interrupt. He addressed David.

“If I don’t make it out of this adventure alive, tell Mama I want her to put my death certificate at the end of that scrapbook. That way the certificates will be like bookends to my life. Okay? Will you do that?”

“Of course, but we aren’t going to let that happen, you know. You still have

years and years of little wonders to spread around and then there is that still unidentified big wonder you were speaking about.”

Ari smiled understanding what David was doing. From his standpoint he had received the man’s word so he felt assured his wishes would be complied with and that was the most important part.

“No adoption in either state. The book summary actually spoke of foster care not adoption.”

David nodded.

“It was a shot.”

Ari had a thought.

“In my fathers will he said that if Mama died or something happened so she couldn’t take care of me, he wanted to give me to you, David. I hope he talked that over with you.”

“If that situation should arise it will be my grand honor to have you as a part of my household.”

Kit flashed a puzzled look at David. He had not been told of that arrangement and thought he surely would have. David just raised his eyebrows as if say it was news to him as well.

Nothing more was said as Ari continued with his original thought.

“What I was getting at was maybe Paul’s parents made some arrangement like that in their will and if we can find their will then we would know.”

“An excellent thought but I don’t know if wills are even saved,” Kit said looking at David.

“That comes under local jurisdiction – usually county. Not sure how to proceed on that one.”

Again it was Ari. He had clearly taken Kit’s ‘Detective Buff’ reference seriously.

“Couldn’t we just email the county and ask?”

Alex began chuckling from aft and it had soon worked its way fore.

“What? You guys are always laughing after I’ve said something and I want to be in on it.”

Alex made the explanation.

“It is your *wisdom*, still untarnished by the complexities and unexamined assumptions about life, that often allows you to cut right to the chase. I do believe *that* is rapidly becoming our *secret weapon* in this adventure.”

“Thank you for the explanation,” Ari said. “It’s pretty cool to be a secret weapon. Just tell me whenever you need me to wise things up.”

Amid lingering chuckles, the email was sent into the Houston night. It would be awaiting the county clerk’s staff come eight o’clock a.m. their time.

“Time for A and A to hit the sack,” Alex said.

“A and A,” Ari said picking up on it with a grin. “Alex and Ari. I’m ready. This on-again, off-again sleep schedule is hard on a guy, I’ve decided. Maybe why Mama insists I’m in bed by nine every night. Who’d a thought I be learning all this stuff about

my Mama while hangin' out on a dirty little steam boat with a bunch smelly old men.”

“Hey!” Kit said. “I’ll have you know I’m not . . . smelly.”

Before hoisting the boy up to the upper bunk, Alex checked his blisters and reapplied ointment with the tenderness of a parent.

“I’ll re-wrap the straps with fresh gauze in the morning.”

“Thanks. If you ever need somebody to take care of *you* when you get r e a l l y old, I’m your boy – oh, I guess I’ll be *your man* by that time.”

“Careful what you promise. I may just take you up on it.”

Kit took the wheel. It allowed him to continue working on the laptop something the person on lookout duty couldn’t do. David sat up front.

“Clouds rolling in,” David said. Could be in for some bad weather. I’ll break out the rain gear just in case.”

“I probably should move more coal into the bin from the dinghies,” Kit added.

David nodded. Fifteen minutes later their tasks had been completed. The wind picked up and the rain began. Alex and Ari were protected under the metal roof. David and Kit donned the waterproof pants and jackets. Connie had prepared the old boat well that first day they took on supplies.

The gentle ripples of the water gave way to ever growing swerlls as the wind increased. They put all loose objects away and stashed the laptop safely in the cabinet on the starboard side, amid ship, across from the bunks. It grew dark and thunder began to rumble. Lightning was seen in the distance.

David moved back under the roof. It provided some protection from the rain but was probably not a good choice in case lightning came close. It was all they had.

With the heavy sheets of rain, surveillance distance shrunk to less than a hundred yards and eventually closed to fifty feet. He let the binoculars hang from his neck. At that distance they would not be useful.

Kit kept a steady course. The wind and waves were coming straight at them. He had learned at survival camp to always head a craft into the waves. It worked out well feeling more like a rocking cradle than an impending problem. They would be fine unless the wind picked up significantly

Silently, David got Kit’s attention with his arm, and pointed to the middle bunk. At some point during the disorder of the half hour just past, Ari had slipped himself in beside Alex whose big arm had pulled him close. It reminded them of Kit’s, childhood, middle of the night, mad-dashes across back yards to David’s loft during the summer time thunderstorms in Indiana.

‘I felt so safe and comforted there with Uncle David,’ Kit thought to himself.

‘I felt so needed and important, there with Kit,’ David thought to himself

Those were the last private thoughts they would be allowed. The wind suddenly came at them with a swirling ferocity.

“A water spout ahead!” David called.

Alex was immediately out of the bunk and beside Kit at the wheel. There was no time for him to don gear against the cold, stinging sheets of rain.

“Find some way of shielding the vents on the furnace,” he called. “We can’t afford for the fire to be drenched. If we lose power we’ll be tossed around out here like a toy in a toddler’s bath.”

“Hand me a drawer from under the front seat,” Uncle David.

It was soon freed from its station and passed back to Alex then Kit, who put it in place at an angle to protect the precious flames. He weighted it in place with chunks of coal.

Behind them one of the empty dinghies at the end of the line flipped and sank pulling the rear of the next in line dangerously close to the water line. It worked in their favor by adding drag that kept the coal laden boats taut in line. It also helped stabilize the steam boat.

As the water spout passed fifty yards to port the sea rose in angry, churning, waves twenty feet high. They crashed down against the little boat breaking the roof above the bunks.

“Hey,” Ari said rolling out and onto the floor. “I assume this is not a nightmare.”

“Hold on, little buddy,” Alex called.

David reached out and pulled the boy close.

“My belt,” David said. “Keep hold of my belt.”

“We’re taking on water fast,” Kit called out, loud enough for everyone to hear.”

“The foot lever to the right of the furnace,” Alex said. “Push it in. It engages the sump pump. Not real efficient but it will buy time for us.”

Kit stepped on the lever and it clicked into place. It took some power from the boat’s engine. He added more coal and left the furnace door open for maximum air supply. The fire blazed. He opened the valve all the way, sending the full force of the steam to power the pistons which turned the propeller. The water level in the boiler sank rapidly. He knew with that much pressure he dare not try to pump additional water into the tank or it might blow out the back pressure valve disabling the engine.

The storm continued to rage. The boat rolled high as the huge waves approached; then slapped low into the trailing troughs as they splashed their way on past. The stress on the old tub was incredible.

Ari was sure he was freezing but wouldn’t say anything. He pressed himself against David who understood. The best he could offer was to pull him close with his big arms.

The copper steam lines began to vibrate under the unaccustomed stress. The pressure gage began venting a wisp of steam. It had long been sitting at the high end of the red zone.

Kit tapped Alex on the shoulder and pointed to the gauge. Alex looked, nodded, and shrugged.

“Guess we’re seeing what she’s made of,” he said offering no alternative.

They continued to fight the onslaught for another two hours. One sheet of the metal roof was torn off and blown away. The emergency band radio was wrested from its shelf and tossed into the sea. Everything that had not been tied down or locked inside

the closet was lost.

By five the wind had shifted and approached from the east.

“We’ve see the worst of it,” Alex announced.

He was right. By five thirty the rain had stopped. The sea had calmed. They could see the looming storm silhouetted behind them against the sunrise. The starkness of the swirling blacks and grays set against the breaking pinks and fuchsias behind was unexpectedly beautiful. The memories of the hours just past, were not.

Ari freed his hands from David’s belt; his palms were bleeding where the leather edges had cut his flesh.

“At least my fingers are all here,” he said wincing as saltwater rolled down his arms invading the open sores. “And another good thing. The strap must have stayed water-proof. Good job, Alex. I owe you one – probably a hundred if we were really counting.”

Kit closed the vents and the pressure was soon back to an acceptable level. The sump continued to remove water, at that point still a foot deep inside the boat cutting its speed dramatically.

“We either need to cut that sunken dinghy loose or go in and right her,” Kit said, directing his comment to Alex.

“*Nunca corte seus recursos quando você está no mar.*” Alex said. An old Portuguese sailor’s saying. Translates as, *Never cut your assets when you’re at sea.*”

“I know the ‘roll and right’ procedure from Survival Camp,” Kit said shedding his clothes.

“Want help,” Alex asked.

“Let me give it a try. No need for both of us to get wet.”

The absurdity of the comment provided some much needed chuckles.

While Kit worked in the water to right the boat, David took the first aid kit from its shelf inside the cabinet.

“We need to tend to those cuts, Ari.”

The boy nodded and looked up into David’s face.

“No offence, but Alex has sort of been my doctor right from the start. Is it okay if he takes care of them?”

David nodded.

“I have to agree with you. A good doctor is hard to find these days so if you’ve found one, there is no reason to change.”

David was sure he saw a single quiver rise and fall across Alex’s lower lip. He let it pass. There was clearly a story about him and a child but David wouldn’t press.

Alex began attending to Ari. In the water, Kit had the boat surfaced and floating upside down. He moved to its rear and put his right hand against the corner which should be the top. With the other he reached up and grasped the small, protruding, keel in the center. Then, with a mighty effort he righted the boat. It floated low in the water since it remained nearly half full. That was part of the process. He began swaying the boat from side to side slopping water over the edges. Soon there were no more than a few inches in

the bottom. He swam to the side of the *Ari* and climbed back aboard.

“You’re all wet,” Ari said, smiling, hoping to extend the humor from before.

“I’ll choose to take that literally, rather than figuratively,” Kit said.

Ari dug out a dry towel from its plastic, vacuum package and handed it to Kit.

“That was like magic, what you did with that boat. You gotta teach me to do it.”

“I thought I just did. Weren’t you watching?”

“Oh! Yeah! Then, thanks for the lesson, I guess.”

“If class is over,” David said, “I think it’s our turn to get some sleep.”

“But the bunks are soakin’ wet,” Ari said.

“I doubt if that will keep us awake,” Kit said crawling into bunk number two.

Water squeezed from the foam mattress as he positioned himself.”

“Looks like I’ll be getting a shower as well as sleep,” David joked from below.

“How efficient! Paul would approve” Kit quipped in return.

The word, *Paul*, quickly brought a somber mood to the boat. Alex motioned Ari to take the wheel and noted the compass course he was to maintain.

“How are your hands feeling,” Alex asked.

“If that’s the worse thing that happens to me today, my life will be in excellent shape. My father used to say that. He said he learned it from David.”

“I like the philosophy. It blows away the chaff doesn’t it?”

“I’m not sure I understand the analogy,” Ari said.

Alex spoke to him in Greek, something the two of them only did when the others were not around – or were unconscious.

“Removes from one’s focus all the really meaningless petty problems folks often dwell on. Allows you to keep focused on what’s *really* important.”

“Like life itself and health and friendship, you mean.”

“You’ve got it. I have to wonder how Paul missed it?”

“If the books Kit was talking about are really about Paul, I can see how he missed it. He had a hard and very unhappy life growing up.”

“You are expressing compassion for the man who says he will kill you with no remorse.”

“If a pot of soup boils over on the stove, it’s not the soup’s fault!”

“And who said that?”

“I did. Just now. Weren’t you listening?”

“I meant where did you hear it? Who said it originally?”

“I repeat. I did. Just now. Weren’t you listening? I’m not just a parrot. I do have thoughts of my own, you know.”

“Back off, tiger. It wasn’t my intention to offend you. If anything I was witnessing to the fact it was a profound analogy.”

“Really? Hot soup, profound? Who knew?”

Alex shook his head and chuckled as he took his seat forward and began the monotonous process of scanning the horizon. David and Kit slept. Ari kept to a perfect course and spent time thinking about Mama and Casey and wondering how it would feel

to jump out of the *fourth* floor window into the pool. He envisioned a splash as high as the roof and pats on the back from his friends so hard they would hurt – but it would be worth it, of course – until Mama found out.

\* \* \* \* \*

At ten thirty two things came into view. The island of Malta and a speed boat heading directly toward them.

“Up and at ‘em guys,” Alex said intending his comment for David and Alex. “We got company heading straight our way. With the sun directly above us I can’t really determine much about it. I will take the wheel. Ari, spread eagle on the deck. You two break out your side arms and crouch low.”

It took place smoothly, as if it had been practiced a hundred times. From the rear, Alex kept his binoculars focused on the rapidly closing craft not yet ready to try a defensive maneuver. He reached back and cut the dinghies loose.

“I only see one occupant but the others could be hiding,” he reported.

“I assume you loaded these things,” Kit said, picking up the rifle as if it were maggot infested slime.

“It’s ready. Turn the safety button to, ‘Off’.”

“What do we aim for?”

It was again Kit’s question.

“If you’re a crack shot who never misses you might try for the gun hand or kneecaps. Otherwise go for the chest.”

“Kit thought he was going to throw up at the vision. He didn’t.”

At one hundred yards the other boat slowed. Alex’s phone rang. Perhaps it was to be an opportunity to surrender. That made no sense in light of the cat and mouse war Paul had outlined.

Alex hesitated not wanting to scatter his attention.

At that moment the other boat began cutting a close circle to its left.

“Could that be Connie?” Kit called out.

“Hello. Alex here.”

“Hello. A worried-stiff Connie here. You guys are way over due and your boat looks like it went through a hurricane.”

“Almost. We were close to shooting you out of the water just now. Call ahead next time you make an unannounced mad dash straight down our throat.”

“OOPS! Sorry. Clearly I wasn’t thinking through my worry. You all okay?”

“As someone I know might say, ‘If this is the worst that happens to me today my life is going to be fantastic’.”

Hearing only Alex’s side of the conversation, the others relaxed. David pulled Ari to his feet.

“You’re wet and filthy, Son,” David said.

“I know. Isn’t it great? And Alex, it’s ‘in *excellent* shape’, not ‘*fantastic*’.”

“I stand corrected.”

Connie pulled along side. Kit threw him a line. They talked across the water.

“Got caught in a little squall, out there,” Alex offered as his full explanation.

“I tracked it on the radar. Looked more than *little* to me. I see the roof took a hit. We’ll give her a complete going over once we get to dock. I’ll follow you in. Got a private slip for us.”

“What ever’s your pleasure, Connie,” Kit said, “but I personally prefer just *general boxers* – to a *private slip*,” he added immediately feeling the need to explain his esoteric offering.

Kit figured the group groan that followed was payment in full.

“We need to pick up the dinghies,” Alex said.

“I’ll take care of that,” Connie called. “You want to help, Ari?”

“Sure – if it’s okay with the guys here.”

He spoke of the guys but looked to Alex for permission. Alex nodded, privately tickled at the exchange.

Kit pulled the speed boat close and Ari jumped from one to the other. The crafts parted and a half hour later had safely slipped into their ‘boxers’ at the dock.

“You going to get dressed, Kit, or are you planning to stroll *Malta* stark naked?” David asked.

“Thank you I guess. I hadn’t noticed. I owe you – say a nice cool drink. How about a nice, thick, chocolate, *Maltamilk*?”

There were only two left to groan, but again it was sufficient.

“We all need to get cleaned up and fed,” David said. “Connie you’re the only presentable one in the lot. Find us a room where we can freshen up. We’re here until late tonight. We’ll inspect the boat while you’re gone.

The problems with the craft were minimal. Connie’s choice of boat had been excellent. Kit scrounged a sheet of metal and a can of tar from a shop not far away. The roof was soon good as new. Bowing to the modesty code David had invoked, Kit wore boxers as he dived repeatedly to inspect *Ari VII*’s underside – the boat, that is. It, too, had weathered the storm in good shape.

A supplier of coal was located and would come mid afternoon with what they needed. Much of what the dinghies had been carrying had been lost in the storm and most of the rest was used during the final leg of the trip.

At last clean and fed, they returned to the room from the café for a strategy session. Kit checked the laptop batteries he had left recharging. They needed several more sets. He’d go shopping later.

Ari lay back on the bed and was soon asleep. It was just as well since there were many scary unknowns for which plans and alternative plans needed to be made.

Alex rolled out the map on the table around which the others were seated.

“Malta to Crete is the next leg as we set it out originally. That’s about four hundred miles. We’ll need two more dinghies for coal. That will slow us down some. We are reaching the point of diminished returns – the extra weight of the coal boats and the amount of extra coal it takes to pull them along with us. Plus, Connie will be back with us.”

“How long, then,” David asked.

“In calm waters – and the forecast looks good – a straight shot would take about twenty hours – maybe twenty two considering the load.”

“We’ll need every bit of that, then,” David said. “What do you think of this? At eleven o’clock tonight we will set out retracing our course northeast toward *Greece*. At a few minutes after midnight – once Paul has plotted the new course – we head straight south eventually turning onto that direct westerly path to *Crete* Alex presented.”

“Doesn’t give us much wiggle room,” Kit said. “And why *Crete*. It lays mostly west and way south of Greece? It’s hard to see how that route makes any sense at all. Oh! It doesn’t. I see. Very clever, actually.”

“Thank you for adding your blessing to the plan.”

“My *generic* blessing, you understand.”

David smiled. The other men were unsure of the meaning but wouldn’t ask. They were good soldiers.

David continued.

“I am betting that Paul will pull all his resources back to *Greece* – specifically the area around Athens. He earns no margin having them chase shadows in the huge expanse of the *Ionian Sea* between the sole of *Italy*’s boot and *Greece*. He will have learned by now that he and his methods are no match for us.

“He may have planned a reserve of dozens of men for the last stand. We undoubtedly have him confused. Paul functions as a well organized mind. There has been nothing well organized about our route up to now. Our lack of logic has him confused, we can bet on that.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t broken his word and phoned Ari’s butt more often,” Kit said offering it in all seriousness.

“Paul was always a man of his word. He always thought he was brighter than I was. Had many plausible reasons for his coming in second – none of them related to *his* level of smarts. I imagine he still believes his brain power will prevail. Perhaps to prove that he has to remain true to his dictum making brain against brain. As the area of the globe grows smaller, his chances increase and our decrease.”

“Easier to search a soup bowl than an ocean, you mean,” Kit offered.

David nodded.

“What’s with these kids and soup?” Ari asked then let it go without pursuing or clarifying it.

David went on.

“From the westernmost part of *Crete* we have lots of options. North into the *Aegean* to the west of *Athens*; back west and east into the *Ionian* from where we can go overland through *Greece*; or take a nearly straight shot north to either *Sparta* or *Athens* itself.”

Connie spoke.

“I don’t know what kind of a tactician the Pod Man is, but if I were in his shoes I’d guard Athens from the west and south. There is a major highway, E94, from the west

connecting with equally good roads continuing to the west coast. There are the major waterways to the south and west each having a thousand places to moor a ship this size.”

“That is precisely why Plan A will be for us to sail north to the *Cyclades Islands*, south east of *Athens* and then on north to Lesvos Island, across the *Aegean* to the northwest. Our approach to *Athens* will be by sightseeing tourist boats from the islands there. I’m banking on Ari knowing the area near his house well enough to get us there under some kind of cover.”

“Seems like forever since we’ve actually followed *Plan A*, Uncle David. It makes me feel uneasy.”

He smiled. It had been a joke – well, mostly.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Both Connie and Alex were concerned about aerial surveillance as they approached Greece – especially while they remained in the open waters to the south. A plan was created to disguise the boat.

They set to work immediately. Alex and Connie located two fourteen foot long, wooden, six by six's and secured them across the boat extending some three feet on each side. The rear piece was screwed in place just in front of the engine section. The other just behind the front seat. One dingy was fastened to each end of the posts with vertical sections of two by fours giving them the appearance of outriggers on a canoe. One dingy was attached by rope to trail the rear 'outrigger' on each side. Two more trailed behind the coal bin at the rear of the boat. They then had eight stable coal carriers, four of which also acted as stabilizers. It was overkill in the fuel category but too much trumped too little every time. Heavy, green-tone, camouflage netting was procured and draped across the roof – front to back and side to side. It was fastened to the bow and to the far outsides of the dinghies along side.

"It looks like a floating cave," Ari observed. "I guess that will make us Cave Men."

At least Ari thought it was hilarious and his reaction was predictably infectious.

By nine o'clock that evening supplies had been purchased and loaded, laptop batteries recharged, and several new ones added to the inventory. They each had two new changes of clothing and deodorant sticks all around.

David's attempts to purchase the books by Peggy Parsons, Paul's alter ego, were unsuccessful. Amazon could have them there in any one of four languages within twenty-four hours. It gave David an idea.

"Connie, Alex. You undoubtedly have a favorite hotel on Crete, right?"

"*The Continental Plaza*," they said as one, looking surprised since they had never been there together.

