

Brothers on the Run: A Terrifying Journey



By Tom Gnagey
David Drake

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**The reader can follow the journey on an atlas
if he or she cares to (once the boys hit Pennsylvania).
Most of the roads and places are real although the authors
have changed a few things to fit the needs of the story.**

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CHAPTER ONE

Terror at the Bottom of the Stairs

The boys' parents lay dead and bleeding on the brown stone floor of the front hall in the huge old Victorian house that had been the center of their privileged lives since birth – nineteen years for Marco and thirteen for Frankie. The younger boy still believed his beloved father was a real estate tycoon; the older one had known for a number of years he was the center of all things illegal in their section of the city. That night it suddenly made no difference. The man was nothing but dead.

The brothers had been approaching the top of the stairs from the hall on the second floor on their way down to dinner when the deadly commotion came and went below them. There had been two men with automatic weapons in and out of the front door in seconds. Marco clapped his hand over Frankie's mouth and pulled him back into the hall out of sight from those down below. He was certain one of the men had seen them and figured they would be back to tie up the loose ends – namely, him and his little brother.

The half dozen 'security officers' who patrolled the grounds had clearly offered no protection. Marco felt sure that meant they were dead – their bodies scattered across the fifteen-acre estate. It was the butler's day off. The maid was in her quarters for the evening at the rear of the basement. The cook was in the kitchen making ready to serve the family their evening meal. Frankie screamed into his brother's hand and struggled to get free, out of his head with despair.

"Get hold of yourself, Frankie. There are things you don't know. We have to get away from here right now. Don't make a noise, you understand? *Our* lives are also in danger."

Frankie nodded; tears washing down his cheeks, falling onto his heaving chest. Marco removed his hand – tentatively at first – then hurried them back down the hall to their father's study at the rear of the house. Inside, he turned on the light and locked the door. He went directly to the bookcase behind his father's oversized desk. He pulled out two books – each on a different shelf. A section of the bookcase clicked open back into the darkness. He replaced the books and urged his

brother into the space ahead of him.

Marco fumbled for a light switch to his right and the hidden room was soon lit. He pushed the panel closed and flipped a switch which would ensure it could no longer be opened from the study.

“What in god’s name is going on, Marco? Mom and dad are dead and you don’t even seem to care.”

“I care every bit as much as you do, Frankie, but there are things we have to do immediately to protect ourselves. Dad has been over the emergency drill with me a number of times. You follow my instructions and we’ll get out of this okay”

“What don’t I know, Marco?”

“No time now. Later I’ll tell you everything.”

He reached out and put his hands on his brother shoulders, looking at him face to face.

“For now, I guess you need to know they were killed by mobsters who won’t hesitate to do the same to us. You understand me?”

“*You, yes. All this, no.*”

“I understand that. You have to trust me. I promise that I’ll explain everything once we are safely away from here. I need your help, now. In that closet are several large back packs – loaded. Get one for each of us – doesn’t matter which ones. All four are alike.”

Marco moved to a cabinet on the rear wall. He removed a large, leather brief case that hung from a shoulder strap which he slipped over his head and settled into place beside his neck. Frankie brought the back packs.

“Here, let me help you into one of them,” Marco said . . . “There. Now help me. . . Good.”

“They’re” heavy.’

“Won’t be carrying them for long. Stick with me on this.”

Marco moved to a door beside the cabinet and pulled it open.

“This is a stairway that leads to a tunnel that will allow us to escape from the house. Take one of the flashlights from the shelf, there. Now down the stairs – make it fast, but stay safe. They’re steep and have tripped me up before. I’m right

behind you.”

Marco also took a flashlight, then closed and locked the door behind them. When they reached what Frankie figured was the first floor level, the wooden steps were replaced by cement steps and continued down another twenty feet or so underground.

“There is the tunnel,” Marco said. “You know the old gas station on the corner that’s been closed for ever. It was designed that way from the beginning. That’s where we will come out. There is a van in there with additional supplies.”

That destination was most of a block away. The tunnel was six feet high and three wide, with the look of a cement bunker from an old war movie. The only light was from their flashlights. The air was stale and stomach turning musty. By the time they reached the door at the other end, Frankie’s chest had stopped heaving, though tears continued. They were both breathing hard, partly from the inadequate air and partly from the quick pace they had maintained while carrying the heavy backpacks.

“We will be just fine, little brother. I know I have a lot to explain. Just remember regardless of any of this our mom and dad loved us very much. First, we have to get to safety. Dad provided me with instructions. We need to move quickly or . . .”