"Kit, make a reservation in your very best German and broken English. Then order Paul's books on line and have them delivered to . . . let's see."

"Benning Wentworth," Kit offered.

"Benning Wentworth?"

"I just happen to have an ID with that name on it under my picture – the best dancing nudes on the east coast perform in bars. I figured it was not fully illegal since I was not using it to drink illegally."

"We can discuss your ogling illogic later, but right now it's a god send – in the generic sense."

They exchanged a private smile.

"Use it for the reservations as well. We can't chance using any of ours."

It was all soon arranged.

They ate a final meal on land. Alex, Kit and Ari went for a jog. Connie and David opted for a walk around the tiny port town. Economically things looked poor.

Fresh water, most of it imported from Sicily, went for nearly two Euros a glass. Filling the main and auxiliary water tanks on the ship had come to over five hundred Euros and had to be purchased in several installments so as to not exceed a single tourist's allotment. Interesting to David was that English, not Italian was the official language – along with the native Maltese. That had facilitated their stay.

At 10:45 Kit lit the fire in the furnace and by 11:00 they had a head of steam ready to move them on their way. It was an odd sight from the dock – like a hill dislodged from its meadow, slipping across the water, heading out to sea.

From the air it was guaranteed to look like the shadow of a cloud, a sudden deepness in the sea, a school of fish, or perhaps, from the angle of a distance, a small island. If approached by air the plan was to cut the engine and close the vents, reducing both movement and smoke.

Connie took first watch as lookout up front. Alex and Ari handled the boiler and wheel from the rear.

"Thirty seconds to butt ring, guys," Ari announced at last.

When the time arrived, Kit punched in the codes and noted the readings – still coming through the same tower. He tapped Paul's cell phone positioning system. It was still in the hotel room. It had all become routine – the processes and the findings.

At five after midnight Alex set the craft on a southerly course and an hour later a wide, gentle, turn to port settled them into an easterly trek toward Crete. Using the global positioning system, Ari kept track of where they were. David was still amazed that such a contraption could possibly exist. Ari accepted it as a mere fact of life and became impatient when it took two seconds to get a reading rather than the one he was used to.

David and Kit began pouring over Paul's articles, which they had printed off while on Malta. The glow from their penlights seemed safe enough there in the vastness of the Mediterranean night.

"He quotes *you* in this one, Uncle David."

"Nothing positive, I hope."

"He attacks the basis of your philosophy by presenting your three pillars as a straw man. The quote, offered out of context, is:

*Trust, mutual respect, and a willingness to be helpful are the three essential cornerstones of a viable society as well as any sub-unit within it.*

Ari was listening. "What's a subunit, like a family or a neighborhood?"

"Exactly," Kit said suddenly realizing the conversation would of necessity be a combination of *Sociology 101* and *The Philosophic Bases of Society 699*. He continued.

"Your position, as he reports it, is that one must trust his fellow man until the other person proves that he is not trustworthy. He then goes on to relate the story of the Gingerbread Boy who accepts a ride across the stream on the back of the wolf. The wolf sinks deeper and deeper into the water forcing the Gingerbread Boy to move from the wolf's back to his neck to the top of his head and finally out onto his snout from where a single snap of the wolf's tongue could bring the ginger treat into his waiting mouth. He goes on to state his theorem: Trusting people, find themselves taken in before they can

move to protect themselves.

"He omits the *always use good sense* element of your premise."

"Interesting," David said. "I had never thought of the Gingerbread Man story as supportive of Paul's malevolent, don't trust anybody, philosophy."

"He goes on to analyze your position on respect, suggesting that you propose there must exist a basic mutual respect for each other's rights to exist, to keep their possessions, and to act according to their personal beliefs, values and standards so long as those things don't harm or unduly hamper the rights of others."

"Paul contends that respect is not a legitimate social concept. He replaces it with fear – his basic motivator. Person 'A', he says, will never freely just allow another person his legal or moral or ethical rights unless Person 'A' is afraid he will be punished or somehow otherwise hurt should he *not* allow those things."

Ari needed to clarify.

"Paul believes people don't do nice things just because they want to do nice things?"

"That's the way it sounds."

"His life must have been even unhappier than I thought."

Kit went on.

"He goes even further with it. He says parents should therefore not spend time trying to teach children to respect their elders and quotes you as agreeing with him."

David had a comment.

"I assume it is from something I wrote in which I said that although *love* we give freely, asking nothing in return, *respect* must be earned and once it is we honor the person for having achieved it."

"Mama says I have to respect my elders. That's *not* what you just said."

"Your Mama and I may disagree or we may really be saying the same thing. Do you think your Mama is saying you have to respect bad guys who go around hurting other people?"

"I doubt it though we've never specifically spoke of it."

"People who deserve respect do so because they act in ways deserving of admiration and esteem. Do we automatically respect all of our teachers just because they are teachers? I say no, not unless they have shown us they deserve our respect. A sarcastic or hurtful teacher is despicably misusing his position and certainly does not deserve his students' respect. It is never the *position* that is respected. It is the *person* who occupies the position who earns or does not earn our respect."

"So are you agreeing with Paul?" Ari asked.

"Paul says we shouldn't waste time trying to behave in ways that will win the respect of others because in the end, no one will respect us anyway. He says we must instill fear in others – fear that if they go against us we will be able to inflict some punishment on them. I understand that people's *behavior* can be controlled by fear of punishment. I also understand that a person's basic *beliefs and values* cannot be changed by punishment."

Again it was Ari waxing practical.

"It's like when the Christians were conquering England and they forced the Druids to go to Church services or be run through with a sword. They went but they remained Druids at heart."

"An excellent example."

"Taking it further," Kit said, "The Christians eventually discovered just *that*, so in order to quash the Druid beliefs so they could pose no threat to Christianity, they ended up slaughtering every last Druid on the Islands."

"They did that in the name of Christianity?" Ari asked, amazed.

David responded.

"It continues happening to this day – not just among Christian's, understand, but among many powerful religious factions world wide."

"That's like saying you have no right to believe any way other than mine."

"That's exactly the way many folks do believe, unfortunately."

Ari shook his head.

"It looks like there are *lots* of big wonders I need to do."

He looked directly into David's face.

"The biggest problem seems like it's that all those religious guys who believe they are doing right are really bad guys doing wrong, but they will never be convinced of that. If they have their way they'll keep on doing bad things until all us modern Druids are extinguished."

"Out of the mouths of babes," Alex said.

David raised his eyebrows. Kit nodded. Connie took it all in without a response – on the outside.

David felt the need to clarify.

"You must understand that I'm not saying religious groups are basically evil. Many – most, perhaps – regularly do wonderful things for people."

Ari nodded.

"I'm interested in Paul's take on my position that people must be willing to be helpful to one another."

"Let's see. He equates helpfulness with weakness. It is impossible to take the best possible care of yourself if you stop to offer help to others. He says that none of us have that kind of time or resources. Here's the quote of the day: 'I got to where I am by myself – according to my own resources. If others can't do the same they should perish and remove their sickly blood line from the human gene pool'."

"He wouldn't have made much of a Musketeer, would he?" Ari said then explained into the blank looks that met him. "There motto was, '*All for one and one for all.*'"

"I wonder if Paul ever read those books." Kit asked knowing they had no answer.

"And he offers *what*, after having torn asunder my pillars?"

"Each one must be a law unto himself only wavering from that when others are powerful enough to require it of you. Ideally everybody is strong enough to frighten

everybody else into a standoff – everybody is equally powerful. Society then becomes a fragile association of islands none of which have to pay any attention to others needs, wishes, or beliefs unless and until one becomes more powerful."

"Sounds like the theme of his forth book for sure," David said.

"Who would buy his stuff?" Kit asked shivering at the idea.

"Think about it, Kit. Lots and lots of people live his philosophy every day. They spend their entire pay checks on themselves – need to or not – and ignore the homeless without guilt. They accumulate closets of clothes, houses, cars, boats, RV's, electronic gadgets, four wheelers, jewelry, and you name it *that they don't need* while shamelessly letting children in their own cities go to sleep hungry every single night.

"They envision themselves as members of some elite class that is above the rules and laws and expectations of a mutually helpful society. On the less extreme side they only obey speed zones if they are pretty sure they won't be caught. More seriously, big businessmen crush little businessmen with no qualms about the fact they have ruined a life, more likely dozens or hundreds. Much of the business world has become amoral if not immoral, fully disconnected from anything but one's own economic bottom line."

"Seems to be a tad more emotion in there than usual, Unc."

"It is just so hard to understand how people have connected themselves to money and stuff and status, and disconnected themselves from other people."

"It's apartments."

That was Ari's proclamation.

The others looked at him. Even Connie turned around flashing a brief glance in the boy's direction.

"Go on," David said genuinely interested.

"I know all the people who live in houses within a mile of my place. When you have a house you have to get outside and take care of it, lawn, leaves, sweep the walks, you know. People come and go in cars and bikes and walking. You talk. You sit on your porches. You get to know each other. Everybody becomes an actual person to you, not just a figure you see from a distance sometimes.

"People in apartments don't have any place to get out to, plus they don't have things to take care of outside. You can't connect if you aren't available – out there. And, when you don't have people in your life you have to depend on the stuff you were talking about – stuff for friends, like."

"That's a very interesting take," David said. "I'm sure there is more than a kernel of truth in it."

The discussion left many heavy concepts for them to ponder.

It was a toss up who should take to the bunks first. The boys were wide awake so Alex suggested the other two take first turn.

"We'll roust you about nine," he said.

Kit took up the binoculars in the front. Ari bent Alex's ear in the rear.

"So you've flown lots of kinds of planes?"

"Sure have. Not as many as Connie. He's really the pilot on this team."

"Jets?"

"A few."

"Kit says you were in some elite navy squad or something."

"It's been called that."

"Secret stuff, I suppose."

"Mostly."

Ari nodded. He wouldn't pry into secret stuff.

"You married?"

"Was once."

"Have kids?"

"Did once."

"That's not very helpful information."

"Perhaps I didn't intend it to be helpful."

"Oh. If I'm prying I'm sorry. Mama says I ask way too many personal questions. I'm sorry. Just interested in you, you know. Friends need to know about each other. I got no secrets. Ask away if you want to."

"It's just that I'm not used to talking about myself. I didn't mean to put you off or seem unfriendly."

"That's okay. I don't ever take offense. My father said there's no margin in that. What is, *is*, and I leave it at that."

"I was married for seven years. We had a son. When he was six he and my wife died in a ski lift accident in the Alps. I never remarried. Spent the next ten years in the navy."

"I'm sorry about your loss. I'm sure my saying that really can't help much, though. I do know how it is to lose somebody you love very much. Some nights I still cry myself to sleep. I think that's more because I'm feeling sorry for myself than for any other reason."

"I understand."

Alex reached out his long arm and pulled the boy close. Ari relaxed into the man's strong body. His head rested against Alex's chest. They sat in silence for many minutes. There are times friends don't need to talk.

Kit had learned a valuable lesson from his kibitzing: Even with powerful binoculars you can't see very far when your eyes are damp.

Within the hour the boat began slowing, noticeably. Kit turned to ask Alex about it. He was met with a finger to the man's lips. Ari was sound asleep. Alex pointed to the firebox. Kit understood. It needed filling but the big, brazen, island of a man didn't want to awaken the little boy. Kit soon had the situation remedied.

Then, he whispered to Alex. "I'll take him and put him in his bunk."

Alex shook his head.

"He's fine here."

Alex the soldier suddenly became Alex the man. Kit wasn't sure if he liked that. The soldier had been invincible. The man just might not be.

Kit returned to the front of the boat and resumed surveillance. He figured the chance that the Pod Men had any idea where they were was slim to none and immediately berated himself for thinking in clichés. He corrected that. 'One chance in . . . 37,' he thought, smiling, clearly pleased with what he figured was the accuracy of the odds he had formulated.

Ari's continuing compassion for Paul interested, no, discomforted, Kit. Alex had related the boy's 'spilled soup' analogy. It was how part of Kit believed as well.

Kit's analysis remained on two levels. One was the analytical, logical, cool conclusion that Paul was indeed a product of his apparently horrendous childhood. He could understand how the man might have come to the conclusions he had about society and the powers that drove it. He could even understand how those experiences might allow him to justify the actions he was taking.

At the same time, he disliked the man – abhorred, detested, despised might come closer to his feelings. David always said it was important to separate the quality of the deed – which in this case was abhorrent – from the innate worth of the person who performed it. That had been nearly impossible to do as a boy. It was some easier at nineteen but complete separation clearly had not occurred.

He understood his Uncle's point. People were not merely their behaviors. If that were true people could not change. More importantly if people *could* change their behavior it proved they were *not* merely their behavior.

He remembered reading the biography of a man, who as a teenager committed brutal crimes and yet as an adult went on to become an outstanding pillar of his community, working tirelessly in inner city programs to help aim young people in socially appropriate directions. That *person* was clearly not synonymous with those early *acts*. There was a worthy person in there above and beyond the behaviors. It took time and the appropriate opportunities to develop and mature. Had he been judged forever according to his early ways, the subsequent years of positive service could never have taken place.

He wondered how things might have turned out if the teen in the story had been incarcerated – punished – instead of helped. The usual scenario is that the youngster grows to hate his captors – law enforcement – and wallows not in thoughts of rehabilitation but in thoughts of revenge. He succeeds in prison by learning to behave as he is told he must – not ever having to learn (or having the opportunity to learn) how to make good social decisions, himself. Then one day he is turned loose on society fully unprepared to cope away from the structure that had guided every aspect of his life.

Surprise, surprise. He's back in jail within six months. How stupid can we be? Treat the behavior and forget the person. Even worse, the treatment is not really treatment at all – it is punishment, long known to be fully ineffective in changing the values and beliefs from which behaviors follow. If punishment really worked than spanking a kid once should be sufficient; one time in after school detention should be sufficient; one time in jail should be sufficient.

He remembered a phrase from one of David's essays: "Live with a punisher and

chances are you will become a punisher. Live with a problem solver and chances are you will be become a problem solver. Live with hate and you will likely become a hater. Live with love and you will almost certainly grow to guide yourself by a love-based philosophy."

Paul didn't really seem to advocate hate. He believed in a fully self-centered life – one that allowed no time to care about or for others. Kit had to wonder how Paul envisioned marriages and families working within such a plan. It seemed that good parenting was automatically out of the question. In fact, how could children be cared for at all?

Paul's philosophy was compartmentalized. He purported to want to save the human species, just as David did. Paul's approach was based on the power to hurt or at least ignore others needs and to posture belligerently. David's grew out of the intention to help and love and include.

They both believed in taking care of oneself. For Paul it became the all inclusive focus. For David it was merely a necessary base from which one drew the strength needed to assist ones fellow man.

Paul's approach required each person to find and utilize his personal strengths and develop self reliance or to be pushed aside to die or be killed. It would build strong, alert, active beings who just expected to take care of themselves. The concept of welfare programs of any kind would be irrelevant.

David's approach allowed weaknesses to develop that Paul's system did not. Folks, with a mind to, could take advantage of the good will and intentions of others and find ways of being taken care of with minimal effort on their part. 'Allowed' was the key element. It did not 'encourage' such an approach and it would rarely come about as children were taught to strive toward becoming the best that they could become. Pride came from searching for personal excellence in mind and body and in reaching out to assist others to do the same.

People, *not* power, money, or stuff, became the bottom line in David's vision for mankind. Me *and* power *and* money *and* stuff became the bottom lines in Paul's vision. Kit had read enough human history to understand that as the bottom line for a society turned away from people and toward those other things, it began its decent into suffering and extinction.

Kit wondered, again, how people can just ignore such obvious lessons. Perhaps that's where the word *ignoramus* came from. If so, he feared the proportion of ignoramuses to thoughtful students of history was increasing at an alarming rate.

If Paul and David had a common ground it was in the area of taking immediate steps to improve Planetary health. Without a vibrant, verdant, living planet, all else would not matter for long. It had been young Ari's father's life long concern. His solution had been to merely wipe mankind off the face of the globe since it was man, alone, who was killing the planet with his vain, unthinking, selfish ways. David called upon mankind to engage its powers of forethought, compassion and altruism to cease and desist from its deadly practices. Paul might have an edge on the other two. If the most

powerful beings on the planet required appropriate planet-friendly behaviors from all those who feared them, the planet would, of course, be saved whether most people *really* cared or not.

Ari had believed free will would destroy life. David believed free will allowed man to search out and find the truly positive, altruistic traits and abilities within him that were necessary to save the planet. Paul's stance seemed the most efficient. Live in a planet friendly way or be destroyed. His was perhaps more akin to Ari's approach than David's.

Kit's thoughts had provoked the necessity for defining a fourth approach – Ignore the problem and condemn the ultimate remnants of humankind to suffer in excruciating ways as they approached the inevitable death of the planet. His eyes again moistened as he understood *that was* the approach currently in control of the planet's fate. To some extent it was being legislated by the self-seeking, short sighted, governments of the world – his own perhaps leading the way.

"We need a wonder right now," he whispered into the darkness. "We need a *Big Wonder*."

His foray into social philosophy had provided a diversion from the distressing situation in which he and his associates found themselves. Both, however, produced unwelcome anxiety. He'd try to steer his thoughts toward the pleasant side of life – Megan."

Ari awoke with sunup: Connie and David at 8:30. Twelve hours remained until they would step onto solid land again.

They agreed that as they approached Crete their chances of meeting the Pod Men again increased. Paul had to make a decision. If he believed his chances of intercepting David's group elsewhere was slim he would need to pull back to Athens

The men believed that would have to be his conclusion. The next midnight would place them on Crete so Paul would at least know where their jumping off point would be.

"Do we keep the camouflage as we head up into the Aegean Sea?" David asked looking from Connie to Alex as the experts.'

"We will need every advantage," Connie said and this seems to be working nicely."

Alex nodded, massaging his right shoulder that had stiffened under his precious load during the night.

"My suggestion would be to remove it just before we make port, so we won't look like such a memorable circus parade, and then once out to sea again we reinstall it."

"That's our plan, then," David said.

"My plan is breakfast and then sleep," Kit said.

"I'll second that – both that," Alex said.

A plane approached as a tiny dot in the eastern sky. Alex cut the engine and closed the vents. There had been planes before but most had flown high – no doubt carrying people and cargo. Few had been so low.

Ari crossed his fingers and kept his eye on the speck in the sky. It grew larger. It

was red. It was a biplane.

"Being flown by an amateur," Connie said. "Watch its wings, dipping one way and then another."

"And that means?" Kit asked twirling his finger to encourage more information.

"It means just that. An amateur. Maybe a Pod Man, inexperienced with biplanes. Maybe a student with his instructor. Maybe a rhesus monkey looking for its surrogate mother. How should I know?"

It brought chuckles into the tension. The plane drew closer and dropped near to the surface clearly having spotted the floating whatever it looked to be from up there.

By the time it passed just to the north the boat was dead still in the water. The plane climbed and turned returning for a second look. Alex and Connie drew their side arms.

"Better lay on the floor, Ari," Alex said pointing.

Ari complied immediately. David and Kit crouched. That time the plane buzzed so close they could see its occupants. It was a teen age girl at the controls with an older man – presumably the instructor – in the other seat. That time it climbed higher than before and set a course back toward Crete.

"What did I miss?" Ari said scrambling to his feet.

"An attractive young teenager, and an old man," Kit said cutting to the chase.

"Got that here," Ari said grinning and throwing up his arms.

"A *girl* teen. Ari. A *girl*."

His grin spread.

"They're both imps, you know," Alex said. "What one doesn't think of the other will."

It deserved a fist pound between the boys.

The floating hilltop was again soon making nearly twenty knots toward Crete.

"I wonder what they thought we were." Kit asked, working on an apple.

"Something curious enough to derive a look," Connie said.

"And a second look," Ari added.

\* \* \* \* \*

With Kit and Alex asleep and Ari tending the fire and wheel like an experienced old tar, Connie and David chatted as they scanned the horizon,

"I'm still uncertain about how we are going to end this thing – once we get the boy home," Connie said.

"Number one we save Ari – that was the mission we accepted. Two, if we can, we will find a way to protect the kids in the hospital. Three, we will try to save Paul's life and take him into custody."

Connie smiled.

"Like I said, I'm still uncertain about how we are going to end this thing."

David nodded and managed a quick smile.

"It's always the specifics that present the problems. I have an idea. It's vague and can't be formulated in any precise way until we are in the moment."

"Sounds like this entire undertaking."

"I suppose so. Here's what I got. Once we get to *Lesnos Island*, Kit and I will go ahead to Athens. We will track down Paul. Once we locate him we will let you and Alex know. You'll board a tourist boat and head back to Athens with Ari.