“Or, we’ll end up face down in pools of our own blood. I got the picture as soon as you put your hand over my mouth. This door won’t open.”

“It takes a key that is here in this leather case. Let me find it. Hold your light for me here.”

“Marco clicked opened the case.”

“My god, Marco, there are guns and ammunition in there. What the hell is going on?”

Marco ignored the question and looked through the other items also present.

“Here. Use this key.”

“Frankie did as he was told. His hands shook. His confusion grew. Marco closed the case. Beyond that door, they found themselves at the base of another cement stairway – that one much shorter and steeper.”

“You’ll need the key again for the door at the top.”

They climbed the steps to a narrow landing. Frankie soon had the door opened out into the darkness of what he supposed was the inside of the gas station. The windows on the old building were boarded up on the outside, and to his surprise, covered by metal plates on the inside.

Marco directed the beam of his flashlight to their left.

“The van is there.”

It was medium sized, blue, unwashed, and nondescript with out of state license plates. Marco opened the sliding side door. The dome light came on revealing several suitcases and a number of cardboard boxes. There were two bikes hanging from the roof – one along each side. He opened the smaller of the suitcases.

“First, we both change clothes down to our skin. The new clothes can’t be traced back to us – to our family – just like the van and everything in it. Dad thought of everything to protect us.”

“Everything, maybe, except the most important thing – letting us keep our mom and dad.”

Anger had seeped into his tone. He began sobbing again. Marco made no effort to comfort him or stop the crying. He understood about that. He kept to the schedule he had so carefully rehearsed.

“Our old clothes go in the whole under that manhole – acid will eat them up in minutes.”

Pete replaced the heavy metal cover and continued speaking.

“Okay. You ride shotgun, of course. Seatbelt.”

Once in place behind the wheel, Marco allowed a deep sigh. He reached over and took a firm hold of his brother’s arm looking him in the face.

“You are now the most important thing in my world, Frankie. I promised dad I would protect you with my life if it comes to that. *Your* job is to keep yourself safe. I don’t now know where this journey is going to take us and don’t know how it’s going to turn out, but it is *our* journey together and we will make the very best of what it has to offer. I love you.”

It was the first-time Frankie could remember ever receiving an ‘I love you’ from his brother. He had been focused on his big brother’s face the whole time. He nodded;

he tried to launch a smile to indicate both their unwavering kinship and his bravery, but it wouldn't happen.

"I guess we're all we got, right?" he managed.

"That's right, but we're all we need."

Frankie sighed and spoke.

"Okay, then. Two brothers on the run into what sure seems like a terrifying journey to me."

"We're going to be fine. Wait and see."

Frankie figured there was no alternative to that – wait and see – but he didn't say it. Instead, he nodded again and checked his seatbelt. Marco clicked the garage door opener and waited to see outside before starting the engine and turning on the lights. It was dark except for a street light at each end of the narrow street. There was no traffic. He turned the key and spoke.

"Four hundred and fifty horses and auxiliary gas tanks that'll get us a thousand miles from here without a stop."

He adjusted the lights to low beam and pulled out onto the street. Frankie watched the garage door close behind them. Marco turned right – the shortest way out of the city. They proceeded in silence, broken only by the occasional sounds of Frankie's off and on heaving chest. He felt a deep emptiness inside that he had never even considered before – life without his parents. It was as if a creeping darkness was consuming him, creeping outward from the center of his chest. Although it was nothing he could disregard, he was able to set it aside when Marco spoke.

Their father had laid out a route that mostly avoided traffic and stoplights and soon had them on a state route, which headed them due west from the city. The quarter moon and the life they had always known were both behind them. A thousand miles would put them near Des Moines, Iowa. They would never reach Des Moines, Iowa.

"Do you know where we are headed, Marco?"

"West."

"There's a lot of world to the west."

"There is – all of it, I guess, in a way. Dad gave me some guidelines to follow until we get things figured out."

"It sounds like Dad knew this was going to happen. Why didn't he do something about it? You say mobsters.

Why didn't he go to the police?"

"I know you will have trouble accepting this, but our dad was a mobster, the main mobster in our part of the city, just like his father had been."

"I don't believe you. Dad loved us."

"Yes he did. Dad and Mom loved us more than anything in the world."

"I can't understand, then."

"I can't say I fully understand either. I just know that is how it is – was."

"So were we supposed to grow up and be mobsters, too?"

"Dad had an alternative plan for us. He hated his life, but he said, 'once in it, never out of it'. He never shared any of the details of that part of his life with me – to protect me he said. I didn't want to know. The whole idea made me sick to my stomach. The plan was, when I turned twenty-one and you fifteen we were to be sent to Brazil. Our dark Italian skin would help us blend in, he said. He had set us up with new identities, citizenship, property – everything just waiting for us down there."

"That's why we had to learn Spanish and Portuguese, then, huh?"

"That's right. And why Mr. Jackson tutored us in the history and culture of South America."

"I must admit I had to wonder about that. I mean, I knew mom was from Brazil so I supposed that was the reason."

"That wasn't really the truth. She was from the city just like dad – Little Mexico instead of Little Italy. But, you mustn't think badly of them for it. It was all a part of their plan to free us from their terrifying way of life."

"It sounds like everything I know about myself is not true."

"Dad prepared us to be independent, to survive, because he loved us and he knew this time might come. You and I might not have handled it in the same way, but he did the best he knew how. He gave us the best education available. He encouraged us to exercise and take good care of our bodies and health. Everything was to prepare us for the

happy futures he wanted for us.”

“Like why I had to study the classical guitar instead of the trombone like I wanted to – a skill for Brazil.”

“For sure, and me piano, but they are skills we can use anywhere – to earn money, maybe.”

“What about money? You can get a job I suppose, but I can’t. People will expect me to be in school. How are we going to support ourselves?”

“There’s a good deal of money in that case I brought. It will last until we can get our lives together somewhere.”

“The case with the guns? I guess I’m beginning to see why guns. No, I don’t or at least I don’t want to. I can’t believe this, Marco.”

“Guns were part of dad’s life since he was your age. I can understand why he included them. It doesn’t mean we have to use them. He wasn’t pushing us to become bank robbers for god’s sake. We’ll think that through later when we’ve had time to consider all the possibilities and make good – thoughtful – decisions. The last thing he said to me about all this was that we should always think every move through for longer than seemed reasonable.”

“Be extra careful, he meant?”

Marco nodded.

Presently Frankie broke a long silence.

“Seems to me we have decisions to make about everything, Marco. Nothing that used to be was real and we got nothing out in front of us that holds any certainties. We’re in limbo. That’s what our life amounts to – limbo.”

“You don’t dare think of it like that. Limbo is stagnant – standing still. We have to think of what’s out in front of us like it’s going to be a wonderful journey – a grand adventure – one exciting escapade after another.”

“When the tone of your voice really matches your words I may begin considering it.”

A half hour passed in silence as Marco avoided the heavily traveled and well patrolled Interstates by keeping to the lesser used state and country roads. It had been their father’s instructions. Eventually he pulled off the road onto the crumbling cement slab that had once been home to a sizeable filling station. He figured the interstate to the north had

probably forced it out of business.

“What’s the deal?” Frankie said. “I thought dad said to keep on the move.”

“Two things, and I’m not sure which is the most important. First, I need to pee and you should, too. Second, in the leather case are our new identities with papers and ID cards. We need to find them so we can begin practicing until we can answer any question we could ever be asked about who we are, where we’re from, names of parents and grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins. We have a lot of work to do.”

“I hadn’t thought about all that – well, the peeing, yes. So, we have to lose our names, too. That seems reasonable, I guess. I can drill us on the information while we drive. Don’t suppose you’ll let me drive, huh?”

“And if you’d get caught?”

“I understood before I asked. Just figure one thing about our new life needs to be the same as it was in our old life.”

“I don’t get it.”

“That I’ll still be a pain in your ass, big brother.”

They managed faint smiles. They figured someday it would be a funny memory.

In that moment, Marco was hit by a chilling realization; he was in charge. The final responsibility rested on *his* shoulders. At the same time, he was determined that for his brother it always needed to feel as much like a fifty/fifty venture as possible. He understood that in lots of ways Frankie was smarter than he was. That should only help make things go better.

Part of his deep sadness suddenly had to be moved aside to accommodate the recognition of his two new roles – total responsibility for himself, and making all the proper, important decisions for his brother. Frankie had been a hard headed, independent-minded sort ever since he decided he would have none of that diaper wearing arrangement. He would push them down, step out of them on the run, and head for the nearest corner to make his getaway. Marco and his dad called him the fastest butt in the city. That memory did give ‘big bro’ a quick smile.

Marco's new role was not only vital for his brother's well-being, but it would be the most challenging undertaking of his life. He had promised his dad, the man he revered and loved the most in the world – the man who had taught him that few things in life were more important than a man's word. He understood he had no alternative.