"Using what the boy knows about the area you will work out what you feel is a safe, back door route to his home. We'll synchronize, such as we can. When Paul receives word – just how I'm not sure – that Ari is safely home, I assume he will delay the deactivation procedure long enough to either escape and save his neck or follow through on his stated plan. Either way we will follow him. If it is to the hospital we'll have to innovate some way of separating him from the kids during those minutes he says will exist between the turning of the canister on Ari's strap and the moment the explosive he is wearing is to be detonated."

"I believe *our* job will be easier than yours," Connie said.

"There's always the chance he'll just call it quits once he sees he's been beaten," David said.

"No there isn't."

"No there isn't, you're right, Connie. He clings to sanity in such a precarious way we can't know at what point in all of this he may snap. And, if he does, will it be in the direction of acting out or catatonic withdrawal?"

"Of all possible places, why do you suppose he picked the children's hospital to end this thing?"

"I can only assume it has some twisted connection to the time he was apparently hospitalized as a child and the other young patients tormented him about his physical appearance."

"Pay back?"

"Pay back once removed I suppose."

"Sick!"

"All of this is fully logical to him. His basic premises are not but that's often the basis of insanity. He can't recognize the problem, of course."

"I feel better knowing the general game plan. Innovation is our specialty so that's not really bothersome."

"More immediately," David went on, "we will arrive on the north shore of Crete in a small bay near *Georgious*. We will re-supply while Ari and Alex take the highway south across the Island to the bay at *Vauvas*. They will await midnight and return by way of that same highway. Before one o'clock we should be on our way north to the *Cyclades* Islands. It is a trip of about 150 miles – eight hours tops which should put us in port by nine a.m.

"We're in your home territory now," Connie. "Be free with suggestions."

"I have one – perhaps it will sound like several. Twenty five miles out we lose the camouflage netting and begin dropping off the dinghies as they are emptied so we stand out as little as possible. The real point is we will look suspicious if we aren't displaying a national flag. If it's Greek the Greek Patrol Boats will feel obliged to look us

up as we pass. That won't do. So I suggest we get an Albanian flag and fly that. It's innocuous. No one will look twice at us."

"Excellent. How about you take charge of all that?"

Connie nodded turning to check on Ari. He got a wink and a thumbs up from one obviously happy sailor. Ari took the opportunity to speak.

"I heard you talking earlier about me setting up the route to my house. I got it all worked out so we'll be undercover the last four kilometers except for two gaps of about thirty meters each. I'm working on that. Thinking skate boards for the one downhill part. Always kids and skateboards there. If we'd take off from the viaduct at thirty second intervals and head for the culvert at the base of my hill, I doubt if we'd be noticed."

"Sounds like a sound plan," Connie said. "We'll go over it on a map closer to time. I have a cousin who can supply the boards if that's how we decide to go."

"One thing I'm not sure about," Ari said. "There is a secret entrance to our house down through the hill it's built on. I guess it's really a secret *exit*. My Grandpapa had it built before I was born – I guess so if any bad guys came after us we could use it to escape. Wasn't much help this time, I'll tell you."

"And the problem is?" David asked.

"I'm figuring that this Paul guy does his research pretty well. So, he probably found out about it and would have guys waiting for me there. I'm thinking we shouldn't use it for the last leg of the trek."

"Wise!" Connie said. "Is there an alternative?"

"Yes. The yuckiest, but yes. Let me work on it some more."

The men turned back toward the front.

"Sounds very sewer-like to me," David said, low, to Connie.

"I'm so sorry you will have to miss that."

David turned his head toward Connie.

"I'm sure I haven't properly thanked either of you for doing this with us. I appreciate it more than . . . well, I guess you understand."

"What's that well known old saying?" Connie said, eyes twinkling. "*Fight the Pod Men and see the Mediterranean*. I'm really glad I'm here."

At five, Ari acted as chef for the evening meal. He opened the cans with flare presenting a light fare, envisioning a belly filling meal once they landed. David filled them in about the general end plan he had gone over with Connie earlier.

"What time of day are we going to be getting to my house?" Ari asked.

"I suppose that's open. You have a thought?"

"I'm guessing Paul would expect us to get there under the cover of night – say one or two in the morning. So, I'm thinking it would be better to do it all out in the open during daylight. The problem with that is the last thirty meters we have to cover across the back yard we'll be out in the open. Snipers could pick us off like crows on a wire."

Kit shivered. The others winced, saddened and distressed that the boy had to contemplate such a possibility.

"So, I'm thinking we need some kind of a diversion out front."

"You and Kit work on the diversion," David said. "I think the daytime approach holds some merit. What do the rest of you think?"

They all nodded.

Lunch finished and cans flattened and bagged, they settled in for the final two hours. As the image of the island widened to encompass the horizon they removed and rolled the netting, stowing it in one of the empty dinghies. Connie took the wheel and guided the craft along the north edge of the island and into a mostly isolated bay, which he had previously visited. By nine they were tied up.

They headed for the hotel Kit had booked where they cleaned up, changed clothes and ate a hearty dinner. Considering the small amount of time they would be in the room, Kit estimated it was costing them well over a hundred dollars an hour. He was sure that to Ari the fifth it was like a grain of salt. To a financially struggling Harvard student, it seemed huge.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

At eleven, a car was rented and Alex and Ari set off across the island for the little bay city of Vauvas. The highway followed a dip in the mountain providing what, during daylight hours, was one beautiful sight after another. Darkness, however, only allowed views of headlights, tail lights, and the starlit sky. Ari soon had enough of that and began to talk.

"What do think happens when we die?" he asked.

"You're not big on starting things off with small talk, are you?"

Ari understood and smiled but gave no indication of backing off from the question.

"I suppose *you* have some thoughts about it don't you?" Alex said hoping the boy would bite and give him some wiggle room.

"My father believed that dead means everything is over. Mama believes we have souls that go to heaven and live out eternity in bliss."

"And you?"

"I hope Mama's right. Father's belief makes more sense, though. Since there is no way to know for sure or even for *maybe*, I figure a guy should believe whatever makes him happy about it – so long as he doesn't hurt others along the way."

"You and I agree, then."

Ari nodded.

"I hope after all of this is over – the adventure, I mean, not life – you and I can remain friends," Ari said. "You not having your kid anymore and me not having my father anymore I just figured it should be good for both of us."

Alex smiled over at the boy.

"I am *not* your father, Ari."

"I know. And I'm *not* your son. I didn't mean like we'd be replacements. Just that we both have empty spaces that need filling."

"I will consider it a privilege to fill part of my empty space with your friendship, Aristotle Stephanopoulos the seventh."

"Thanks. And I will et cetera, et cetera, et cetera also, Alexander . . . Somebody the something-or-other."

"I don't know your last name."

"Would that change anything between us?"

"No. Of course not. *Somebody's* good enough for me."

"Sounds like we have a deal."

"Now we just have to live through *this*," Ari said.

"I understand you are worried about what's going on. That's reasonable. I've been in lots of scary situations before and I made myself a rule that helps me. I remember that I've always gotten through bad stuff in the past so I figure the same will happen in the future if I just take reasonable steps toward insuring it."

"If I may mix metaphors you're saying that so far I'm batting a thousand so why

change horses in the middle of a stream."

"If horse is a metaphor for 'positive, sensible, approach to problem solving' then yes. Your mixture seems to wrap it up. I think metaphors and analogies may have gotten inseparably intermingled in there, however."

"Aside from idioms, I find those two concepts are the most difficult to switch from one language to another."

"I certainly won't argue the point. Analogies and metaphors are like old shoes that only really fit one foot."

"You are very good! Let me try. And an idiom is like . . . a string of irregular, unmatched, pearls that only becomes beautiful as you detach yourself from each one and view them as a unit."

"Yes, but I didn't find an idiom in there."

"Neither did I. Sometimes my mind takes flight, like a goose before shotguns, and before I can toss the catch back, my tongue waggles like a sparkler lit by mistake."

"We might call that idiomatic overcompensation."

"Suppose that phrase has ever been said before in the whole history of man?"

"I don't know, of course."

"I'm going to believe not and suggest we celebrate with an ice cream cone from the *Negoziò Del Gelato* over there. We have time?"

"I'm always up for a celebration at an Ice Cream Shop even though in this case it may be celebratic overcompensation."

"That's great! Now we'll have to make it a *double* dipper."

They were enjoying the last cool vestiges of the cones as Alex pulled the car to a stop at the edge of a beach in the bay south of Vauvas. He handed Ari a handful of paper napkins. Once cleaned up they left the car and walked the beach waiting for midnight to come and go.

"You've been to all these islands before, right?"

"Right?"

"Civilian or soldier?"

"Both."

"About all I'm going to be able to claim is that I've been to them. Wish there had been time to explore them. My Father said he once spit into Mt. Vesuvius. You ever do that?"

"No. Can't say I have."

"Must be midnight."

"It is. How did you know?"

"When my butt phone is reached it vibrates – just for an instant."

"I didn't realize that."

"I may not have mentioned it."

"I assume it's only been doing that at midnight."

"Right. He seems to be keeping to his word about that."

"If it ever vibrates off schedule be sure to let us know."

"Oh, I will!"

"Back to the car, I guess," Alex said.

Ari nodded.

"Like I said, I never get to see anything. I deliver my butt here and I deliver my butt there, *but* in the *end* – no *buns* intended – I still don't get to see anything."

The chuckles lingered well into the return trip.

At twelve thirty the boat was on its way, again. There was new coal, fresh water, charged batteries, and some fresh fruit.

By one o'clock the netting had been re-hung. The *Cyclades* is made up of eighteen large islands and six smaller ones. It lies 150 miles north and a little east of Crete. The specific destination had been selected by Alex – the island of *Sikinos*. As a whole the islands overflowed with tourists. *Sikinos* was one that still offered areas of calm, peaceful, isolation from others. It lies in the southern region of the cluster. Ari had a cousin there in case a contact was needed.

The trip should take about eight hours. No one seemed ready to sleep. The sea was calm. Ari and Alex took the wheel and drug some fishing lines. Connie took lookout while David and Kit began reading the novels Paul had written under the pen name of Peggy Parsons.

They were well written, presenting far more modeling than preaching. His characters were well defined and set up a series of straw men – the bad or less enlightened guys – and the few others who lived by Paul's philosophy of self-centered detachment. They always won in the end. The theme of necessary revenge played openly.

He had probably found that his fiction did not receive close, logical, scholarly, critique so there, unlike in his professional treatises, his positions went unchallenged allowing the less critical public to be led down his primrose path.

It presented a comfortable way of life for those who chose to live fully self-centered, non-compassionate life styles. They could indulge there every hedonistic desire with no guilt. They could crush their competition with no remorse. They could ignore the growing, destructive forces in the world – poverty, hunger, sickness, hate, war-mongering, religious hostility – and encapsulate themselves from all those things, affirming no responsibility for anything but their own pleasure and advancement.

Piecing together bits from various sources – book jackets, sell sheets, author bios – it became clear the books were basically autobiographical. At some point Paul had taken the name of a long-term foster family as his middle name – Oliver.

His fourth book represented his best writing and his most fallacious logic. In the end, the World achieved peace through the tireless negotiation of someone bearing his initials. No subgroup dared move against any other because the subsequent retaliation would involve the automatic annihilation of both groups. Everyone lived in fear. Fear of punishment had become the basic motivator – not because it actually *was* in any genetic or generic sense but because in the world he had designed it *had* to be.

Where Paul took it as validation of his position, David and Kit understood it

represented an artificially induced state that stood just one small step short of the extinction of the human species.

Paul and David were in agreement that bad guys should not be allowed to ply their trades. Paul would fight the bad guys in two ways. He would teach people not to trust anybody so bad guys would find it more difficult to move against others. He would create a stable state of mutual fear to control antisocial behavior.

Much of what he had to say was not to be taken lightly, because there *were* lots of bad guys in the world who met Paul's description. They were willing to take and take for selfish gain at any cost. There were those willing – eager – to crush others for their own benefit and to use fear as their base of power. There were people working to set other groups against one enough in the hope once the two had destroyed or disabled each other they could move in and take and have and rule. At the less obvious level there were millions and millions – perhaps billions – of people willing to ignore the plights of others while amassing obscene amounts of needless stuff and money and power themselves.

In some ways, Paul's approach was a benign selfishness; it preached taking care of oneself first and foremost and never anybody outside your immediate circle. It was not nihilistic in the sense Ari's had been. Paul wanted to preserve the human species. He would not invade others or kill senselessly, though he believed others would invade him if not held in check by fear.

Whether by design or merely as associated unavoidable collateral damage, his system encouraged the polarization of well defined oppositional philosophies, the establishment of self-serving social groups, the specific exclusion of love, compassion, and helpfulness to those in need, all served up on the essential bottom line of all-encompassing terror that something might light the first match.

Even within the subgroups – national, religious, business – punishment became the sole method for behavior control. Punishment is inflicted from outside the person, so, in any punishment based process the person himself never takes on the responsibility to make himself act well. He needs to build no positive personal values upon which self-control depends. There is no self-control. There is only control from without – control dependably imposed from the powerful other, control from fearing the punishing consequence of misbehaving as defined by that powerful other.

No one behaves well because that's how their personal belief system says one should act. He behaves so as to not be hurt. Traits such as altruism, compassion, helpfulness, and perhaps even love drop from the easily accessible repertoire of human traits because children no longer see them modeled or witness their positive consequences. No one defines their own sense of right or wrong. Right is doing as you are told. Wrong is not doing as you are told.

A punishment based system is easy to establish for the one who possesses the power because it is a mindless undertaking. Somebody disobeys in word, thought, or deed and they are punished or destroyed. It is far more difficult to establish and maintain a positively based social order because it is by definition a more thoughtful undertaking and when people are allowed – encouraged – to think, differences of opinion legitimately

occur. In it, people are given choices based on their own inner beliefs and value systems. When they inculcate selfish, divisive, and anti-social elements into their values they hurt the rest. When the opposite traits are acquired they help the rest.

The challenge for the punishment based society is merely to create enough terror that everybody stays in line. It involves devising increasingly horrifying forms of punishment to maintain the high level of terror.

The challenge for the positively based social order is to instill positively inclusive, not negatively self-centered, values from an early age. It involves devising sure fire ways of helping parents raise children who possess the basic socially positive traits of altruism, helpfulness, compassion and love. It requires a foolproof method, which allows a social milieu in which people with divergent values and beliefs can live and grow and flourish and interact lovingly side by side. It is more time consuming and requires more knowledge and parental skills to build a socially positive personality than it does to build a negative one but, according to David's philosophy, that must become the essence of parenting. Anything less is non-parenting.

David had written about the differences between the biological functions of siring and bearing children on the one hand and the all quite separate process of raising children on the other. He pleaded that the two functions be referred to by separate words. Current usage of the all inclusive term, *parent*, clouded the meaning and fooled people into believing that the ability to raise children was just an innate extension of creating a new life. Just because a man can inseminate a woman and a woman can give birth do not, in any wild stretch of the imagination, automatically qualify them as *childrearing* parents. He pled with educators to make childrearing and mental health the cornerstones of the curriculum – areas almost never touched on by most students throughout thirteen years of elementary and secondary schooling in the United States. His proposal immediately became buried in favor of programs that taught virtually nothing about a huge number of traditional, 'academic' topics. David believed that the amassing of facts in this day and age of immediate access to information on the web makes the old '*stuff it in kid's brains*' approach to education harmfully outdated. To help students know *what* topics of information are available and *how* to find them and *learn* them when needed needs to replace the current system. It would free time to learn about the really important aspects of life – becoming and remaining mentally and physically healthy and instilling those things in our children; proven problem-solving techniques; the use of logic in dealing with one's daily challenges; and the lessons of history.

In Paul's world there would be no books on parenting, or problem solving, comparative philosophies, or rehabilitation because those would be non-topics, never utilized, fully unnecessary, and would probably even be looked upon as subversive information. (Uncomfortably descriptive of present day secondary education in the United States.)

There was one interesting oxymoron-ish child rearing approach still in vogue in the generally positive societies that had always intrigued – bothered – David. It can be summarized in the generic parental phrase, "Be a good person or I'll punish you." What

these parents don't understand is that although they may be maintaining positive behavior while they are present to punish its opposite, the fact is the child has no inner positive reference value about it to take with him when he's out of their sight. So, doing as he has been taught at home, he follows the lead of whoever is the most powerful person he meets. If that person utilizes his power to lead the child into anti-social or dangerous undertakings that's where the child goes because that's how he has been taught to act. 'Do it the way of the powerful person or be punished.'

And why is it such a surprise when these 'artificially' nice kids go berserk once out on their own??? Punishment never changes values – it merely changes behavior in the short run. Just as pernicious, perhaps, is that the concept of punishment fools parents into believing there is an easy shortcut to raising well socialized children – one that really requires no research, or study, or knowledge on their part. There isn't of course.

Early 'religious' leaders in most cultures understood that for whatever unknown reason, children raised to behave out of fear did in fact misbehave to extremes when out of the ken of their punisher – their controlling parent or priest. So, they extended their god-being into an all knowing, all seeing, all powerful god-being from whom individuals could *never* hide their misdeeds. In David's interpretation of the History of Social Philosophies THAT represented the ultimate necessity for those who would control through fear – fear of hell, lightning bolts, plagues, famines, or what have you. David had referred to it in his writing as the Santa Claus Factor in religion. (More accurately it was the religion factor in Santa Claus.)

David believed those early formulators of social control had taken the lazy route – perhaps inevitably led in that direction by their close association with the kill or be killed model of the lower animals. Even most of those religions that purport to preach positive values won't risk giving up the big club of eternal damnation for misbehavior.

Still, it amazed David how the parent-figures of the past could have ignored the behavior shaping and maintaining power of the wonderful feelings that follow accomplishing something positive for somebody else, and the sustaining power of positive, intermittent, rewards – verbal, physical, sensual. Paul was wrong. Humans do work to avoid punishing and hurtful events out of common sense, but it is only when they seek after mutually positive ends for themselves *and* others that they tap into the most effective, value forming, value sustaining, social building processes man has at his disposal.

When a child believes that being 'good' is how *he wants* to be, then he has a *value*, which he transports with him everywhere. He has an inner mirror, goal, rule to use in deciding which behaviors he 'should' (wants to) exhibit. He tells himself to do the 'right' thing rather than merely acting to avoid punishment – either real pain or that promised within the fantasy of some religion.

David recalled a list of traits from a parenting book, which, if instilled in children, *Trouble Proofed\** them – that is, gave them the best chance at developing a positive personality, the behaviors from which produced mental health, positive social interactions, and a healthy, safe, growing, society.

"Kit. Engage that photographic memory of yours and recall that list of Trouble Proofing Values that intrigued you so a few years back. I want to contrast them with those that follow from Paul's philosophy."

"Okay. Sure. This will be great fun."

His comment gave him pause to momentarily consider something else.

"You do realize that you and I define 'fun' and being 'entertained' in ways that are substantially different from most other folks."

"Unfortunately!"

"Unfortunately for whom? We who miss the occasional party or they who miss the wonders and personal growth derived from in-depth thinking and contemplating ourselves and our universe?"

"Fifty/fifty I imagine."

Kit smiled and closed his eyes, tilting his head back. "Let's see, it began on page seventy four. Do you just want the traits or the explanations as well?"

"Just the traits. I think they are listed in pairs – contrasting the 'likely to be in trouble kid' trait with the 'trouble proofed kid' trait."

"That's the way they are. Here goes. I'll name them in that order, *destructive* followed by *constructive*.

*Physical aggression vs information-seeking, and logical, problem solving.*

*Competitive need vs using cooperative efforts.*

*Seeks immediate gratification vs ability to save and delay gratification.*

*Lack of respect for other people's property vs respect for all people's property.*

*Disregard for life vs reverence and respect for life.*

*Deceit vs Honesty.*

*Taking whatever one wants vs earning what one deserves or bargaining fairly for what one wants.*

*Law slipping vs law abiding behavior.*

*Leadership through imposed power vs leadership through shared power.*

*Believing that one knows what is right or wrong absolutely without any doubt whatsoever vs positive value-based open mindedness (a desire to keep learning).*

*Selfishness vs altruism.*

*Uninformed decision-making that relies on mere opinion, folklore, or self-defensive maneuvering vs accurately informed decision making based on a search for reliable knowledge.*

*Seeking happiness through the stuff of materialism vs seeking happiness through integrity, which the author defines as having a set of positive, socially helpful values, and living up to them each and every day.*

*Monday morning quarterbacking vs planning ahead with care and diligence.*

*Continually having to try to prove one's worth vs knowing without any doubt that one is a worthy being.*

*Being inconsiderate vs being kind hearted.*

*Using imprecise language vs using precise language.*

“There are a few more you want them?”