After heeding Mother Nature's call, they stood side by side at the open sliding door. Marco laid open the leather case. Frankie began going through its contents.

"Lots of things in here. Here's this big envelope marked 'Identity'. There is also a list, an inventory of everything that's in the van with us. Like you said there is money contained in four small boxes – the kind checks come in from the bank."

He opened one.

"Looks to be a half inch of twenties on top and then well used hundreds underneath – I suppose new bills might be suspicious. Good thinking. There are two handguns and a dozen boxes of ammunition. What did he think – that we'd have to hold off the entire US Army?"

"I just imagine Dad stayed alive for as long as he did by being very careful – over-planning, and such."

"I don't want to even consider that. It wasn't the dad I knew."

"I'm sorry. It was an uncalled-for remark at this time. You should just remember the dad you knew."

"Here's your driver's license and a permit for the guns, *Peter James Martin*. You should make that exchange right now, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Good idea."

"We need to remove everything from our wallets that can be used to give us away," Frankie said.

"Good thinking. Who are you?"

"*Thomas David Martin*. We got new birth certificates, too. You are 21 and I'm 15. You can easily pass for 21. That makes you legal age for most things. That was a good idea. Can I pass for 15, though? My Italian heritage hasn't blessed me with a smidgeon of extra height. Half the girls my age are still taller than I am."

"With all the big words you use you can pass for 50. Every time you open your mouth you grow six inches as far as

other people are concerned.”

It was cause for the first genuine smile between them. As brothers went, they had really not been close. There was the large age gap to begin with, plus they shared virtually nothing in common – music and recently girls – so any compliment from Marco felt particularly important to Frankie.

After the ten minute stop they were back on the road.

“The van has Illinois plates and that’s where my driver’s license is from. Your ID?”

“Yes. Illinois. I suppose we need to read up on the state. All I know is Abraham Lincoln and Walter Peyton of the Bears were from there. That would be a fascinating paper to write for school: *If it hadn’t been for Lincoln would anybody have ever heard about Walter Peyton?* I wonder if I’ll ever be back in school.”

Marco remained silent; Frankie moved on.

“I saw on the list that there are two high end lap tops in the boxes behind us, and the van is equipped with wi-fi. There’s a month’s worth of food and more clothes. There are also cell phones paid up for a year – so we can keep track of each other I suppose, huh?”

“Yeah. I suppose so,” Marco/Pete said. “It would be a good idea to make sure those are activated and ready to use right away.”

“Maybe I should crawl in back and see where things are so we’ll know if we need them.”

“Do it. I’m thinking the sooner we know everything, the better off we’ll be.”

Frankie understood, even if his brother’s use of the term, ‘everything’, had been inappropriate. As he worked his way through box after box and suitcase after suitcase he chatted – Frankie always chatted.

“I don’t much like the name Thomas – sounds too biblical – and Tommy makes me sound like a snot-nosed little kid out of one of those old black and white movie shorts. What do you think?”

“Lots of guys go by their middle names.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that. David is not really so bad. And there could be Dave or Davy. Scratch Davy – again like a little kid. I think I’ll try Dave. What about you, Peter

James Martin?”

“I actually like Peter or Pete. I think I’ll stick with Pete informally and Peter otherwise.”

“Sorry the new initials can’t be pronounced like our real names – FAD for Franklin Alexander DiLapio and MOD for Marco Ogden DiLapio. Now it’s TDA and PJA – pronouncing them, one sounds like stuttering and the other throwing up. You know, Marco, if you get tired of Pete, PJ wouldn’t be half bad – kind of classy even.”

“I will take that under advisement, as judges say.”

“You know at first we’re going to slip up like I just did and call each other by our real – old – names out in public. It’ll be difficult to explain ‘Marco’ in place of ‘Pete’ as a simple slip up.”

“Practice, I guess – practice, practice, practice.”

“Do you think we’ll ever forget our real names, *Pete*?”

“Of course not, *Dave*. We’re 13 and 19 for god sake.”

“That’s 15 and 21, *Pete*.”

“Thanks for the reminder, *Dave*. When’s my birthday?”

“Give me a minute here. . . . Okay, December 7th. Mine is March 15th. Those will be easy to remember; December 7th is the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and March 15th is the Ides of March – the day Shakespeare killed off Caesar.”

“So our birthdays both celebrate horrible event in history.”

“I said they’d be easy to remember not fill the world with pleasant memories.”

Frankie/Dave continued looking through things in the back.

“Would you believe it? Here’s a box of school books marked 7th, 8th, and 9th grades. I guess that’s my backup to public school. I just have two months left in eighth grade. Here’s a big brown envelope in with the books. Let’s see. And would you believe this? Here is your High School diploma and transcripts all from the Champaign Public School System in Illinois. There’s more stuff for me. I’ve been set up way into the future: diploma from 8th grade dated this year and a diploma from high school dated four years from now. And, separate transcripts listing my subjects and grades cumulatively right through high school. Would you look at this,

it only gives me a B+ in Calculus my senior year. Probably because I can never remember 9 times 7.”

“The rest are ‘A’s I take it, like usual,” Marcho/Pete said.

“Right. I know why that was done. To make it look like I couldn’t be valedictorian – that might be checked out by a college or employer.”

“Dad was smart that way about everything, Dave.”

“NOT *everything*, Pete!”

“Sorry. Well, yeah. We have to move on from that final miscalculation.”

Dave continued taking inventory in silence. He pulled out the cell phones, turned them on, and passed one forward to his brother. Dave dialed Pete’s number. It rang. Pete answered.

“Hello, and I don’t care what you say; we have to stop meeting this way.”

The first genuine set of giggles of their new life ended the call.

Dave spoke.

“If I’m to be 15, I have two years of school work to catch up on in a hurry – 9th and 10th grades.”

“You love to study. Don’t say it won’t be the best sort of challenge you’ve ever had. Anyway, you already know most of that stuff.”

“What about you? I know you took off this this year on purpose, but in September you’re scheduled to start college.”

“We’ll just have to play things by ear for a while. I have most of a lifetime left for college. When the time’s right I’ll go.”

“So, do we head for Champaign, Illinois?”

“Let’s think it through, long and hard like dad suggested.”

“I can see one down side to it right away, Pete.”

“What’s that, Dave?”

“Being that close to the schools we are supposed to have attended, an employer or somebody might be easily tempted to check out our story – call a teacher or the guidance counselor. If we’re far away from there, more than likely they wouldn’t.”

“Interesting. We have time before we have to make

that decision.”

“For the first time, I’m hungry,” Dave said. “It’s been almost ten hours since lunch.”

“There’ve been signs about a café up ahead – 24 hours and an endless cup of coffee.”

“Think we dare actually go into a café, Pete?”

“Probably will eventually. Way out here in the middle of nowhere might be a good place to practice. Shouldn’t be questions asked in an all-night café.”

“That must be it,” Dave said pointing – “the building with sign than says, Café Open All Night.”

“We may need a story – two kids on the road late at night might look suspicious.”

It had been Pete. Dave made his way back into the front seat.

“Here. I brought light jackets from a suitcase. It’ll be chilly outside, I imagine. How about this for a story: Our older brother is getting married someplace out ahead of us and we are going to be in the wedding party?”

“Hmm. Should work. Doubt if it’ll come up, you think?”

“Remember our new motto: Be Prepared!”

“Better make that: Always Be Over Prepared!”

“Gottcha, big bro, Pete.”

“Good, little pain in the ass, Dave.”

Pete turned off the road and came to a stop in the nearly empty parking lot. It was a small, white, wooden building with a steeply pitched roof. There were three large windows across the front, each apparently home to a booth. From outside, peeking in, it looked to be deeper than it was wide. The six wooden steps just might pose a problem for those in wheelchairs. Such an entrance was unheard of back in the city.

They entered into a small area that held the register on a counter directly in front of them and coat racks on the short, wall to the right. The main room was to the left. A sign read, ‘Seat yourself.’ Pete pointed to the booth in the far corner in front and they took seats across from each other. They had been carrying their jackets so they laid them on the seats next to the outside wall. It hadn’t been as cool and Dave had figured.

There were no menus. Dave hitched his head toward the counter flanked by with stools with red seats and no backs. He was more or less facing it across the room. Behind it was a food pass-through from the kitchen. Above that was a list of their offerings. Pete had to strain his neck and turn to see it. A woman in her way-past-60s appeared through the swinging half doors from the kitchen. She filled a water pitcher, set it on a tray, added two glasses and sets of silverware wrapped in paper napkins. She turned and approached them with a big smile.

“Gentlemen,” she said as she began distributing the items around the table. “I’m Madge. Serving breakfast all night. Could probably convince Harry to throw on a couple of nice thick steaks if you want. Scrambled eggs, toast, hash brown and steak makes a mighty fine late night snack for boys your age.”

“And just what would such a feast cost two absolutely delightful cross country vagabonds who can regale you with delightful conversation on most any topic of your choice?”