“No. That should be sufficient. It reconfirms my conviction that Paul’s philosophy is at almost every turn exactly backwards from what a social philosophy must be if we are to survive and improve as a vital species.

Ari had been listening and felt compelled to make a comment.

“I can sort of see how Paul grew into those beliefs though. His life as a kid showed him the world was full of hurt and he had to protect himself and take care of himself because nobody else would. As a kid it would be impossible to feel compassion for others who always picked on you and it would be hard to believe in love if you never felt it from those around you.”

“Once again you cut to the quick, Ari,” David said. “I had the privilege of living with a very wise, very old American Indian – Native American, now, I guess – one summer when I was just a little younger than Kit is. He was the Keeper of the Wisdom for the tribe. He had this to say about learning to be who we become as adults. *During the first three years of life we listen to what others say about us – what kind of person we are – and then we spend the rest of our life trying to live up to it.*”

Ari needed to make sure he understood.

“He meant that if we heard people saying we were good and nice and loveable then we’d believe *that* and try to be that kind of a person, but if we heard people saying we were bad and bothersome and unwanted we would believe *that* and continue to behave in ways that proved those things were true about us.”

“I believe you have it.”

“I’m lucky then because the grownups in my life have always told me and showed me what a precious person I am and how much they love me. Well, not Grampa Ari, but then he just can’t bring himself to express those kinds of feelings. My Father said that his family was stern and hurtful and distant. Being smart, doing well, and getting lots of stuff was most important. I always figured Grampa loves me as much as he is capable of doing. Your Indian friend was a pretty wise old bird.”

“In more ways than one. His name was *Gray Eagle*.”

It produced a few chuckles.

“His books confirm our impression of Paul, I guess,” Kit said, “but I don’t know how it changes anything or gives us a leg up. It may be fodder for a few nightmares down the way, I suppose.”

“Speaking of . . . some of us better get some sleep,” Alex suggested. “Volunteers?”

The hands of David and Kit went up simultaneously as if in response to their kindergarten teacher. They headed for the bunks and were soon asleep only to be awakened several hours later by Connie.

“We have company closing on us fast from the north east. We think it’s over the side time again. Ari has the breathing tubes ready. We’ll cut the engine and take a

position fifty or seventy five meters south. Hurry!

They hurriedly donned the camouflage jump suits and the green ski masks, picked up their breathing tubes, and moved overboard swimming together as a school back south.

They had time to put eighty yards between them and the *Ari* before the boat arrived. It was the previously encountered blue speedboat with a gun mounted on the front. The Pod Men had found them. Paul was indeed a worthy, brilliant, adversary. The five in the ocean treaded water, heads bobbing, watching the activity, alert for any signal it was time to submerge completely.

The Pod Men's boat circled the old, net-draped, steamer several times close in, then took off to the west at a surprisingly slow speed. The surprise would not last. At a hundred meters it turned and headed back toward the old tub. It picked up speed clearly on a collision course.

"It must be fitted with a ramming bar just below the surface," Alex said. "They certainly don't know how to use it, though. The lot of them will sustain whiplash upon impact. It may be the end of the *Ari VII*, however."

Most things turned out as he had predicted. Three of the mercenaries were thrown from their boat. Moans and groans arose from the others. They backed off, drug their men out of the water, and headed back the way they had come.

"Their boat is riding nose low in the water," Connie pointed out.

"They damaged it and it's taking on water," Alex added in way of explaining Connie's observation. "Let's get back to our boat and see what's going on."

Alex, Connie and Kit swam on ahead. David remained to swim at a pace *Ari* could manage. By the time they arrived the bad news had been discovered.

"She'll sink within the hour," Alex said. "Best we can do is to transfer some of the supplies and fresh water into a couple of dinghies and paddle our way to Sikinos Island. It has a hole the size of a melon just under the water line in front to starboard. We have nothing substantial enough to patch it with."

"How big a melon?" Ari asked.

"Twenty millimeters, circular like the ramming bar. A fairly clean cut hole. That's about eight inches for you Americans," he added as an unnecessary afterthought.

"I have an idea," Ari said. "Let me get to my back pack. I brought along the deflated soccer ball. Abe brought it to the cave one day when Paul was away and we'd kick it around sometimes. It was the expensive kind with a rubber bladder."

Immediately Kit understood. He helped Ari climb aboard.

"You kids going to let us old guys know what you have in mind?"

The 'kids' ignored David's question. Ari pulled out the ball and immediately began unlacing it. Kit hoisted himself into the boat as well and engaged the sump pump. He removed his jump suit. The water was still a foot below the furnace door at the rear. He then located the can of tar they had used when repairing the roof several days before.

"Here's the plan," he announced at last. "You heavier guys put your weight as far to the rear as possible. What we need to do is raise the front of the boat about a foot

higher than it normally rides. Take everything from up front to the rear. Once the hole is out of the water, I'll coat its inside edges all around with tar. Then we'll blow up the bladder while it's placed inside the opening. Eventually it just might close the hole enough to keep this thing afloat."

The men understood. Things were moved and they positioned themselves on the very rear edge of the boat behind the coal bin. They transferred as much coal from the dinghies into the bin as it would hold. Ari had freed the bladder and had blown it up to about seven inches holding the stem tube closed between his first finger and thumb. The bottom two inches of the hole remained two inches below the waterline. Kit moved to the rear to see if his weight would make the difference. It didn't and anyway he really needed to be at the hole. Ari would not be capable of pulling it off alone.

Water continued to enter.

"Hold this pillow over the hole," Kit said handing a small seat cushion to Ari. It will stop much of the incoming water.

"Kit took the largest screw driver from the tool kit, wrapped the end of a coil of rope around his waist, and jumped back into the water. He began unscrewing the iron plate that protected the point of the hull in front. There were twelve, huge, screws, none of them easy to start. Once loosened, however, the salt water seemed to act as a natural lubricant and he had soon removed the top ten. Then he tied the rope to the plate.

"You big guys hold onto the other end of the rope. Two more screws and it will be free. Then we'll pull it back around the boat through the water and lift it on board. It must weigh two hundred pounds. That will be like adding four hundred pounds to the rear and should help lift the front."

Ten minutes later the plate lay on top of the coal pile.

"How's the cushion holding?" he asked.

"Slowed it a lot but not all," Ari reported. He had taken a seat on the deck, pushing his back against the pillow to force it into place

"How's the water line relative to the furnace door?"

"Have maybe three inches," Alex said. "Moving the front up also moved more water to the rear inside."

"Well, we have the hole up above the water line. Now, Just one more adjustment. I'll have to come back on board."

He unrolled the coil of plastic tubing from which they had constructed the breathing tubes and took one end to the steam pressure tank.

"I'm attaching the tubing to the emergency vent valve up here under the clamp. I'm going back up front. When I call for it, open the valve ever so slightly."

He returned to the hole and using the shaft of the screwdriver, he smoothed the sharp splinters from around the inside of the hole. Then he applied tar deep into the raw edge of the wooden siding. Leaving a liberal amount on the surface of the edge he placed the bladder into the hole and blew it up as much as he could with his lungs. It set in place covering the entire hole. It needed to be inflated to the point it would lap around encompassing the wood both outside and inside.

“I need something to tie off the bladder’s stem tube once it is fully inflated.”

“Dental floss,” Ari suggested and went to the first aid kit to procure it.

Kit removed his T-shirt and wound it around the end of the plastic tubing as a shield against the heat of the steam that would soon be passing through it. He stretched the bladder stem tube over the outside of the tubing.

“You go back and add your weight to the rear,” Kit said to Ari, really just wanting to keep him out of harm’s way if the gadget blew up.

“Okay. On my count give me some steam – just a tiny, tiny amount. We need force but not much volume. Be prepared to turn it off immediately. This whole process – no pun intended – should take no more than one or two seconds.”

Ari did his best to be heavy in the rear. Connie manned the valve, the others agreeing that his piloting skills probably gave him some edge over the others in terms of fine tuning levers and such.

“On three,” Kit called back. “One, two, three . . . And OFF!”

He tied the bladder tube then examined the bladder itself.

“Here on the inside we couldn’t have done better. I’m going back into the water to check the outside.”

While he was gone, Connie had to ask David. “Does the boy often go off on all consuming tangents like this?”

“Since he was three. I’ve learned two things about them. First, there truly is no way to stop him once he’s into it. And, second, they virtually always work plan prefect.”

“Yahoo!!”

The message from the boy in the water was clear. He dubbed it a success and climbed back aboard.

He sat in the bottom of the boat, arms supporting him to his rear as he faced the others, turning specifically to Ari.

“That was a stupendous idea of yours, Ari. You saved your namesake.”

“Well, to be quite honest I hadn’t taken the idea much beyond stuffing the bladder into the hole.”

“So, I improvised a bit on your theme. And you other guys. Thanks for giving me my head without any explanation up front. There just wasn’t time.”

David spoke.

“Hey. I for one wrote the first six pages of my next essay for Modern Philosophy – while you were playing around up there in the puddle.”

“Playing? In a puddle? If I didn’t love you so very much I’d spring at you from the deck where I am sprawled out recuperating from my taxing, nerve racking, ordeal, and plunge with you into the water where we would duel to the end. Heck, I’m not all *that* tired.”

In a move only a strong, athletic, nineteen year old could launch, Kit was up, suddenly moving horizontally through the air toward his uncle. Five seconds later they were in the water behind the boat tussling as they had done so many times before.

Ari showed a very puzzled face to Alex.

“It’s how big boys sometimes show their love and affection for each other,” the man explained, smiling.

“Then let me at ‘em. I love those two *big boys!*”

The lad was over the side before any of the big arms on deck could corral him. Alex looked at Connie.

“What the hell,” Connie said with a shrug, and the two of them rolled off the back joining the melee at sea.

Ten minutes later the five drowned rats drug themselves back aboard. They were too exhausted to talk, though chuckles and smiles seemed to occur without effort.

“So, David said at last, “Who has the strength to get this tub under way?”

Ari looked around still beaming from the romp in then water.

“It looks to me like the *kids* will need to come to the rescue once again.”

He stood and stretched a hand out toward Kit.

Kit responded by *word* rather than by *hand*.

“I think *this* kid just temporarily crossed over to old guy. See what *you* can do.”

“See what I can do? I can jockey this thing clear to Athens if I need too. Haven’t you been paying attention?”

His mock indignation required one more round of laughter before they each struggled to insert themselves back into the adventure.

No one felt like sleeping. Kit continued to check on the bladder in case it sprung a slow leak and needed an occasional, additional, burst of steam. Ari took control of the wheel. Alex stoked the furnace and suggested cutting their speed back to fifteen knots in deference to the patch. Connie sat lookout up front. David and Kit went over the details of the final legs of the mission.

“On *Sikinos* we’ll need to have a real patch put in place,” David said. “Our timeline has been altered significantly between the Pod Men, the patching, and the cut in speed.”

He turned to Connie, in so doing asking for an ETA.

“About eleven a.m. is my guess for arrival now.”

He had been doing some figuring of his own.

“How long to make this thing seaworthy again,” he asked, directing it toward Alex.”

“I can call my cousin and get things set up before we arrive. Maybe four hours. Maybe a bit less.”

“Do that, then, and book us a couple of rooms. I’m thinking about doing the speedboat trick one more time. What do you all think about this? Alex and Ari again travel together and at midnight sit dead in the water at the exact spot we just encountered the Pod Men. My hope is to make it seem we are still there – stranded or dead. Paul can decide which, if any, of those he will believe. Then it would be back to *Sikinos* in a wide circle, trying to avoid any contact with Paul’s guys should they decide to take another look. By then the boat will be repaired and we can set out for *Lesnos Island* off the Turkey coast north east of Athens. From there I’ve decided we split up and take sight

seeing boats back to Greece.”

“Should we consider using a different boat?” Kit asked. “By now the Pod Men know this one.”

“It’s a point well taken. What do the rest of you think?”

“How about just adding a paint job along with the repairs?” Alex suggested. “This one meets our needs very well. Its appearance could be changed significantly by removing the roof and extending the smoke stack.”

“Red. I vote for painting it red,” Ari said, assuming if Alex had made the suggestion it was a done deal.

With a round of nods the plan was agreed. Alex made the calls. The rooms were secured, a repair shop hired, and a speedboat rented for the next two days. His cousin not only had an Albanian flag for them to fly but also matching ship’s papers in case they were stopped and questioned. Things were looking good.

They put into port at 10:45 a.m. with Alex at the wheel. It was his cousin’s private dock on the extreme southern tip of the island. Fifteen minutes later they were entering their suite in a small, out of the way, hotel. Suite, in this case, meant two bedrooms, two baths, a sizeable sitting room, small kitchenette and dining area. The recommended restaurant was a twenty minute walk north east along the beach.

They showered, trashed the clothes they had been wearing, dressed in the last change they had, and made for the food.

It was after one when they reentered the suite. They headed for the beds, exhausted. Kit and Ari shared a bed in David’s room. Connie and Alex took the other bedroom. Kit’s alarm sounded according to plan at seven and Ari took it upon himself to awaken the others.

Alex called his cousin. The work was on schedule. The speedboat was fueled and ready.

“I guess if you kids will agree to put on some clothes, we should get one last meal under our belts before things begin happening around here,” David said.

Ari grinned. “I suppose it would be hard to get a meal under your belt if you weren’t wearing a belt – oh, that’s right I’m covered in belts.”

It was humorous. It was heartbreaking. It was horrendous.

Soon presentable, they all left for the restaurant.

Ari and Alex led the way north along the path. At one point Ari reached out and took the big man’s hand. Kit pointed. It launched three sets of moist eyes to the rear.

They had come that far safely but each one knew in his heart that the true test still lay ahead.

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\* Trouble-Proofing Kids, Family of Man Press,  
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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The rental speedboat was not as fast as the first one they had used. Alex and Ari set out at 10:30 even though the trip should take no more than an hour. At Alex's suggestion they loaded part of the netting – sections with many cork floats attached – and numerous other items they could live without but which would float; the seat cushion Ari had used against the water, a large plastic storage box with water tight lid, one of the mattresses, and the outside casing of the soccer ball, made more or less water tight when re-laced. They would scatter them about the scene of the ramming in case the Pod Men did return to search for them. Ari brought a few of the discarded clothes as well.

At midnight, right on schedule, the device vibrated. Paul would locate them there in the middle of *The Sea of Crete* showing no movement from where they had been when rammed. The material had been scattered and Alex pushed the boat to its maximum as he steered a large arc to the east, which eventually brought them back to the dock at Sikinos.

The *Ari VII* looked proud as it sat there bobbing in the gentle sea, bearing a new coat of barn red paint from the waterline up. Its profile was significantly different with the roof removed and the freshly painted black stack widened and raised three feet. The front metal plate had also been painted black and was reattached. It was a good match to the red and black Albanian flag flying from a short staff at the rear. Alex's cousin had replaced the old propeller with a larger one that would increase its speed, if not its power. Of course all of that might shake the old tub into a billion splinters but Alex would do his best not let that happen.

It was a trip of only one hundred miles so no extra coal would be required. They said goodbye to the dinghies and by 1:30 they were on their way again.

Ari stretched and yawned.

"This lugging my butt from place to place wears me out. I'm going to hit my bunk."

The foam mattress had been replaced with an inflatable one. The boy acknowledged it but didn't linger long in the realm of the conscious.

"My thought is to stick very close to populated areas and trail close to other boats," David said. "That should make the Pod Men think twice about attacking us. By now I imagine they are looking forward to payday and may be reluctant to risk their own necks regardless of Paul's instructions."

"I agree with you," Alex said. "Mercenaries' loyalty only goes so far and coming home dead is not anywhere on their agenda."

"You said we would split up on the trip back from Lesnos to Athens," Connie said. "What are the specifics?"

"Let me try this out on you. We'll fix the plan as we need to. There are tourist lines from Greece that carry visitors to and between every island in the Aegean. Kit has located three smaller carriers that have home base in three different ports – *Anna* and *Andronion* on the outer, eastern, coast, and *Nea Mahri* just a few miles north east of

Athens in the inner passage. I suggest that Kit and I sail directly for Nea Mahri so we can track down Paul and keep him in sight. Connie, I suggest you dock at Anna and take public transportation south to Chalkis where you will eventually meet up with Alex and Ari who will make land at Andronion. They will rent a car at the port so after you meet you will have transportation on to Athens. I will leave it up to you three to find an easily accessible contact point in the area of Chalkis.

“You will work your way into the city and lay low as near to Ari’s house as you feel safe and await a call from us. Once we have done some preliminary scouting and have Paul in sight you will make your move. Work out the plan with Ari. I’d suggest having several alternative routes in mind. You know the big picture and he knows the local layout. You two have veto over anything he suggests, remember.”

“Sounds like a solid plan,” Connie said as Alex nodded his approval as well. “Just one major flaw.”

“What’s that?”

“How are we going to get the boys to leave the nude beach on Lesvos?”

“Well, we could have just *not* told them about it but I suppose that’s out of the question now.”

They all looked at Kit. Connie offered a wink. Kit spoke.

“I promise that I, for one, will be ready – make that willing – to leave by July 4<sup>th</sup>, latest!”

“We will arrive at Lesvos somewhere around six a.m. this morning. Sight see – or see sights – until noon if you want. I’m not so sure it’s a good idea to take an eleven year old to a nude beach, however.”

“He goes to them with his mother all the time. The spa they go to in the winter is clothes optional. It’s not like it will be a new experience for him. This is not Indiana where guys still get hot in the pants when they see a girls belly button. This is the enlightened real world.”

“Okay. You realize he’ll have to wear at least a T-shirt and shorts to cover up the strap.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Kit said. “I’ve grown so used to seeing him in it I forget it’s there.”

“We can leave his going with you or not up to him I guess. I don’t want you two out alone – for safety sake – so I suppose I’ll need to shed my duds as well.”

“We’ll need to catch some sleep this afternoon and then at nine o’clock catch the Niners – it’s what the locals call the last boats back to the mainland at night. It will put Ari almost back to Greece at Paul’s midnight position taking.”

“Will he panic, do you think?” Kit asked.

“Not initially, at least. I’m more and more convinced that it is the personal confrontation between him and me that he’s really after. He wants to be looking me right in the eyes when he blows Ari to bits.”

“Ouch!” Kit said.

The others winced.

“But, we aren’t going to let that happen, of course. From the moment we land on Lesvos anybody who isn’t with me checks in with me by phone every half hour. Once we separate at nine, we’ll make that every fifteen minutes. Report anything suspicious whenever it happens.”

They all nodded.

“It’s a sound plan, David,” Alex said.

“Thank you. Within forty eight hours this should all be behind us.”

As if choreographed, the four looked up at the sleeping boy.

The docking was uneventful. Ari arranged for a week’s mooring of the boat – paid in advance. It would be less suspicious than just abandoning it in the slip. They found the hotel Alex had arranged and had breakfast in its dining room. Ari opted to go sightseeing with Alex and Connie. David and Kit visited the beach.

At noon they met back at the hotel and had lunch. No one had anything suspicious to report. Ari did voice his objection about all the fat ladies who insisted on calling him adorable and pinching his cheeks. The fully unexpected perk – from his newly acquired point of view – seemed to be that when they bent down and reached out, he got a good long look at a significant portion of their breasts. He found himself suddenly interested – a sure sign he was nearing the onset of adolescence.

Unlike most young males he all quite openly voiced his suspicion about that to his four adult companions. They agreed he was rapidly approaching the point of no return. It was clearly a serious topic to the lad and somehow the others maintained straight faces.

“I suppose you were all equally confused when you were at my point in all of this.”

His pause demanded responses.

Somewhat belatedly they all nodded.

“It is just so difficult to understand why I am suddenly attracted to huge masses of jiggling flesh with ugly brown spots on them.”

“And that question, too, shall pass,” Kit said smiling at the others.

After lunch they returned to their rooms for a few hours of rest.

As they undressed, Ari asked Kit:

“I wonder, when this is all over, if I’ll miss this strap. I’ve grown used to it, you know.”

“I have the idea it will be a time for celebration when the strap comes off.”

“Can I keep it?”

“I hadn’t thought about it. Probably unless it becomes evidence in a case against Paul.”

“I think I want to keep it. I imagine later on I’ll look back on these past few weeks as a rather significant period in my life.”

“I imagine you will, Ari. I imagine you will.”

They were soon asleep. They slept until after six when they were awakened by a rap on the door. Kit quickly arranged a towel around his waist, entered and crossed the sitting room, and looked through the peep hole. It was a bellboy. David motioned Ari into

the bathroom and he also stood out of sight.

"Package for room 609," the young man said.

Kit took the package and handed him five euros, which he had quickly snatched from the pocket of his pants that lay draped over the back of a chair. He closed the door and locked it.

"You heard?" he asked the others as they appeared in the sitting room.

David nodded.

Kit placed the package – ten inches square and wrapped in brown paper – on the small table. The only writing on it was the room number.

Alex entered from the door to his room.

"What's going on?"

"We got this package," Ari announced moving to stand close to him.

"Take a look at it, Alex," David said. "What do you think?"

Alex lifted it carefully, slowly turning it one way and then another to get an idea of its weight and the stability of its contents.

"Light. Well packaged."

He ran his fingertips over the entire surface.

"Apparently no wires between the paper and the box. I'd say let's remove the paper."

With a well practiced flick of his wrist, a knife, sporting a thin, six inch blade appeared in his hand.

"That was like magic," Ari said amazed and smiling up into his face.

"Been better than magic on more than one occasion I'm afraid."

Ari didn't understand but let it go as Alex inserted the blade and cut away the square of paper from the top of the box.

The printing on the box was in Greek.

"Athens Electrical Supply Company," Ari said translating.

"Could be a discarded box, re-used by somebody," Kit suggested.

Alex examined the brown paper tape that held the lid to the sides and then slit it to free the top, cardboard, flaps.

"This kind of corrugated box is made in the Orient – China or Hong Kong, most likely," Alex went on to explain.

With the blade of his knife he lifted one flap, then the other, and finally the two cross-folded underneath.

"A box of shredded paper?" Ari said, not understanding.

"Probably cradling something delicate or breakable," Kit said.

Repeatedly, Alex carefully slid his knife blade down into the packing.

"Clink!"

He hit something. He began removing the paper several strands at a time. Presently the contents was revealed.

"Looks to be a fluted glass light globe similar to the ones on the ceiling fans in these rooms. Ari, take a look in my room and see if one is missing."

Ari was immediately back with Connie and his report.

"None missing in there."

Again there was a rap at the door. David answered. Ari moved behind Alex until he could see who was there. It was the bellboy again.

"Many pardons, Sir, but the package I just delivered was intended for room 906 not 609. I looked at it upside down."

"It's been opened but we're happy for you take it. It's all there."

"That's a really good ending to a scary situation that we collectively concocted as a nefarious event," Kit said.

"What's nefarious?" Ari asked.

"Bad, threatening, dangerous," Kit explained.

"Again proving that reality is merely what one perceives it to be," David said.

"You're sounding like a philosophy professor, again," Ari said, smiling, repeating the phrase he had often heard Kit use. "Let me see if I understand, Prof."

The others chuckled. It had been intended as humorous.

"Because of this scary adventure with the bad guys trying to do us in, we assumed the box was part of their plan to get us. If it had been my birthday instead, I'd have assumed it was a gift and just tore into it. If we had complained to the front desk about a missing glass light globe then that version of reality might have actually been correct."

"Once again, you have distilled it down to its essence, young man."

"It's like that old Native American said, I guess."

Lost, the others offered puzzled looks at each other and then back at Ari.

"I'm not sure why I have to keep explaining things to a bunch of guys as smart as you are. What a little kid hears – or thinks he hears – about himself becomes his *reality* and he lives in that version of reality all the rest of his life."

"Ah! Interesting. Profound, even," David said. "Thank you for the instructive lesson, Son."

"Anytime. I call it *Wise Kid Stuff, 101*."

They chuckled. Alex picked the boy up by the armpits and administered a brief peck to his temple. It was fully unexpected by everyone, apparently including Alex and Ari. Life screeched to a halt for a split second – infinitesimal, though noticeable – then things returned to normal. Well, not exactly.

The event left an obvious feeling of joy and determination in its wake. This boy with the yet to be specified Big Wonders in his future *had* to survive the ordeal.

"We all need new clothes," David said. "Things that will make us look very tourist like. There is a shop off the lobby downstairs. Let's eat, then hit that shop. I'll also get us a shoebox full of cash. Then, back here we can split it among us, and freshen up one last time before we hit the road for Greece."

"That would be water," Uncle David. "Hit the water for Greece."

"I used the term figuratively, Grasshopper – all inclusively – generically, for pathway via land, sea, air, or teleporter."

Kit bowed, hands prayerfully clasped.

"Ah, so," Great Teacher. I stand humbly corrected and acknowledge the honor that accrues to merely be standing in your esteemed presence."

The others enjoyed the byplay.

"I'd like to be a Grasshopper," Ari said enthusiastically, stepping forward.

"Then, I now dub you *Grasshopper the Second* and bestow upon you all the privileges and responsibilities that accompany that title."

Kit feigned a whisper toward Ari.

"What he means is that you now get to do all the stuff he doesn't want to do."

Ari whispered back – loudly.

"How's that any different from what I've been doing?" It had been offered in all seriousness.

The other four roared themselves into wet cheeks. Ari felt loved – after all, that was the indestructible picture of reality he carried with him.

\* \* \* \* \*

They were in the lobby.

David whispered to Connie.

"It seems to me we are being followed."

"The man in the blue blazer?"

"Yes. He's been with us through dinner, the clothes shop and now as we stand here arranging for a large amount of cash."

"Why don't we just go investigate," Connie said looking at Alex.

He gestured with a subtle move of his head and eyes. The two of them casually peeled away from the group and soon confronted the man. A few minutes later all three returned.

"Like you meet the under secretary at the US Embassy in Greece," Connie announced.

The others shook his hand as he began to explain.

"As requested by the Ambassador I am delivering these documents to you, Professor Lawrence."

"Oh. Yes. Thank you."

"I needed to be sure you were my legitimate contact before approaching you. Sorry to have caused concern. I'm not much good at clandestine undertakings. I'm an accountant by training. I was told it was top secret so felt no small amount of uneasiness, I'm afraid."

"And it is. Thank you. I suppose the sooner you leave us the better. Thank you so much. Thank the Ambassador for me."

He nodded, turned, and left.

As a unit the others turned toward David.

"What in the universe was that all about?" Kit asked.

"All of us have passports and visas except Ari. He was kidnapped, remember? He must also have them in order to re-enter Greece. I arranged to have them delivered. Ambassador McCutchen and I toured Greece and Turkey one summer during

undergraduate school, studying ethnic stuff."

"Ethnic stuff?" Kit said.

"Do you *really* want to know?"

"No. Actually, I guess I don't. Let's move on."

"Thank you for your permission."

\* \* \* \* \*

Decked out in their new clothes and rehearsed one final time about the plans, they hugged and went their separate ways along the nearly deserted, foggy, street in front of the hotel.

"Love you guys," Ari called, waving and walking backwards beside Alex as they disappeared into the darkness of the wharf.

It was 8:45 when David and Kit purchased their ticket for the Niner headed for Nea Mahri. They booked a sleeper cabin – six feet wide and seven feet long on the side with the bunks. There was a chair under the window (square and screened, it made no pretense of being a *portal*.)

They would cover close to three hundred miles, so it would be no short trip. With all the stops along the way they would not reach their destination until noon the following day.

Kit, for one, didn't mind if it took a long time. The ship's brochure promised scantily clad dancing girls and waitresses. He figured to eat (and drool) continually.

Up on the top deck David found a comfortable, rear facing, canvas lounge chair. He put his phone on vibrate so as to minimize any disturbance to the other passengers. Receiving twelve calls an hour allowed little rest.

"All's well with A and A," Alex said, checking in. "We have two bunks in a closet, here. Ari thinks it's wonderful. Our ETA Greece will be well before you – seven a.m. same day. I figure we will hook up with Connie about two that afternoon."

"Keep alert," David said knowing it was unnecessary but still feeling obligated to state it. "It's a new game once we reach the mainland."

"Roger and out."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Doing fine here," Connie said. "Will arrive at seven in the morning. Depending on the bus schedule I should be in Chalkis by noon. Alex and I have arranged a spot to meet in the early afternoon. Nothing suspicious so far."

"Thanks for the update," David said. "That's just the way we want it. Later."

\* \* \* \* \*

"She's about five feet two, slender in all the right places and bulging most everywhere else," Kit began, whispering, as he checked in from the lounge with the dancing ladies – well, clearly *women*, at least. "This is the finest definition of 'scantily clad' I have yet witnessed – except for the one in the red high heels back east last September."

"Let's do the check list," David said.

"What check list?"

"Eyeballs in sockets?"

Kit smiled realizing he was being put on.

"Mostly."

"Tongue in mouth?"

"Not really."

"Pulse rate normal?"

"Are you kidding? Of course not! You want me to be a normal 19 year old male, right?"

"I won't pursue the check list any further south."

"That is both kind and understanding. It's an interesting contrast between the generally non-sensual turn we took around the nude beach this morning and the fantastically sensual experience it is here among the scantily clads."

"Don't forget to keep an eye out for suspicious characters."

"I assure you that I am keeping *abreast* of it. By the way, it has just come to me that a small, portable, fabric covered house of prostitution for naval navigators would be called a . . . sextent."

He hung up chuckling not allowing David time for a comeback.

David's plan had been for him and Kit to spell each other between taking calls and sleeping. If Kit had not volunteered to return by two a.m. David would conscript his services. Honestly, he was glad the boy was relaxing and having fun. It had been a long hard journey without much opportunity to really be laid back.

By midnight, David was feeling good about the immediate leg of the journey. He felt fairly confident they had not been located by the Pod Men and began to relax as well. He returned to the cabin and laid down. Kit entered at one.

"Figured it was my turn to man the phone," he said. "I'll take it up on deck so you can get some sleep."

"It is as if you can read my mind."

"Not really that ethereal. The girls are on break until two thirty. It appears they make a little extra money during that time. I had two offers for a good time."

"How did you handle it?"

"I told them I doubted they could afford me. I got some strange looks."

David chuckled and traded phones.

"I'll lock the door from in here so I won't need to be checking in with you."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did you know my Father?" Ari asked as he and Alex watched the moon dance off the waves. They were standing behind the railing on the top deck.

"No. I never had the privilege of meeting him."

"You'd have liked him. The two of you are a lot alike."

That was news to Alex but he was intrigued enough to pursue it.

"What would some of those ways be?"

"Well, you both stay in great physical shape – well, not after he got sick, of course. You both are very intelligent and educated. You both treat me like I am a real

person with ideas and questions that are worthy of your time. You both love me and are the sort of person I can love really easily. Neither one of you preaches at me even when I know you think I've done or said something dumb. You ask questions or provide information that helps me fix things by thinking it all through myself. That's the kind of father I want to be."

"An interesting evaluation, Ari. I had no idea you thought of us in such similar ways. May I ask what you think of Kit and David?"

"Two of the finest people I've ever come across. My father really loved David. They had been very close during college and had some sort of contact last summer just before he died. It seems clear to me that Kit and David love people and try to make life better for folks just because they want to. They aren't doing it to worm their way into heaven or avoid hell or anything like that. They just believe in taking good care of all people. No matter how I end up believing about the religion thing, I always want to be like them in that way – just be good because being good is the only way of life that makes sense if you believe the human species is precious and worthy of improving and maintaining."

"You are an astute observer of people, plus you are sounding like a professor, again."

Ari smiled up at his new friend.

"The words were probably my Fathers. He spoke to me often about David's beliefs. He said they represented the only possible way mankind could survive and take adequate care of this planet. I think that may become my Big Wonder."

"What's that?"

"Something about saving this planet from man's thoughtless attempts at killing it."

"Really!"

"Yup. Seems to me that would be a pretty nice gift to pass on my kids and grandkids. It might be part of a plan you know."

"A plan?"

"Yeah. I don't know the source of the plan but I've been thinking a lot since my fathers died – about the money I'm going to come into some day. It's like the plan was for my Grandpapa to make lots of money; for my father to have me and train me to be one of the good guys, as he used to put it; so I could use all that money to save the planet."

"Regardless of its source, I can think of no better plan in the entire history of mankind."

"Really?"

Ari looked back out to sea and nodded deliberately.

"I have so much to learn, you know – about how to go about it. I guess it's lucky I'm so smart, huh?"

"That will certainly help. That's not your most important quality, however."

"No? What is then?"

"The fact that you want to make a difference in people's lives – for those of us

here now and for those you will never even know because they haven't yet been born."

"The idea excites my risibles, I'll tell you that," Ari said maintaining his gaze into the distant night.

"Risibles?"

"It's Mama's term. I assume it is some fictitious organ inside me that produces wonderfully fantastically great feelings when I think about doing good things for others."

"I believe I know about that. Couldn't locate it on a diagram of the human body but I've certainly had the feelings it produces."

Ari continued fixed on the view into the darkness.

"I love you, you know," he said as if testing the waters.

"I know. We share the feeling. There is no more special feeling between folks, you know."

Ari nodded and reached out, putting a hand on the big man's hands – folded there atop the railing. He put his other arm around his waist and leaned his head against his shoulder. They stood that way in silence for some time.

"We should probably get some sleep, you know, Alex said.

"Okay. Sure. We'll need to be all rested up for the victory lap."

"Victory lap?"

"That's how I'm thinking about that final dash we'll make across my back yard and into the house to safety."

Alex pulled the boy close and they began descending the stairs to their cabin. He checked in with Kit.

"A and A checking in."

"Things okay there then?" Kit said.

"Better than you can imagine. We're going to catch a few hours of sleep so we won't be checking in 'til dawn. Okay?"

"Sure. Just make sure to lock the door."

"Yes, mother?"

"And don't forget it!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do you remember anything in Paul's document that forbids us from bribing his men to leave us alone and spend the rest of the month in Tunisia?"

It was Connie's opening remark as he checked in with Kit.

"Probably not specifically approved but what you got on your mind?"

"I'm sitting here with a Russian gentleman in a neck brace who, after a little encouragement, confirmed that he was a Pod Man trailing me for the purpose of cutting my career short. He says he picked me up here on the boat. I understand we are really not supposed to be holding a knife to the throat of any of Paul's men but I find that situation has now developed."

"I'm on my way to David. Hold on. I'm sure we will find a way out of this."

.....

"Connie, David here. Kit says you have a bit of a situation. In your estimation is

he legitimately buyable?"

"Most certainly. He can hardly walk, he is in so much pain – from the boat ramming incident I have ascertained. He would definitely entertain some solution other than becoming shark snacks."

"You still have something over twenty five thousand Euros on you?"

"Closer to forty, actually. You just keep forcing it on me."

"Work out any deal you feel will work. I'd suggest you allow him to swim the last few miles to give you some breathing room."

"Great minds must think alike."

"Has he offered any useful information?"

"His exact words were, 'Paul is a mad man who's rapidly losing it'."

"*Good* to know. *Bad* for us. Anything else that we can do for you?"

"No. I think I can handle it from here on. For what it's worth he says he has not yet contacted Paul to tell him that he located me. Not sure I can believe him, however. I'm going to use particular caution when we dock. Oh, if he did call Paul I don't believe he knew that Alex and the boy were also on *this* boat with me."

"He's listening?"

"Oh, yes."

"Nice ploy in case you are unable to buy his loyalty."

"Be careful," Kit added.

David closed the phone and handed it back to Kit as he thought out loud.

"I have to wonder if it was just luck that man found Connie or if Paul has a larger force at work here than we had anticipated. Call Alex and warn him."

Kit made the call.

"Thanks for the heads up. When you speak with Connie next tell him I said to remind him of *Banska* on his thirtieth birthday."

Kit relayed the message immediately assuming it was important and that at some time in the future he would learn what it was all about.

"Thank the old man for me. Tell him I'll wear a commemorative band aid for him."

The explanation would have to wait until Alex called in the next time.

"I'm awake for the duration, I guess," David said. "Your turn in here."

"I'll give it a try. Things finally seem like they are coming to a head. Not sure if I can sleep with that in the back of my mind"

"Then think about the pretty girls you were ogling this evening, instead."

"Yeah. Like *that* will induce *sleep*."

"Keep you up?"

"In more than one way . . . and you just set me up for that didn't you?"

"What can I say? I'm good!"

"That you are."

"I must say I haven't heard many references about your escapades with Fido during this trip."

"Yeah. Like being stuck on a twenty foot tug boat with four other guys allows one any space or time to dawdle."

They chuckled at the by-play left over from an earlier era in their lives.

"I'll be on the upper deck if you need me," David said. "Count sheep or something – *ewe* really need to get some sleep."

"I declare, Unc, if you're not trying to *ram* directives down my throat you're trying to pull the *wool* over my eyes."

"Go to sleep. This is really getting *baad*."

David chuckled himself into the hall and closed the door waiting to hear that Kit had bolted it from inside. The chance – likelihood – that he was being followed or more appropriately, stalked, sent a shiver up his spine. This was really *not* the life he had envisioned back when he decided to go for a PhD in Philosophy.

Up on deck he switched positions every half hour or so, watching to see if anybody took note or moved with him. He returned below to check on their cabin door once each hour. Kit had evidently found a way to put both the growing terror and the naked girls out of his mind and find sleep.

David's thoughts turned to the next twenty four hours. If his memory served him right, it was the sixteenth day since arriving in Monaco and the ninth day since finding Ari. The timeline would not present the problem it had been the summer before.

He and Kit would arrive on land about noon. Once through customs they would need to eat and then rent a car. The highway trip to Athens would take perhaps an hour depending on traffic. By three they should have checked into their hotel. It stood next door to the one Paul was using. They would locate Paul and keep close track of him.

\* \* \* \* \*

If asked, Kit would not have ranked Greek drivers as either polite or competent. Still they were parked in the garage beneath the hotel – virtually in one piece – by 2:30 and in their room at 2:45.

Kit got a bearing on Paul. He was in his room. During the happy coincidence in which Kit discovered Paul was calling from his room phone, that exact location had been confirmed giving them an important baseline from which to operate.

"What's first?" Kit asked doing the sit and bounce thing comparing the beds to determine which was the best fit to his needs.

"One, determine exactly where the others plan to hole up once here in Athens. Two, go over and learn what we can about the hospital – try to determine where Paul will most likely make his last stand."

"We're really getting close aren't we?"

"Very."

"*Close* and *crazy* don't seem like they would be the combination we might want – unstable like old sticks of TNT."

"So it becomes very important not to startle him – not to provoke *any* action at all," David explained.

"But, of course, we really don't know how to do that – or to *not* do that as the case

may be."

"So what's new? If we encounter him, we *talk – listen – see* if we can ascertain his state of mind and what his end game seems to be."

"Will he really leave Ari alone once he knows the boy has made it safely inside his house?"

"I believe he will live up to his agreement, which really only said the explosive would be deactivated from the strap so it could be removed, which clearly means cut off."

"So, at that point Ari is home free, so to speak."

"Maybe. Hopefully. I simply don't know. He really wants to hurt *me* in all this. Killing me would be too easy – too painless to me. He knows I would be more hurt if Ari or you or one of the others would be harmed."

"Interesting. You, the one he's really after, suddenly become the only one who is safe."

"If – when – we confront him, you stay as much in the background as possible. Keep alert for near-by safe places to put yourself."

"Do you believe he'll go through with blowing himself up?"

"We have to assume that. He seems to believe that it will achieve several very important things. It will, in his mind, make me the bad guy – my allowing, if not causing his death, the death of the hospitalized children, and perhaps Ari. Reading his last novel it is clear that he has – in his mind –transformed himself into some kind of savior of mankind. His death would, therefore, represent martyrdom to him. He undoubtedly believes people should then flock to his philosophy."

"If that is generally true, and if *you* are in the same room with *him*, will he risk killing you, thereby preventing you from living out your life in guilt and remorse?"

"I believe he would prefer not to kill me but there is no way of knowing, now, what will play out in a few hours or days. Insane people find it reasonable to justify insane decisions."

"I suppose we should begin dealing with what we *can* control, then," Kit said. "The hospital, for one."

He looked at his watch.

"It's almost time for Alex and Ari to check in with us. We wait for it here?"

"We're both overdue for a shower. Let's freshen up here. We'll take the calls as they come in and let them know what we're up to. Then we can venture across the street."

"Sounds good. It will be the first actual private shower I've had since we picked up Squirt. Seems he's always right there chattering away about things."

"Hmm. Seems I remember a similar situation some eight or so years ago."

"Really. Yeah, I guess so. Had never thought about it in terms of privacy. Sorry."

"No sorry to it. We had some of our best early conversations with me in the shower and you sitting on your little three legged stool close enough to count the hairs on my legs."

“You go ahead, first. It will likely take me a while.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In a few minutes day would break to the east behind the Niner that carried Connie and the Pod Man. They were on the rear of the lower deck between the engine room and the railing. It was a secluded spot, dark and out of the line of sight of the passengers and crew.

Connie had outfitted the man in a dark green life vest to keep him afloat, had taped his mouth to keep him quiet and taped his hands together behind his back to keep him slow in the water.