“That had been Dave – the charming, if hard headed one with the appealing smile and a line a mile long.”

Madge turned to Pete.

“I hope you keep this one on a leash.”

“Oh, I do. He’s only running free right now because the guys at the filling station back there said the waitress in here could handle a brown bear in heat if necessary.”

“That was probably Jake, back there. He takes the cake – but he’s *right* of course. Ten bucks apiece with pie and a drink – that includes the delightful conversation discount.”

There had been no filling station stop, of course – good fortune seemed to be with them.

“Pie for breakfast. Now, that’s a novel idea,” Dave said. “I’ll have hot chocolate and my brother will have coffee – black and strong for the road.”

She looked at Pete as if for confirmation. He nodded and smiled.

“Steaks both medium well, please,” he added.

Once she was out of whisper range, Dave had a question: “Do we have twenty bucks between us. We didn’t take any money from the boxes.”

"I have about fifteen," Pete said. "You?"

"A five and several ones. We'll cover it, then. Eating out is going to be expensive."

"We'll get the hang of budgeting – granted, something we've never had to do – but tonight, this is a celebration."

"I don't see how you figure that – mom and dad gone and our life in shambles, and all."

"Look at your ID card."

"So."

"Now, look at that wall calendar."

"So? I don't get it. It's March 15th . . . Oh! I see. It's my birthday – Thomas David Martin's *first* birthday."

"Let's make that your 15th – I already did my diaper duty on your behalf. You're officially fifteen now. Congratulations, old man."

"It feels right, you know," Dave said. "It really is my birthday – the first day of my new life. Where are the scantily clad dancing girls? Big brothers are expected to see to such things."

"I just imagine Madge, there, could cut quite a rug – that meant 'dance' in mom and dad's day."

That had been more than a chance mention. Pete believed he needed to see that they kept the good memories about their parents alive, even if at first it was going to be painful. Pete had a good head start on his brother, having had a year or so to begin coming to grips with the situation – the situation being that his father had been a ruthless, merciless, gangster, responsible for unspeakable crimes and inflicting horrible suffering and uncountable deaths.

On the other hand, he had loved his family with every fiber of his being. He maintained a happy family life with lots of laughter and instilled the unmistakable feelings of self-worth and personal dignity in his children. The children had never wanted for anything – arguably not truly a positive feature of a home, but, appropriate or not, it flowed from his love.

Pete found it less difficult to keep those two distinct sides of his father separate than one might think, partly because for his first sixteen teen years he had only known the loving and benevolent side of him and partly because he had, in recent years, come to understand how much the man hated

the required, evil side of his life.

The boys' grandfather – the original Don of the DiLapio Family – had been a ruthless and unforgiving man. He had his eldest son killed for repeatedly disobeying him. With that possible – likely – consequence made real to him as a fifteen-year-old, it gave the boys' father no choice in the life he would follow; there was no way to leave a 'Family' once one was worked into it. *Their* father, however, had planned for years to build the perfect plan so they *would* be free of it.

It had been two plans, of course – the Brazil Plan if things went exactly according to plan and the Old Filling Station Escape Plan if they didn't. The South American option was still open and Pete had been well drilled in how to execute it. The boys felt a strong allegiance to their country so leaving it would require a good deal of thought and discussion.

"Two steaks, thick and medium well," Madge said serving the plates with some flair. "Plates will be hot."

With each side on a separate plate the table was suddenly filled to overflowing. She looked at Dave.

"Hot chocolate – Marshmallows or plain?"

"Marshmallows, please."

"Real or syrup?"

Dave had to think for a moment, then he understood.

"Real, please."

"In the drink or on the side?"

"On the side, please. I had no idea it would require so many decisions to order hot chocolate."

"Just wait 'til you order your pie, honey."

She tweaked him on his cheek and winked. He had no idea why, but he offered his default grin in return.

They agreed the food was almost as good as Hattie – their cook – had prepared for them all those years. The topic gave rise to a concern Dave had been thinking about. He voiced it with some reluctance.

"You think . . . Hattie and Agatha (the maid) are safe. They wouldn't have any reason to hurt them, would they?"

"They're fine. No need to be concerned."

"When you say that with some degree of conviction I may believe you."

Pete shrugged. It highlighted for him that he really needed to be honest with his brother even about the darker side of things. Getting some horrible truth out in the open was probably less cruel in the long run than making him live forever not knowing. He decided to put that off until next time.