"Over the side time, my man," he said. "Tunisia, remember. I see your face again and you will most certainly wish you were in Africa.

The man nodded as he eyed with some terror the sea behind and below.

With the man's back to the railing, Connie grabbed his lower legs and flipped him over backwards leaving him quietly hidden in the blackness of the water. Eventually the salt water would unseal the tape on his wrists and he could make easier progress toward shore.

Connie made a call.

"No room for a slip up here, my friend. If you're late you loose a hundred dollars a minute. I will be in the third chair to the left of the gangplank as you enter the boat. My passport will be in my left shirt pocket."

He closed his phone.

It was not a particularly pretty sunrise; dark, billowing, sun blocking, clouds moved slowly north beneath the higher, faster, southward heading streaks of dirty orange.

He walked around to the front of the lower deck where he saw a low, jagged line of land just coming into view. He stayed in the still deep shadows. Something the man had said led him to believe there might be others of his ilk aboard or waiting at the dock to spot one of the specified faces from the pocket-sized, laminated, sheet of photos they each carried. Paul had indeed done his homework well.

While the boat was tying up, Connie lay back in the third lounge chair to *his* right of the gate. He heard a siren, smiled, and closed his eyes.

The area was immediately filled with a hundred passport waving passengers eager to disembark. Through the crowd came two ambulance attendants with a gurney.

Connie was immediately lifted aboard. His passport was removed from his pocket and laid on top of the sheet that covered him head to toe. They quickly moved him down the gang plank, through customs, and into the back of the waiting ambulance. Again the siren and they were on the move.

Connie pulled away the sheet and sat up.

"Nice work, gentlemen. Here's half of the thousand up front. The rest when we reach our destination."

The attendant handed him back his papers. Connie began giving instructions to the driver.

"Maintain siren-fast speed for another two kilometers, then south on Athena

Boulevard. Cut the siren at that point and slow with the flow of traffic. Turn west on Constantine Avenue and I'll continue with your instructions then."

"I know it's none of my business," the attendant asked, "but do you travel this way often?"

"Only once before, actually. On my thirtieth birthday."

Nothing more was said.

Five kilometers later Connie instructed the driver to pull into a hospital parking lot. He paid them the remainder of their fee and exited the vehicle. He walked to the emergency entrance where buses stopped every twenty minutes. The man who had flown the fastest planes in the world was on his way south to Chalkis, more or less comfortably seated at the rear of a milk-run bus.

Through the back window he soon determined to his satisfaction that he was not being followed. He leaned back and got some rest.

\* \* \* \* \*

The alarm on Ari's phone rang at six and a few minutes later they were on deck, purchasing apples and grapes from a vender. They took seats in loungers to enjoy breakfast. The air was cool. Ari slipped into a light jacket from his backpack.

"You think there are any of the bad guys on this boat with us?" he asked.

"I can't be sure, of course, but I imagine if there are they would have made their move in the dark of last night rather than waiting for this morning."

"I saw an old movie once where the hit-man always stabbed his victims in the lower back while they were mingling among large crowds. That way he could always get away, usually unnoticed."

"You worried about getting stabbed?"

"Of course I am. This is serious territory we're getting into now. Stabbed, shot, blown to bits. You name it and I'm scared about it."

"I'm so sorry you have to be going through all this, you know."

"I know and me too by the way."

It produced a faint smile between them.

"How did you and the others meet?"

"We worked together last summer."

Alex hoped that would be enough to quell the boy's interest though would have lost had he bet on it.

"Doing what?"

"Oh, it was sort of an adventure similar to this one."

"My father was somehow involved, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"When you're older, David may choose to fill you in on that. It's really not my place. I was his assistant. You understand?"

"I understand that you don't want me to know what it was all about. . . . I'll go with that, I guess. I trust your judgment. But if David doesn't come to me about it by the

time I'm sixteen I'll go to him."

"Seems fair. Good grapes, huh?"

Ari understood that subject was closed.

"Yeah. I love white grapes. It's like savoring the sunshine."

"I believe there's a poet in your soul."

"That's what Mama says to me. I write poems sometime. Want to hear one?"

"Yes. I really would."

"Okay. Let's see. Here's the one my Father liked best. I wrote it for him after he told me how sick he was. He asked me to recite it to him the last time I saw him."

Alex swallowed hard and nodded.

"I gave it the title, *Thanks*."

"I did not ask for life, you see,  
I did not ask for sight to see.  
I did not ask for air to breath,  
And never for my Pa to leave.  
I'm pleased that life has come my way  
I love to see and breathe and play.  
The only way I know to pay  
You back for life, I'd say,  
Is that each day I'll always try  
To take the road that's high,  
So I will be the kind of guy  
You've hoped I'd be inside."

"I know its meter is a bit rough and some of the rhymes are kind of forced. I may rewrite it someday."

"Don't ever change a syllable, Ari. It is beautiful in its simplicity and its sincerity. Write another like it if you want, but never change that one."

"Really. You think? Thank you. That's probably best. That way my father got to hear the final version."

Alex turned his head, not that he was in any way ashamed for the boy to see a few tears on his face, but at that moment Ari needed to see strength and feel whatever security that lent him. There would be time for tears later. Alex was determined to make them tears of joy.

"You have your passport handy?" Alex asked.

"Right here."

He opened it.

"I wonder where they got this picture of me. I can never tell if a photograph of me is good or bad. This one shows the way my nose sort of turns up. The girls love that about my nose, so I guess it's okay. Really hard to know. Everybody says I'm cute but I can't see it."

In that, Alex heard the beginning of the ever present adolescent sense of self

doubt. Although it couldn't be avoided he was sure Ari's reality – his solid sense of self acceptance and confidence – would see him through it with no lasting scars.

Passports were checked at the top of the gangplank as the passengers left the boat. Alex became privately concerned. As soon as theirs had been examined and they were waved on, one of the two customs agents made a call on his cell phone as he followed their departure with his eyes.

Once on land Alex waved down a taxi, not taking the first one that pulled up in case it had been waiting for them courtesy of Paul. He handed the driver a hundred Euro bill.

"Two more like it if you get us from here to 827 Franklin without any company from our rear. Time is less important than results."

"Slipping tails is my specialty," Sir. "I look upon it as a challenge. I even hate to take your money, but I will, of course."

He chuckled.

"Any vehicle in particular?"

"I have no idea what it may look like or even if it exists."

"Ah! Preventative maintenance!"

"Not sure I understand."

"You want to *maintain* a situation in which no *preventative* measures will need to be taken."

"I believe we understand each other. Now, go!"

"He who hurries and he who dallies are both of suspicion."

"Old Chinese wisdom?"

"Who knows? It was in my fortune cookie yesterday."

He pointed to the narrow slip of curled paper on the dash. Regardless of its source he seemed to be heeding its advice.

As they rode down the streets and boulevards familiar to them both, Ari kept up a running commentary about this and that as if Alex were a tourist from some far off place. Alex listened intently resisting the urge to correct certain trivial inaccuracies in the boy's monologue.

"May have company," the driver said. "Two cars taking turns behind us block by block. Blue Toyota is back there now. At the next cross street it will fall back and the black Nissan will move up close. Each has a driver and a rider."

"We have a situation here," Alex said speaking to David on the phone. "Tailed by two cars. Professionals. We are going to take evasive action."

"I'll have Kit call you on his phone so we can maintain an open line. Need mine free for Connie."

"Roger."

He hung up. It immediately rang.

"Kit here. Just let me know what's happening. I'll do my best to keep quiet."

"We are taking bets on that at this end," Alex said.

"Suggestions, driver?"

"I'm *Herm*, by the way. And I've never failed to lose a tail. Always best not to let on you know they're with you. Give me a minute here for some high level plotting."

He made a call to his central dispatch.

"George. Need a couple of cars to run interference for me. Got me located?"

Alex and Ari could only hear one side of the conversation.

"I'd like a Plan Four at the on ramp to 88 East at Brazil Avenue. Thanks."

He hung up.

"*Plan Four* suggests at least three others you must use fairly regularly," Alex said almost as intrigued as he was concerned.

"Four is plenty. Just relax. I got it under control."

His phone rang.

"Herm. . . . Yes I see you back there. Hold steady. Waiting for the second cab."

A kilometer or so further on it rang again.

"Herm. . . . Coming up on you right now."

"Let me three way with you and Benny, Herm said. . . . Okay guys. The cars are the blue Toyota and the black Nissan. Keep them from turning with me onto the on ramp; then disappear. Out."

"So you're called on to do this often?" Alex asked.

"Daily. Athens has become a city of intrigue – like Budapest during the cold war."

"We're not spies," Ari said hoping to reassure him.

"I don't ask. I'm about to cross three lanes to our right. George and Benny will slow the traffic in those lanes for me then provide the barrier at the last second. This may feel a little hairy."

They remained silent as the cabbies did their thing. Within thirty seconds they were arcing up the on ramp as the Toyota and Nissan missed the turn. The next opportunity to exit was four kilometers on down the road.

Herm again crossed three lanes of traffic and immediately exited to an access road leading back in the direction from which they had come.

"The Franklin address in five minutes," Herm announced.

"What will it take to employ you for the next six hours?"

"Just an offer, I suppose."

"Consider it made".

Ari was concerned.

"This won't get you in trouble with the cab company will it?"

"My Uncle George owns it. I'll inherit it. Not to worry."

"Any experience racing hearses?" Alex asked.

"No, but that certainly has me hooked."

"The Franklin street address is a warehouse. As we approach the middle overhead door flash your lights six times. It will open and we enter. Inside I have a hearse waiting – casket, flowers, and all. The boy and I will ride in back with the box. We can hide in the casket if circumstances warrant. You will exit the warehouse through

the rear door and get us to Chalkis as soon as possible."

"Chalkis. I was born and raised on a farm between here and there. This will be a piece of cake. I know back roads the other back roads don't even know."

"You're funny, Herm," Ari said.

"Been called lots worse."

"My name is . . ."

"Alex clapped a hand over the boy's mouth.

"Best he doesn't know for both your and his benefit."

"I see. Sorry. You can just call me . . . Rumpelstiltskin, then."

"Too long. How about Rump?"

"I think I'd prefer Stilts, if it's all the same to you."

"Stilts it is then."

Ari smiled, keeping the obvious pun to himself. (Being called Rump might make him the butt of jokes!)

Once inside the warehouse, Alex embraced and spoke in low tones to an old man as Herm and Ari approached the longest, shiniest, black hearse, the boy had ever seen.

Alex joined them. He opened the casket. There were two small, automatic weapons and one AK something or other. He left them inside. He and Ari sat in the jump seat behind the Driver – a roomy area used by families of the deceased in small funeral processions.

The old man opened the rear, warehouse, door and Herm had them on their way.

"The old man?" Ari asked.

"One of my uncles – great uncle I guess to be accurate."

"I just have one uncle. He's a priest. I gather that he and my father were never very close. I've only visited with him a few times. He baptized me. I'm glad I'm baptized – in case Mama's view of religion turns out to be correct, you understand."

Alex smiled containing the chuckle welling up inside. The boy was being serious.

"What's the plan with the casket?" he asked.

"Well, in the unlikely event we are picked up again and stopped, you and I will climb into the casket and go from there."

"Go where? Not to heaven, I hope."

"I meant, make our plans on the fly."

Ari nodded, then smiled.

"If Herm closes the lid on it, we could say we had been hermetically sealed inside."

"You have definitely spent too much time around Kit."

"Yeah! It has been great. He is a very good teacher."

"Oh!"

Ari nodded.

"More like a good model, I guess. I watch him all the time and listen to his ideas. He's a good person, like I said. Did you know he can pee and hit a tree from seven feet away?"

"I believe I did hear something about that Olympian achievement."

"I have the idea my bladder has to grow some yet before I'll be able to match that."

Alex nodded and caught a smile in the mirror from Herm. Some things just didn't really change from generation to generation among young males.

The closer they got to Chalkis the safer they felt. Alex was sure they had not been followed since entering the hearse. He was some concerned they might be picked up as they entered the city.

"How many ways into Chalkis?" he asked.

"Maybe three dozen *and one*."

"And that *one*?"

"Only a half dozen folks in the whole world know about it. A trail through a meadow that has still escaped development."

"I assume an uncle owns it," Ari said smiling.

"Pretty close. A maiden aunt. Stubborn a person as you'll ever run across."

"That why she never married?"

"No. She's a nun."

"Didn't know nuns could own property."

"You don't know my aunt."

It hadn't really answered his question but he smiled and let it go."

"I assume you have been listening," Alex said finally speaking directly to Kit on the cell phone.

"Yes. Some mini-adventure you've been having. You seem to be okay now."

"We are. Relaxing – well sort of."

"By the way, tell Squirt that I can show him how to get at least two more feet of distance with no more bladder growth. It's the first lesson in Peeing 102. . . . We guys are really a vulgar lot, aren't we? Disgusting! Ugh! Out."

"What's vulgar about peeing?" Ari said honestly confused. "Everybody does it – well, maybe not *Sponge Bob*. I assume Patrick just periodically wrings him out."

He sent himself into hysterics sliding down in the seat and kicking uncontrollably.

"That's probably more levity than this vehicle has witnessed in its entire existence," Alex noted wiping his own cheeks dry.

\* \* \* \* \*

The bus stopped for a half hour break. Connie got off and entered the cafe. He had not eaten for sometime. He had a corned beef sandwich with lots of mustard and a half portion of sauerkraut. He opted for chips rather than fries. The beer looked tempting but he would not dull his wits even one drink's worth. He settled for Pepsi. There was time for a slice of apple pie – ala mode.

He chuckled to himself and spoke aloud. "If I were just in the stands at Yankee Stadium, I'd pass for a full-fledged Irish American."

The man on the stool next to him gave him a strange look.

"Excuse me. Didn't realize I was ruminating out loud."

That garnered an even *more* puzzled look.

"I'll stop now. Have a good day."

He turned slightly – an attempt to return to his own little world and get on with the business of savoring his dessert.

He felt something – the barrel of a gun, perhaps – engage his lower ribs. A man's voice whispered in his ear.

"Don't let on. I'm taking your wallet."

"You going to shoot me here in the midst of a hundred Greeks if I resist?' Connie said quietly. "Either you're from out of town or just plain stupid. You shoot me they kill you. I call for help and they kill you. Either way *you* loose."

He turned his head just far enough to see it was an older teenager. His long blond hair and blue eyes suggested he probably wasn't a native.

"Here's the deal, son. Slip the gun into my pants pocket, leave the cafe, and I'll spare your life. Do anything else and I'll call for help. You just don't understand how we Greeks take care of each other."

The young man swallowed so hard Connie could hear it. He whispered his response.

"It's not a gun. It's a salt shaker. I'm going to put it on the counter."

Connie stood and placed a bill beside his ticket. He grasped the boy by the back of his belt and escorted him outside. They continued around to the side of the building and into the shadows.

"What's your story?" Connie asked backing the boy against the brick wall, his hand at the lad's throat – more for effect than hurt.

"I'm from Ohio - USA. Touring Europe. Was rolled in a hostel two nights ago. Flat busted now. Broke. Sorry about all that. It's not like me. I figured in there with all the people you wouldn't risk getting anybody hurt."

"Why me out of all those people."

"You were talking to yourself. I figured you were crazy or something."

Connie began laughing and removed his big hand from around the boy's neck.

"What? I'm serious," he said.

"I know you are, son. I have an idea. Let me see your ID."

The boy handed over his cash free wallet.

Connie talked his way through its contents.

"An Ohio drivers license, a copy of a birth certificate, several pictures of pretty girls, one of which has clothes on – your girlfriend, I assume?"

He nodded sheepishly.

Connie took out his own wallet and removed a dozen, hundred Euro bills placing them inside the boy's billfold. He returned it.

"Next time go directly to the US embassy or consulate, Son. I must admit that salt shaker fooled me."

"I saw it done in an old black and white movie – late, late, show – when I was a kid."

"Part of every boy's past midnight education."

The boy grinned and nodded through his continuing puzzlement.

"Give me your address and I'll repay you, Sir."

"That won't be necessary. Someday, when you can, just do the same for another youngster in need. Can I have your word on that?"

"Oh. Yes, Sir. And my word is good. I'm a Methodist."

Connie re-boarded the bus and was on his way again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Due to the unexpected demands on time, it was agreed that the meeting in Chalkis would be delayed until two o'clock. Once into the city Alex and Ari traded the hearse for a roomy rental car. Hearing from Kit that Connie would be another thirty minutes, they went in search of food.

"I vote for some good old fashioned Greek food," Ari said. "It seems like forever since we've had any. If it hadn't been for the occasional grape we could have just as well been on Pluto."

"Like a flea on a dog?" Alex teased.

"No. The planet. I doubt if there are fleas way out there."

"Greek it will be. I know just the place. Good food. Pretty waitresses. Wonderful music and everybody dances for no reason other than that they can."

"Sounds like home to me," Ari said enthusiastically.

Because of the wonderful food; or maybe it was the beautiful women; or most likely the boy's non-stop, energetic, dancing, they were late to the rendezvous.

"You guys sure took your sweet time," Connie said from the bench beside the huge circular fish pond in the center of the park.

"Had to eat the good food and dance the good dance," Ari answered. "Some things just must not be hurried. My Mama's take on life in case you're wondering."

They swapped stories about the past thirty hours. Connie had purchased a bag of bread crumbs to feed the birds. He portioned what was left into their three palms and it was soon gone. They headed for the car.

"I'll paper, scissors, rock you for shotgun," Ari said to Connie.

"It will difficult for me to drive from the back seat, Squirt."

"Oh, is *he* driving?" Ari asked looking up at Alex for the final word on the matter.

"He's the number one pilot among us, remember?"

"Didn't realize the car could fly," he said smiling at Connie.

He turned back to Alex.

"I'll paper, scissors, rock you for shotgun," he repeated, single mindedly.

"Shotgun seems really important to you."

"I never get it when I ride with Casey and his father. He relegates me to the back. Age has privilege, he claims."

"Well let me see, here," Alex said drawing his response out dramatically. "Sit up front, cramped there between the dash, the arm rest, and the door or have the entire back seat to myself. Seems like a no brainer to me. Shotgun is all yours."

As they arrived at the car, Connie pulled a folded city map from his rear pocket and spread it out on the trunk.

“We need our game plan, gentleman,” he said. “We are here.” He pointed.

“And my house is . . . here – *Stephanopoulos Drive*. It’s horseshoe shaped; goes up the hill, crosses in front of the house, and then back down to Moonglow Drive that crosses in front of our hill. It’s private. Have to have a gate key card to enter or exit or be on the list so the gatemen will let you in or out. There is a stone wall all around the base of the hill that the house sits on.”

“How high?” Alex asked.

“The hill?”

“The wall.”

“Twelve feet. Only there to keep out people. The birds fly in and the little animals can mostly find their way up and over it.”

“Show us the route you have in mind,” Connie said, slipping a second sheet out from under the map. “This is a close-up of your neighborhood that Kit took off the internet for us. It looks to include an area of about thirty square blocks.”

“Except in my neighborhood there are *no* square blocks. All hills. See! All the streets are curvy.

“Here’s what I was thinking and I’ll tell you why as I go along. I’ve changed it from before. Almost all of the traffic comes and goes to the east because there are no good roads to the west – this big gorge runs ten blocks both ways from the back of our property. I figured on us starting our final lap up here at the top of the gorge to the north. It’s very steep and the hillsides are riddled with huge culverts – drainage pipes from both sides. There’s always water flowing south in the open stream at the bottom. It’s like a storm sewer collecting run off from the hills and streets. In the old days it was the entire sewer system. Must have stunk like a . . . sewer . . . back then.

“There is a really old drainage *hole*, I guess you’d call it, at the back of our yard. Like a well, sort of. The top entrance is covered with a heavy wooden lid and it’s hidden in a thick stand of brush. I go and sit on the lid sometimes when I just need to get away from everybody. It’s more than a hole though. It’s about three feet in diameter and the sides are bricked up with flat stones all the way from bottom to top – about a hundred meters deep, I’d say. It’s like an old well without a bottom. It comes out into the gorge right about here.

“I may have climbed it on occasion but I will never admit to that. It is the way I think we can get up into the back yard without being detected. There is an open space between it and the house where the swimming pool is and my old playhouse, and the gazebo, and the gardeners shed.

“I figure if we wait until after dark we can enter the gorge and follow it close in to the east side and then once we get to the base of the drainage hole we can wait for morning when they won’t be expecting us. We climb up and scope things out from behind the brush.”

“Earlier you mentioned skateboards?” Alex said confused.

“That would be like Plan B – if we came right at the house from up front. Skateboard down Moonglow – it’s fairly steep then levels off at the base of our hill. We’d have to run up to the house and we’d be out in the open. As I thought about it I decided we’d be too vulnerable.”