After hearing the list of possible dessert choices – ten varieties of pie, one crust or two, hot or cold, ice cream, whipped topping or plain, an eighth of a pie or a quarter – they settled on a quarter, mixed berry, cold, with ice cream.

“How much do we tip?” Dave asked across the table.

“I think dad always tipped 30%,” Pete offered.

“Wow. I think I’ll be a waitress. That will drain our wallets tonight won’t it?”

“We still should have just about the right amount.”

He was right – every last bill was left on the table.

“What are we going to do for sleeping?” Dave asked as they walked to the van.

“Don’t know about you, but I plan to close my eyes, for starters.”

“A comedian. I’m serious – in the van, sleeping bags along the road, a motel?”

“I have to admit I haven’t given it any thought,” Pete said. “I assume you haven’t either.”

Dave’s head went to work.

“We could arrange room in the van. By stacking things up along the sides we could make an aisle down the middle of the back for you. I could curl up on the front seat.”

“You say we have sleeping bags?”

“Yes, and pillows and a tent of some kind. The van’s stocked like a bunker awaiting world war three.”

“Good for dad. Can you imagine the amount of time he spent planning for us and gathering just the right equipment?”

Dave threw him a look that indicated he was still some distance away from ‘good for dad’ kind of thoughts. Pete let it drop. He’d keep trying.

“Let’s look at the atlas,” Dave suggested. “We’re about half way across Pennsylvania – maybe not quite.”

They opened the side door on the van and spread out the atlas. Pete held a flashlight and Dave searched the pages,

soon finding the right one.

“Where are we on this thing?” he asked.

Pete worked his finger around the page for only a moment and then pointed.

“This is the route we’ve been following – state route 192. There will be some serious mountains just ahead of us. I’d rather navigate them in the daylight.”

“Here’s a park symbol, see,” Dave said pointing. “Just up the road. Maybe camp for the night?”

“Let’s go check it out. You know about tents?”

“Henry David Thoreau Summer Camp – three summers – remember. I am the all-time Thoreau ax throwing champ in the ten to twelve-year-old division.”

“Like I asked, you know about tents?”

“You missed the joke.”

“What joke, little brother?”

“I said I was the ‘*throwing*’ champ at Camp *Thoreau*.”

“Ah! I did miss it. Not bad. I guess I’m not tuned in to catch humor just now.”

Dave understood about that, but he would keep trying to lighten the mood.

They drove for half an hour before beginning to see signs touting the several features of the park: horseback riding, trails, swimming, and most attractive to the boys at that moment, camping by the day or week. Well, to be honest the *most* attractive feature to them had been the large picture of a well-tanned, bikini clad young woman holding a beach ball, but it was more related to their nighttime fantasies than to their survival, so they let it go with no more than raised eyebrows and a skip or two of their hearts.

With the entrance in sight just ahead on the left, Pete immediately pulled over off of the road to the right.

“What’s up?” Dave asked.

“Money. We need to divvy up some of the money from the boxes so we can each be carrying some.”

“Excellent, big brother. That’s why I keep you around. We hardly ever used money in our whole lives, did we? We just signed for things or used our credit card. I guess those days are gone forever.”

“Not forever, I’m thinking, just for the time being until we

get established as the Martin boys.”

“Suppose that will ever sound right – natural – the Martin Boys? DiLapio has a rhythmic lilt to it. Martin just sits there, languishing in its dullness.”

“Right or not, it better start coming automatically, Thomas David Martin.”

“I understand, Peter James Martin, born December 7th in Champaign Illinois, first son of Juanita and William Martin, previously of Springfield, Missouri.”

“Very good, bro!”

“Yeah. About what, one percent of what we still have to learn about ourselves?”

“Juanita,” Pete said thoughtfully. “Pretty sharp. Will help explain our beautifully tanned skin.”

Dave held up his arm, and after spending a moment surveying it, nodded. Whether that was offered in reaction to ‘pretty sharp’ or ‘beautifully tanned’ was not apparent.

Pete circled back to the more pertinent topic.

“Let’s each carry a hundred in twenties to begin with.”

Dave took out one of the boxes and began counting out the bills.

“How about I give you an extra hundred-dollar bill from the box to use in paying for the camping? That will begin giving us change from the billions of hundreds in here. Sometime we probably do need to count it, don’t we?”

Pete nodded.

“Good thinking. That’s why I keep *you* around, you know.”

They shared a faint smile and held it for a long moment. It recognized that it was just the two of them. It recognized they were on their way into a new life. It recognized their unspoken pledge to weather, together, whatever the future had to offer.