“Maybe. Yes.” Alex said.

“Got anything else?” Connie asked.

“I was thinking about a helicopter and me sliding down a rope onto the flat porch roof in front and then breaking in through a window on the second floor.”

“A helicopter exceeds the rules Paul set down,” Alex said. “Anyway, one ground to air missile and we’d be vapor.”

“Of the three options it seems to me the drainage hole is the best,” Alex said. “What do you think?”

The question had been directed at Connie. Ari looked back and forth from one to the other. They nodded their agreement.

“We’ll need a detailed diagram of your back yard and entrances into the house,” Alex said.

“I can do that while we drive to Athens.”

“Are there any higher hills close by?”

“You really think my Grandpapa would allow there to be hills higher than his?”

He hadn’t intended it to be humorous though the three of them immediately saw it that way.

“Where will we stay until tonight?” Ari asked.

“I have a place ready for us,” Alex said. “It is about two kilometers north of your home.”

Ari’s phone rang.

“Hello.”

It was Kit.

“You guys are late checking in. I didn’t want to chance calling Connie or Alex’s phone in case there was trouble.”

“Sorry.”

He looked at his watch.

“It’s less than two minutes late,” Ari said. “You’re sounding like my mother.”

“You okay, then?”

“Yes.”

“May I speak with Alex?”

“He wants to talk to you.”

“Alex, here. Sorry if we were late. Got caught up here in a strategy session. We have our plan. Seems quite sound. Only sticky part is the last thirty meters across the open back lawn.”

“I think I have that covered for you. Diversion out front. We just have to coordinate things down to the minute and I will need to know well ahead of time *exactly* when you plan to start that final dash toward the house.”

“We will work that out and get back to you,” Alex said. “My concern between now and then is this final midnight. No way to hide we are in Athens. Even if the device didn’t work Paul would know that much, I suppose.”

“Follow the usual plan. As soon as it vibrates be on your way. If it hasn’t vibrated be gone by 1:00, latest.”

“Got it.”

“And remember to check in *on time* from here on out, Okay?”

“Okay. Out.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“They’re okay. Just got busy with the final plan and lost track of time.”

“Let’s set our own agenda,” David said.

“First, we need to look over the hospital,” Kit said.

“Then we need to arrange the diversion with the help of your friend the Ambassador.”

“Seem to be just two things on our immediate agenda.”

“Those and eating from time to time,” Kit added.

“Let’s get over to the hospital. Is Paul still in his room?”

“Still there. He hasn’t left since yesterday. Who knows how long before that?”

They left their suite and crossed the street. The hospital was one of the smaller ones in the city. Even so, it was six floors tall and a quarter of a city block square. It was a general hospital with a large pediatric ward on the top floor.

The basic structure was old and through the years had undergone several major refurbishings. Ground to roof glass sided elevators and stairwells climbed the center of the east and west outside walls, which clearly facilitated the movement of staff and visitors. They took the stairs, entering each floor to familiarize themselves with the general layout.

As they entered the waiting area on the top floor they were confronted with their first real obstacle. It was a sign, which David translated from Greek as, ‘Only authorized staff beyond this point’.

“This is going to seem trite and late night movie-ish my young friend, but into the linen closet over there.”

They soon exited donned in scrubs, hats, and face masks pulled down just far enough as to not be suspicious – they would not typically be worn all the way up in the halls. They moved through the swinging doors into a large work station some thirty feet square. They saw doors just beyond marked Ward One, Ward Two, and Ward Three. They moved with purpose toward Ward One. It was on the north side of the building with floor to ceiling windows every five or so feet along the fifty foot long north wall. It was bright and pleasant yet crowded with old style hospital beds on six inch wheels with metal rims.

Most of the children lay quietly, sleeping, or watching with fixed gaze the nearest TV. Many were bald. It was the cancer ward.

They moved on to Ward Two, orthopedics. By contrast it was noisy – well

children just needing care for broken bones and such. They obviously led the nursing staff on a merry chase. Wheel chairs buzzed from place to place and Frisbees flew back and forth at the far end of the room – the activity area.

“Probably not Paul’s choice with all the confusion and noise,” David said. “He wants a captive audience.”

Ward three was for children with infectious diseases – a stroke of genius, Kit observed – putting all the kids together like that so they can infect and re-infect one another with diseases they didn’t have before coming to the hospital. They were almost immediately asked to leave and get proper lapel tags – permission to be in that ward.

Back in the work station area they stopped at a water cooler to discuss things.

“Looks to be a pretty clear choice,” Kit said. “Ward One. Little activity. Few attendants. Apparently no restrictive name tags needed.”

“I agree. One more time through that ward, then. Take pictures of everything with that photographic memory of yours. Then you can draw it out for my feebler brain once back in our suit. Note entrances and exits. Where they lead. Anything and everything I guess.”

Ten minutes later they were out of the linen closet, again dressed for the street. Another five minutes saw them to their room. Kit got to work on the layout of Ward One.

“Here’s what we have over there, Uncle David. One main entrance from the Nursing Station on the west wall. Three doors marked exit; two are on the south wall – leading into the hall between the wards – and one on the back outside wall – to a fire escape. The beds are arranged along the back wall, the front wall and the south wall. Five, floor to ceiling windows run along the outside north wall – each about four feet wide with five feet of wall between them. There is the mini nurses station right in the middle of the room. Fire hoses on the south wall by the two exit doors. Large coils of half inch, hemp, rope on each side of every door. I don’t understand about that.”

“You’ll find them in most of the older buildings in Europe that house large numbers of temporary guests – hospitals, hotels, theaters, and such. Part of the time tested evacuation plan in case of fire or some other disaster. The lead evacuator ties it around his waist and the others who follow hold onto it so as to not get lost in the dark or smoke or dust.”

Kit nodded.

“Great floor plan,” David said holding it up and studying it. I imagine Paul would choose to stand in the center of the room so as to do maximum damage when the explosive goes off.”

“Is that horrifying or what?” Kit said, shivering.

“It is that. If it happens, we have to remember that although the deed is horrendous, the man’s motivation is not necessarily evil. Bizarre as it may seem, he believes that what he is doing is for the betterment of mankind in the long run. Aside from me, he holds no particular malice toward anyone else involved in this.”

“Crazy behaviors only make good sense to the crazy person, I guess,” Kit said.

“My best guess is that he will position himself just to the north of that little nurse’s island,” Kit said.

“I agree. He’ll have full range of vision from there.”

“Knowing the floor plan and trying to pre-guess a crazy man is not really a very substantial plan of action, Uncle David.”

“It’s all we can have.”

There was a knock at the door. Kit moved to open it, looking through the peep hole first.

“A guy in a black suit.”

“Stand behind the door, Kit. I’ll open it.”

The man’s first phrase was delivered mechanically.

“Hughy sent me in search of The Saint.”

“Come in, please,” David said, closing the door behind him.

“Kit had to ask. Hughy? The Saint?”

“Hugh the Ambassador. I may or may not fill you in on the rest later.”

“I was instructed to give you this small package and envelope. Do you have a return message?”

“Just thanks.”

“The Ambassador said to tell you Operation TC is ready to commence upon thirty seconds notice. Call this number. Press pound. Enter TC – that’s 82. Press pound again and enter the four digit time of day – using the twenty four hour clock – specifying when the arrivals are to begin. Give as much lead time as possible. Repeat the procedure entering TCX instead to call it off.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Kit opened the door and the man left.

“I think I understand everything but *The Saint*,” Kit said.

“For better or worse it was my nickname in college.”

“And you came by it how?”

“Anything you conjure up in your mind will be more exciting than the reality of it, so I’ll just let you fantasize.”

“I have Harvard contacts now you know. I *will* find out!”

“Go for it my boy. You’ll only be disappointed.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After dinner at six, David and Kit proceeded directly to Paul's hotel. They made their way down the service stairs to the domestic staff department.

"May I help you gentleman," asked a pleasant looking, rotund, maid-like person in her late fifties.

"Looking for Rosie."

"And who would it be that's looking for Rosie?"

She took her ID tag from her apron pocket and pinned it in place. It read, 'Rosie'."

"The Saint and Cat Man."

She moved close. I have my instructions. You have the device?"

"David took a washcloth from his pocket and handed it to her. Wrapped inside was the small elongated box the man had delivered to their room."

"We just left your son's business and he said to be sure and stop in and say hello. Says he'll see you for Sunday dinner at your place."

"Thanks for stopping by. Have a good trip."

The performance of the short drama had probably been unnecessary but Ambassadors and CIA operatives like Rosie seemed to take caution to the extreme.

Back in their suite Kit spoke.

"So as I understand it, Rosie will stash the ballpoint size device in Paul's room when she takes him towels. At eleven tonight it will release a sleeping gas of some kind, which should make him feel naturally drowsy and then once he drifts off for a nap, keep him zonked until one a.m."

"Right. It will buy the others a little time. Mostly it will set up a moral dilemma for Paul. He will have missed the midnight call to locate Ari. Will he go ahead and do it at one o'clock when he wakes up? He promised to only call in at twelve. I'm betting seventy to thirty odds he will keep to his word. He has to know that we are about to make our move."

"So what can we expect, do you think?"

"Well, either he calls the strap to locate Ari or he doesn't. Either way they won't be there to be found but if he makes the call we'll know he is beginning to back down on his promises to me. Once Ari has successfully entered his home – and in some way Paul has prepared things so he will know that – I expect him to cross the street to the hospital. If we miscalculated about which hospital we will just have to follow him to wherever he goes and play it by ear.

"Once there, I assume he will provide the code by phone to Ari's strap and make the one canister glow red according to his initial explanation. At that point Alex will turn the lid clockwise as instructed. Then they wait thirty minutes for the detonator that's connected to the wires in the strap to disarm. Alex will then cut off the strap.

"In the mean time we will confront Paul at the hospital and do what we can to dissuade him from the rest of his plan."

“And we can’t just keep him asleep for a week or so because we need him to defuse the strap,” Kit added beginning to set all the ducks in a row.

“Right. And at that point we can’t just take him into custody because he can still set off the explosives he carries on his person. Also, the detonation device on him may need to receive some periodic signal from him – every hour or two or every five minutes – to keep it from exploding. We just don’t know, so we can’t make a move until we understand better how he really has things set up. I’m hoping he will be in a bragging mood.”

“And he can’t be killed because of the temperature sensing chip that he says is installed under his skin and ultimately controls everything else.”

“He constructed the end plan in what seems to be a foolproof manner,” Kit said.

“He won’t be taken alive, you understand, Kit.”

“I understand that and I know the risk that follows from it as we confront him. I’m a big boy. I’ve made my decision. I’m going with you. Two geniuses against one genius should give us some edge.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at the hideout, as Ari had been referring to the basement in which they had been staying those past several hours, they awaited mid-night. It came. It went.

“No vibrating, guys. Paul didn’t call.”

“Wait a minute or two. He might have been distracted,” Alex said.

“As soon as you feel anything we have to be out of here immediately according to David’s instructions,” Connie reminded them. By one at the latest.

“One good thing,” Ari said feeling inside the neck of his shirt. “The sores on my shoulders where the straps rub me have turned into calluses. Just in time for me to get out of it.”

“It is good they aren’t hurting you anymore,” Alex said.

One o’clock arrived and there had been no vibration.

“Out a here time, gentlemen,” Ari said, looking at his watch. I got nothing back there.”

The lights were turned off and they climbed the stairs to the door. Alex opened it a crack – then a bit wider.

“I’ll cross the lawn to that stand of bushes under the largest of the three trees. On my signal you come, Ari. Connie, you wait thirty seconds and then follow.”

“Seems to me it might be better if I went first,” Connie said indicating the boy with his eyes to Alex.

Alex understood and took a few seconds to consider it. The first one out the door was the point man, the trial balloon, the one to be shot or otherwise attacked if, in fact, the Pod Men knew where they were. Connie’s concern was for the boy if anything happened to Alex, suddenly the important adult male in his life.

Alex nodded and changed positions with Connie. Ari paid little attention. Connie took off on a run to the bushes. Nothing happened.

“You’re next, Son. Run like the wind.”

He patted the boy on his back. Ari ran. Nothing happened. Though having indicated to the others they should run a swift, straight line, Alex chose a zig zag pattern in case onlookers had established the run line. Nothing happened.

“We’ll proceed a block at a time,” Alex said. “Which block will give us the best cover from here on our way to the gorge?”

“We go west one block – it’s curvy but there are retaining walls all along the north side of the street. We can crouch and run behind them.”

“We’re right behind you then. Go!”

With Ari in the lead, Connie followed and Alex brought up the rear. They were half way down the block when a van approached at a speed far in excess of safety sake. It had black-tinted windows and its spotlight was directed toward the north side of the street. It weaved back and forth; perhaps the driver was searching to secure something – a gun of some kind. The window on the rider’s side rolled down as it neared them. Connie and Alex drew their side arms and fell to their knees, pushing Ari to his knees.

“It’s probably Bash. That’s the name of the teenager that lives at the end of the block. He will be drunk and may or may not make the turn into his driveway. We better wait and see.”

Thankfully, Bash not only made the turn but he sang and danced himself into the house – having located the door on the third attempt.

“What kind of a name is, Bash?” Connie asked.

“Think about it. It fits the boy. Always in trouble with his temper though he has always been really nice to me. One night – sometimes I sneak out and take midnight strolls – I came upon his van parked in the street. It was quivering and I suspected it was about to dislodge and careen down the hill so I went to investigate. When I looked inside I saw it was him and a girl having sex. I must admit I watched for several minutes. It cleared up numerous questions I had about the process. I’m very glad I happened upon them. I think all kids should at least see a video or something so they don’t have to grow up wondering and worrying about sexual activity. Anyway the next morning he jogged by my house and I was out front. He stopped and said he’d seen me watching. I figured I was about to get bashed. He just reached out and ruffled my hair. He said, ‘Hope you learned something. You were watching the best!’ I was relieved, I’ll tell you, to just be on the receiving end of his arrogance rather than his temper.”

The men smiled at the boy’s choice of words.

“Time to move on,” Alex urged from the rear.

They stopped at the end of the block.

“Now I suggest we go down that street. It’s mostly south but at the end it turns west – to the right. It’s all down hill. The rest of the way will be fairly flat right up to the top of the gorge. We’ll stay up in the lawns again. Trees and shadows and parked cars in driveways.”

“Are you sure you aren’t really a secret agent disguised as a little person?” Connie asked. “Sounds like you’ve done this before.”

“I just told you. I have. Midnight strolls, remember. I can’t just take them out in

the open and risk having a neighbor tell my Mama.”

The explanation made perfect sense to two former eleven year old males and they proceeded through another block. As they crouched together just back from the brightened circle created by the street light, another car came heading their way. It drove quite slowly down the center of the narrow street. Beams from flashlights searched the sidewalks and shrubs behind them.

“Mr. and Mrs. Karris. Really old. Their cat gets loose at night and they go looking for it. I can understand it. They don’t seem to bathe and they *really* stink. If I was their cat I’d try to escape having to sit on their laps, also.”

It produced spontaneous chuckles from the men.

“Next block?” Alex asked.

“Not a block. We need to cross that lot over there. Kids play soccer and Ultimate Frisbee on it. We can stick close to the bushes on either the east or west side.”

“I’m voting for west,” Ari said pointing toward the top of the west ridge of the gorge. “About half way down there. See the glints of light every so often. Could be a bad guy with binoculars keeping watch on the rear of your property.”

“Not good, huh?” Ari said. “You mean by staying west – right – he won’t have a line of sight at us.”

“Correct.”

“How we going to cross the gorge to the east behind my place? We’ll have to do that eventually.”

“We’ll work on a plan. Let’s get down into that gorge as soon as we can. Keep low and move like a cat up close to the shrubs,” Alex said.

Ari took him at his word. No eleven year old had ever offered more cat-like moves over the course of two blocks.

They didn’t stop until they reached the opening to the narrow deep valley. It began as a slit in the side of the north hill and gradually widened, flattening to form the floor below. Regardless of Ari’s Grandpa-related pronouncement to the contrary, the west bank opposite Ari’s hill appeared slightly higher to the men, setting up a strategic problem.

They descended the gully, keeping low and using a start and stop tactic to confuse any possible observers into thinking they were watching shadows caused by swaying branches.

At the bottom they encountered the ever widening, swift, deep, stream which stayed to the middle cutting a straight course south. It was fed by culverts large and small every thirty meters or so, most coming in from the east – their left as they moved south down the valley. Small nocturnal animals scampered on ahead of them as if to announce their presence. Owls hooted, scolding them for running off the mice they had hoped to have for supper. The mice would stop and stand, sniffing, looking them over – perhaps their way of expressing thanks for the brief reprieve.

Ari pointed toward a stump with two small hovering green glowing objects piercing the darkness just above it.

“Puss. The Karris’ cat.”

He raised his right arm and made a fist giving it a sudden, deliberate, jerk.

“Power to the cat’s,” he said in a somewhat esoteric though clearly personally meaningful offering.

They moved immediately to the west slope where Alex called a halt.

“How close to your place are we?”

“One hundred and twenty five meters and that is quite accurate. I mapped this gorge for a geography project a few months back.”

“How wide is it where we will need to cross to the other side?”

“It narrows there actually. That’s good news and bad news.”

“Explain!”

“Good news is that it’s only about thirty meters wide compared to twice that in most places. Bad news is the creek shallows there and widens to cover almost the entire valley floor.”

“What about a hiding place over there near the base of the cistern like thing we’ll be climbing?”

“Great hiding place. Covered with brush and small trees. People who have been hunting the gorge for years have no idea the opening is there.”

It was Connie’s turn.

“Early on you mentioned an escape tunnel or some such thing leading away from the house. Where does it exit?”

“Our hill bulges out into the gorge. It’s what causes the narrowing down there. Think of it like a face and we are looking across the valley at it. The cistern, as Alex called it, would be the left eye. Our hill would be the nose. The other eye, set halfway up the hill, would be the door to that escape tunnel. You really can’t see both of the entrances at once because of the hill in between – the big Greek nose.”

“So if the escape door is being guarded – so to speak – by the bad guys, those men would have no visual knowledge of the other opening?”

“That’s right.”

“Then our main problem is going to be with whoever may be up there above us on the opposite ridge,” Alex said. “If they can see us they can shoot at us.”

“Ouch! Didn’t want to think about that,” Ari said.

“We have to be alert to the possibilities, Son. Like it or not.”

Ari nodded and shrugged sheepishly. Alex patted him on his back.

“Here is the plan for the next half hour – and we do have lots of time since we are not crossing that back yard until dawn – when, by the way, the sun will be in the eyes of anybody on that ridge.”

“Yea, sun!” Ari said both hands up in the air. “Sorry! I tend to be somewhat spontaneous. Back to the plan.”

“You and Connie will make your way down to a point about thirty meters upstream from the cistern. Keep out of sight and quiet. I’m going up the west slope on a reconnaissance mission to see what we are really up against – if anything.”

“Define the actual reality for us,” Ari added as if contributing an important explanatory note.

“Then I’ll return to locate you. I’ll hoot like an owl – three times. Connie will return it with two hoots. We’ll repeat it if I can’t ascertain where you are.”

“If Kit was here he’d have some joke to make about you two hooters. I assume hooters are breasts.”

“You would assume right. Substantial renderings of the organs would *fill out* the definition, I believe.”

“You’re almost as good at that as Kit.”

“Kit is the king.”

“At Halloween he might be called the *punking*.”

“Mercifully it is time for me to leave.”

Ari watched the big man begin the climb up the steep grassy slope toward the ridge.

“Mom would say a prayer at a time like this.”

“Be my guest,” Connie said. “We got lots of time.”

“I’m not into praying. Sometimes I talk like I’m addressing God just in case there might be one out there somewhere. I suppose I’d say something like, “if it is really in your power to protect the man, please do that’.”

“You believe in covering all possible bases, don’t you?” Connie said.

“Seems prudent at my age.”

Connie smiled to himself.

Let’s get moving. Quiet and like a cat, remember.”

“It’s time to check in with David and Kit,” Ari reminded.

“Thank you. Give me a minute then.”

“Kit. Connie. We are in the gorge, west edge of the valley heading south toward Ari’s hill. Alex has gone up on the ridge behind us to investigate possible binoculars. All parties are holding up fine. Shouldn’t be talking. Out.”

“By all parties you were telling him that I was doing okay, right?”

“Right. Why do I even try to spare your feelings?”

“Probably because you fail to realize that I am not only brilliant but also brave beyond my years. I have learned a few things this past couple of weeks you know.”

“Move out!”

Above them, Alex continued to climb figuring to reach the ridge some fifty meters north of where he had been spotting the reflections. At the top he stopped to look down at the valley and estimate the location of the cistern. He spotted what he thought must be Ari’s house – squared off Mediterranean design, four floors, orange tile roof atop white, stucco, walls. The high rock wall encompassed the base of the hill. The moon reflected off what would be the swimming pool in the back yard.

He began moving south, back some fifteen meters from the edge of the ridge. Ten minutes later he heard voices. He moved toward them then stopped in the brush a few meters away from a clearing. There were three vehicles and seven men in

camouflage fatigues. They wore side arms. Several large caliber hunting rifles were propped against one of the open tailgates.

It represented dangerously significant firepower. Sun in their faces or not, the military goggles might trump that possible advantage. He retreated another fifty meters inland from the ridge and slid off his backpack.

From it he removed six sticks of TNT each pre-fused to an electronic receiver that would begin detonating them at fifteen second intervals after the initial press of a remote button he carried on his belt.. The range was two kilometers; plenty for his purposes. He stashed each one out of sight more or less equally spaced along a thirty meter line. He left.

Circling back in a wide arc, he cautiously made his way down the slope.

“Hoot. Hoot. Hoot.”

“Hoot. Hoot.”

“Over here,” came Ari’s whispered voice.

Alex took a seat beside them in the brush.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t have spoken to me just now, Ari.”

“Let’s see,” the boy began. “What could it be out there hooting in our direction? It might be Ari or it might be an owl. To my knowledge the gorge is free of attack owls.”

“You made your point, son.”

“So did you, actually. Sorry. I tend to still be a bit defensive when I’m being corrected. My father said that will pass once I get adolescence out of my system.”

Alex passed on what he had found and what he had planted.

“What’s the time?”

“Ten after two,” Ari said.

“I think we should make our move across the river now. They have one lookout and six poker players. I assume they rotate activities.”

“How? Where?” Connie asked.

“Rather than try a direct crossing down there where we could wade across shallow water at the narrows, we are going to slip into the water here and float diagonally across the stream all the way down to the out-jutting of Ari’s hill – the nose. They won’t be looking for floating objects nor can they probably even see them against the dark water.”

“Done it on a tube. Water’s about four feet deep where we’ll run into the base of the hill. Scads of scrub and brush to crawl out of the water behind. Poor sentence but did you get my drift?”

That pun had actually been unintended and they all let it pass.

“Connie, you’re in first,” Alex said. “We’ll follow in two minutes so count the seconds and look for us.”

“We’re going together?” Ari asked. “Won’t that be a bigger target?”

“We’ll float with you on my back, your legs around my waist. We’ll be fine. Here’s the scary information, Son. It has to be said. If they should begin shooting at us roll over on your side keeping your body perpendicular to the stream to make the

narrowest possible target. Keep moving toward the bushes. Once behind them immediately move north toward the cistern.”

“And if you’re hit,” Ari added continuing the necessary instructions as he saw them, “Don’t cry out to let them know we really are people and not just shadows.”

Alex swallowed hard. It seemed he’d been doing a lot of that. Then, in his most military manner he said:

“Very good. Right. Keep it to yourself. Biting hard on your jacket sleeve may help.”

“I’m ready,” Connie said.

“Go.”

They watched him disappear into the darkness of the black water.

“One minute. Okay into the water right behind me, Ari.”

“Two minutes. Hang tight. Here we go.”

The water was cold and littered with debris – from small cans to larger branches and logs. Ari didn’t make a peep. He clung to Ari as if his life depended on it. . . . well.

Connie’s big arm was waiting and it snagged Ari out of the water. Alex remained in the stream until the other two had moved on. He caught up with them several minutes later. Ari was shivering – teeth chattering.

“Sure doesn’t seem like 22 degrees (72 F.) when your clothes are soaking wet.”

“Everybody out of their clothes. Open the black, vacuum-sealed plastic bag in your back pack. Black nylon stretch pants and top. Ski mask. Cold or hot, wet or dry, we would have gotten into them at this point.”

Each pack contained a small towel. Soon everyone was dry, redressed, and looked to be a part of the darkness.

“Much better,” Ari said.

“We are about ten meters south of the cistern opening,” Ari announced thinking that was crucial.

It was. The other two nodded.

“How much time to climb the cistern to the top?” Connie asked.

“It’s a difficult climb. It’s dark. You have to feel for hand and foot holds. My best time would have been fifteen minutes – if I had ever actually climbed it you understand.”

“Find a way to get comfortable. We wait it out here ‘til four thirty,” Alex said. “Then we climb. By the time we reach the top, dawn will be near upon us. We’ll wait in the brush up there until the sun is up at twenty degrees blasting away at the west ridge – that will come at 7:07. Then we engage our diversions and make a dash for the house. The door will be locked, I assume?”

“Only if I fail to call in the opening code from my phone,” Ari said.

“That is your priority number one come 7:09.”

Ari nodded.

Alex made a call to David. Again it was Kit who answered. Alex caught him up to date.

“And the diversion time out front must begin at 7:09. We will not call in again until we are safe and sound inside the house.”

“That’s about the time we will be going to work here – well, probably across the street in the hospital. Good luck.”

Kit looked at his watch.

“It’s two thirty. They won’t risk calling in again until they’re in the house. The TC diversion is to begin at 7:09. Shall I call that in to the number the Ambassador gave us?”

“He said the sooner the better. Yes. Make the call. Carefully!”

“Have I ever not been careful, Unc?”

“Shall I recite the times?”

Kit smiled and dialed in the code.

“Time for some shut eye then,” David said. “One of us needs to keep a GPD eye on Paul in case he decides to pull the plug and run. You take the first two hours in the sack. I’ll wake you at 4:30.”

Kit nodded, lay back, and was soon asleep. David kept track of Paul every fifteen minutes. He – or at least his phone – didn’t go anywhere. He may have had backup phones of course but David felt the man had no reason to suspect they had tapped into him. He was depending on that to be the case.

At four thirty David roused Kit.

At four thirty Alex roused Connie and Ari.

“Wake me at 6:30,” David said. “Check on Paul’s position every fifteen minutes. Call me if there is a change.”

“Lace up your shoes tight, Ari,” Alex said. “Put on your kid gloves from the clothes pack. No speaking once inside. That kind of a structure can act like a sound board and amplify the tiniest noises all up and down the gorge.”

Alex strapped the miner’s light around the boy’s head and positioned the light on his forehead. The men donned theirs.

“Don’t turn it on until you’re at least two meters above the lower opening. We don’t want to tip off the Ridge Boys with a spot of light down here.”

“If they were *sad* would that make them the *Blue* Ridge Boys?”

“Up the hole, kid. You lead on this leg.”

Ari entered the low arched opening. Connie followed and finally Alex.

The diameter was less than Ari had estimated – more like two rather than three feet. Maneuvering was difficult. It confirmed the wisdom of Alex’s previous decision not to use flack jackets. The climb would have been impossible and the final dash slowed and awkward.

A century of moss and other slimy growth made it difficult to find firm holds in the irregular stone work. It broke off as touched and dropped onto those below. Ari wanted to apologize for that but he had been told to be quiet so he was quiet.

Dozens of thoughts flashed through his young mind. A month before he had been just a kid – rich and moderately spoiled perhaps but a kid nonetheless. He enjoyed

playing with his friends, swimming, hiking the gorge, taking in movies – mostly in the private theater in the basement. His Mama made wonderful popcorn. He thought about the magazine with pictures of naked ladies that Casey had given him – privately – on his eleventh birthday. He remembered his father, both the strong man that took him hiking though the Alps and the bedridden man so weak he could not even squeeze his son's hand. He wondered about God. He wondered about No God. He hoped he lived to be a father. He would be some like his own father, some like David, some Kit and lots Alex. Connie would probably show up here and there, also.

He was sad he had to learn about evil men and insane men and wondered how he was supposed to know the difference. He felt sorry for Paul – his sad childhood and the way it had warped his version of reality. He didn't so much want the man punished as he just wanted him put away someplace from where he could no longer endanger mankind.

He hoped he would very soon find himself truly eager to ravish females and enjoy the sexual side of growing up. He'd not ravage them, of course, unless it was a mutually agreed upon ravaging.

He admired the four new men in his life. Someday, when he had prepared himself the way they had, he would be ready to risk all to help someone in need. He had to find his special mission in life – his Big Wonder. His father had said that he would most likely find his 'purpose', as he put it, somewhere in David's writings. He still had piles and piles of those to work his way through. He realized that he was not yet educationally prepared to understand most of it. He would have to take it in steps. Get educated, read David, plan the Big Wonder, and then carry it out. In the mean time he would do like David and Kit – everyday plan and carry out some little wonders that would make his small part of the world a better place.

He had the underside of the lid was in sight. Soon he could touch it. Connie moved up beside him and together they moved it aside enough for Ari to peek his head up and over the edge. He turned his light off and looked around. Hank, the night security guard was walking his rounds. The presence of the security men would have kept Paul's men from getting a foothold on his hill, in his yard, or house. He pulled himself over the top and onto the ground. It was difficult to see out through the brush. Seeing in would be fully impossible.

Connie was soon beside him and finally Alex. They moved the lid back into place. Ari took a seat on it, legs crossed, the way he had so many times before. They removed their filthy gloves. The men sat on the ground, backs against the stone top of the cistern. It was 4:50. Ari had the climb well timed – that climb he had never made before.

They waited. Alex motioned to the backpacks indicating the rations and drinks. They relaxed and feasted silently in the moonlight. The climb had been strenuous even for the seasoned soldiers. Though exciting in its way, those months on the beaches of the Riviera had done little to keep them in tip top shape.

Ari slid down from the lid and sat between his two protectors. He had so much he wanted to say to them but there was to be no talking. He put his arm through Alex's and rested his head against his shoulder. He felt safe and was soon asleep. Alex

maintained watch while Connie slept. At 5:45 they switched. By 6:30 they were all awake.

Alex indicated that they would leave the backpacks behind as they sprinted those last few meters to the house. They each kept close tabs on the time.

Seven o'clock came and went.

Five after seven came and went.

At exactly 7:08 it all began. Behind them, across the gorge, an explosion was heard, then another and another. The Blue Ridge Boys retreated to meet the attack from behind. At 7:09 the street in front of Ari's house was suddenly filled with dozens of honking Taxi Cabs, many entering the circular drive up to the house.

At 7:09 Ari opened the back door with his phone. At 7:10 the dash was set. There were more explosions from across the gorge. The cabbies exited their cabs and began arguing loudly about who had and who hadn't been called to take the fare.

"Go!" Alex said and the three ran toward the house. They passed the gardener's shed and rounded the inside edge of the pool, keeping the boy between them and the house so no clear shot could be taken at him. They passed behind the playhouse, the picnic tables, and the huge urns containing small trees and tall flowers. They reached the back door. Ari pushed it open and was immediately inside. The men followed and Alex closed and locked the door. A single shot was heard. An urn crumbled. If Paul was being true to his word the war was over.

"Mama! Mama! Ari called out running from room to room.

"I imagine your grandfather has her in a place of safety."

"So, now what, then?" Ari asked disappointed at not finding his mother but happy about her safety.

"We wait for this canister on the front of your strap to begin glowing red. It means the deactivation process has begun. I'll then turn it one complete turn clockwise. Then we wait the required thirty minutes and cut the strap off."

The same question was on each of their minds. "What if it doesn't really deactivate the bomb?" It was never spoken.

The red light came on, a sure signal that Paul knew he had lost.

Ari spontaneously jumped up and down.

Alex motioned Connie away into another room for safety sake.

He knelt in front of Ari in order to more easily access the canister. With a deep sigh and broad, confident, smile into the boy's face he turned the lid. It clicked into place at the full revolution. Ari and Alex exchanged a nervous chuckle. They embraced. It was held for a long time. There were tears; Ari's were accompanied by long overdue, rhythmic, sobbing; Alex's flowed more quietly. The boy had been brave far longer than any child should ever have to be brave.

Connie reentered the room and called David.

"We are inside – safely. Paul knows. We got the red glow. Alex has turned the canister lid. We are now waiting the thirty minutes required before cutting into the strap."

Kit relayed the information to David.

“They are in the house. Safe. The lid lit up as promised and it has been turned. They are in the wait period.”

“And Paul is on the move. Let’s hit the street.”

They hesitated only briefly in the shadows in front of their hotel as David pointed. It would not have been necessary. The tall, gaunt, figure could only have been Paul. He was striding, with an uncomfortable looking, awkward gait, across the street toward the hospital.

“I think we got the right building, at least,” Kit whispered.

David nodded as they watched him enter the front door.

“Do we follow him or take the elevator?” Kit asked.

“We stay right here to make certain it isn’t a rouse and he just waits five minutes to throw us off and then returns to the street and takes a cab to who knows where?”

“How did you learn to think this way?”

“I, too, watched the late, late, *who-done-its* as a boy. It’s clearly a necessary part of a lad’s education.”

Five minutes passed. Paul did not return. They hurried across the street and into the elevator.

“Stand to the side when the doors slide open so we can see what we have to deal with up there without being seen ourselves. If he isn’t in sight we will proceed under the assumption that he has entered one of the wards. We’ll look into *our* choice first.”

Paul was not in sight. They walked into the nurse’s station and straight for the door to Ward One. Interestingly no one tried to stop them. It was shift change, and the required paper work and hushed conversations took precedence over unrecognized personnel. They stopped and peered through the small window in the door. He was there.

“Here comes improvisation time,” David said. “The general plan at this point is that once inside I will move to the left toward the outside wall with the windows away from most of the beds. I’m sure Paul will be more interested in me than you. It will give you the chance to move slowly to the right and eventually work your way in behind him. I have no idea how that may be to our advantage but it’s all I have.”

“Let’s do it.”

They entered. Paul seemed unruffled – pleased even. This part, at least, seemed to be going his way. David moved left. Kit remained by the door until Paul’s focus began following David. Then Kit slowly inched from bed to bed circling right. He smiled at the children hoping to keep them from panicking. Nothing had yet apparently happened to concern them. There were no attendants in the room.

Paul began the conversation.

“You’re looking well, David.”

“And that so unlikely, considering the events of the past several weeks.”

Paul opened his jacket revealing what David assumed he was to believe were the plastic explosive containers. He did.

“What’s next in this dance?” David asked thinking that would help Paul believe he was in the driver’s seat. He was.

“Well you could just admit you’re wrong and I’m right?”

“If that will put an end to it I will certainly do that, of course that act, in and of itself, would prove I’m really right and you’re wrong. Anyway you wouldn’t believe me.”

“I want to thank you for being my friend when no one else would. I’m sorry you had to be so stubborn about your philosophic positions. We could have reigned together.”

David was instantly frightened by the term *reigned*. The quiet madness was now out in the open.

“I’m not sure who has won and who has lost through all of this, Paul. Help me understand.”

“There can only be winners and losers if there is truly something to contest. You were wrong from the outset so you lost decades ago.”

“I’ve read your novels with interest. Well written.”

Paul flashed a quick, angry look. It lingered.

“What novels? I have written no novels.”

“My mistake. I was referring to those by Peggy Parsons. Perhaps I mistakenly attributed them to you – the obvious expertise and all.”

Paul smiled as if to acknowledge he had been found out – bettered even. It made David all the more uneasy. David decided the use of a more direct approach might provide Paul less of a platform.

“The boy is safe. Whatever this has been to you, it is now over.”

“One small thing here, David. It’s about that trust thing *you* advocate and I don’t. As promised, when the lid of the canister is rotated as per directions it *will*, after thirty minutes, deactivate the device that detonates the strap when its wires are cut. But, it doesn’t prevent *me* from still activating it and blowing the kid into six countries. I need to leave that on your conscious, you see. You and your dangerous philosophy of life – philosophy of human preservation or dispreservation as I like to think of it. You claim to care about others and I believe you. Do you see how vulnerable to punishment that makes you? When they hurt, you hurt. When they die you die a bit along with them. Altruistic love is the ultimate sign of *weakness* – not *strength* as you purport – and I will prove that to you momentarily. It will be the ultimate downfall of the species if your approach is not eliminated.”

David would not legitimize the idea with a response.

Paul continued, miffed but back on his agenda.

“Let’s see, I need to dial thirteen numbers to set off the charge on the youngest Stephanopoulos. I despised his father, you know. He advocated the destruction of the human race to save the planet. Can you imagine that? The man was insane. I’ll be doing the species a great favor by clearing his genes out of the human DNA pool.”

He held the phone out in front of him so David could see the pad. He began

pressing numbers.

Eleven to reach the belt and then two more as the detonation code. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven,

. . . then just two more so don't try anything you will regret."

"So blowing up yourself and these kids was just a ruse? Another way you show the world how dishonest and untrustworthy you really are."

Paul's expression raged! His eyes widened!

"No! Indeed, quite the opposite. If I *don't* dial number thirteen in the code within sixty seconds after the twelfth we'll all go up here. It is the boy or us and I hold the only key."

Kit had heard enough. It was act now or never have the chance. From his position at the rear he rushed Paul. With his best defensive back move he pushed the man across the floor toward a tall, narrow, window twenty feet to the north.

David watched helplessly as he saw Paul dial that twelfth and very likely the final number. The two of them crashed through the window and out into space. Within seconds the explosion sounded and the building shook.

David rushed to the window. During the skirmish an empty hospital bed had moved to block the opening. David crossed the bed on his hands and knees and looked down. There was nothing to see except clouds of smoke and through them the vague outline of a hole in the side of the building. He sat back on his legs and began to sob. Attendants rushed into the room and toward him.

"I'd hand you up my hanky but my arms are both a little busy here, Unc."

David looked out the window again and there was Kit's soot blackened face. He was clinging to the base of the window. By that time two orderlies had arrived and began pushing the bed to one side. David got off and he and one of the men offered Kit a careful hand up.

"What in the . . . ?" David said.

"*Later* on that. What about Ari?"

David shook his head and frowned.

"Paul was dialing the last numbers just before you reached him."

"Damn! I just killed a man, Uncle David."

"No, you just shifted the location of his inevitable death. Paul killed himself. What you did was save three dozen sick children."

Kit wiped at his tear streaked face.

David's phone rang.

Reluctantly he opened it and answered quietly, through a deep sigh. He tried to prepare himself for the saddest of all news.

"Yes."

"Hey. You guys okay, came Ari's voice."

"Yes. WE are fine. But you? You're okay, too?"

There was a tone of amazement in his voice.

"Of course. Home safe and sound and Alex almost has me cut out of the strap. I

feel downright naked without it. Oh. I guess I am. What about Paul?"

"Paul is dead."

"I'm sorry. The kids?"

"They are all just fine."

"Kit?"

"Remarkably – aside from a dirty face and no eyebrows – Kit is fine as well. We'll be right over."

\* \* \* \*

After hugs and tears enough to float the *Ari VII*, David got down to the nitty gritty.

"Kit, tell them how you performed the miracle."

"Not much to tell. Uncle David kept Paul's attention on him the entire time. I was free to move at will behind him. I heard nothing that indicated Paul was *not* going to go ahead and blow us all up. That being the case I had to find a way to remove the explosive from that room before he flipped the switch. It came to me in a flash. I took a coil of the escape rope from beside the rear, south, door and tied one end around my waist. I moved as close to the window wall as I could without Paul seeing me. The kids kept calm. The conversation was in English. Few of them could follow it. I tied the other end onto the center of the frame of an empty bed hoping it would follow me at an angle that would place it across the window opening and secure the rope with me on the other end. I rushed Paul, shoved him through the window ahead of me and once outside pushed him as far away from me as I could. The rope jerked me to a sudden, painful, halt – I may have performed my own appendectomy. Paul was several stories below me when he exploded some thirty feet away from the building. It took out the wall where there is – well, was – an outer hallway. Nobody was seriously hurt. We'll probably never know if it was triggered automatically or if he flipped the switch himself."

"Wow?" Ari said. "I'll never be that great a grasshopper!"

David looked down at Ari, (that's *Grasshopper II* for those in the inner circle). David spoke directly to the youngster.

"There is a basic mystery here that I still don't understand. When Paul made the call to detonate the strap, it didn't work. He had more than enough time and, in fact, I saw him push the button. He held his phone out, smiling, so I couldn't miss seeing it. *That* was more important to him than saving his own life as Kit was sweeping him through the window.

"Oh, that's really no mystery, David," Ari said. "As a precaution, just before Alex turned the lid, I used my cell phone to call my butt so Paul would get a busy signal in case he went back on his word."

He looked around, moving his gaze from one obviously dumbfounded face to another.

He shrugged and spoke, breaking the silence with a broad grin.

"I guess I have to assume that must have been one of those '*wise-kid, secret weapon, things* you guys once tried to explain to me.'"