Pete pulled back onto the road and had soon turned into the park. About fifty yards off the highway, in among a stand of pine trees, sat the gate house to their left. There was a sign.

‘Do not honk for service – respect the wild life and other campers.’

“Hmm. It says what *not* to do to get service,” Pete said.

“I wonder what you do *to* get service?”

His question was answered for him. A uniformed man – well, brown button down the front shirt and matching slacks – opened a door and approached the van. He put on his wide brimmed dark brown hat. Pete rolled down the window.’

“Got room for a couple of tent campers?”

“Sure do. Ten bucks for a twelve hour overnight stay. Fifteen for a full day. Fifty for five and an extra fifteen for any weekend day.”

“I assume if we start with one day we can extend that,” Pete said, really asking.

“Certainly.”

The ranger bent down and looked in through the window.

“That your brother?”

“I guess I’ll claim him if that’s necessary. I’m Pete and he’s Dave. Martin is the last name.”

The man offered a cordial salute across Pete to the younger boy.

“I’ll need to see your driver’s license.”

Pete glanced at Dave giving the hint of a smile as he worked his wallet out of his back pocket.

“Here you go, Sir

The ranger spoke as he copied the information onto his clipboard.

“Ah. Illinois – Champaign. My son went to the university out there. Your license plate number, please.”

Pete had no idea. Surely their adventure would not be tripped up before it even got a good start.

“12-3645,” Dave said, leaning down so he could look up into the ranger’s face. “Pete here’s terrible with numbers. I even have to keep track of his girlfriend’s measurements for him.”

Pete played along.

“At least I have a girlfriend with *real*, three dimensional measurements, small fry. How is Miss August, by the way?”

The ranger chuckled. The boys smiled. Pete’s heart began beating again.

The ranger leaned down to speak to Dave.

“You have any ID, son? Not required.”

“Sure. Probably good for you to have it case the trolls carry me off tonight.”

The ranger smiled.

He handed over his ID card. The ranger copied the necessary information and handed it back. The ranger marked a small map and handed it to Pete. He had traced the route to their lot in pencil. Pete paid for one full day.

“Drive with lights on low beam. May be deer on the road at night. They get both dumb and careless with light in their eyes. Your lot is number 53 on the left side of the road. A good private spot. You’ll see the electrical hook up on the pole at the end of the short lane – that’s the best place to pitch your tent. This is the office phone number in case of emergency.”

He pointed at the brochure.

“Rest rooms and shower rooms here. Water spigots about every thirty yards along the roads. Swimming pool at the center of the camp grounds – lifeguards on duty 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. The rest of the time you drown at your own risk. (He chuckled.) Fires only in the fireplaces, please. The trailers that house the Ladies of the Evening sit on lots 22 and 79.”

They boys did a quick double take.

“Gottcha! One of the many pleasures this job affords me. Have a great night. One day’s fee will take you to noon the day after tomorrow – you arriving so late.”

“Thank you. You’ve been both helpful and kind.”

“Mamma insisted on those things. To this day, if I find myself being short with somebody I still expect a whomp up long side my head.”

“He chuckled himself back inside. Pete moved them on along the road. It was almost a mile away.”

“Lots and lots and lots of privacy, I’d say,” Dave said as they spotted the pole on the left signaling Lot 53.”

“Do I detect the term ‘*privacy*’ suddenly taking on a twinge of uneasiness for you?” Pete asked.

“Not sure what to call it. I’ve never been this isolated in the dead of night in the middle of nowhere, before. Maybe I should keep the leather case under my pillow tonight.”

Pete got the message – the artillery, just in case. Interesting how circumstances can modify initial opinions.

“Whatever makes you comfortable.”

Pete drove just past the entrance and backed in, coming to a stop some ten feet in front of the electrical post.

“Facing out for a quick get-away. I approve, big brother.”

Dave crawled into the back of the van and scooted a large box toward the side door, which Pete had already opened from the outside.

“Camping equipment and supplies, it says on top.”

“You never answered my question about tents,” Pete said as he slid open the side door.

“An irrelevant topic. When I opened the box before, I saw a set of instructions right on top. It’s called the Micro-sheath Inflatable Shelter. Guaranteed water and hail proof. I guess we’re about to see what it’s all about.”

They soon had it out on the ground. Pete hooked up a metal hooded flood light. Dave read the instructions and Pete set the small square mass of green, fiber laced, plastic close to the electric pole.

“Find the foot powered pump?”

“Yup. Right here.”

“Place it flat on the ground. Leave the rest of it folded as it is along the center front of a 12 by 12 foot area.”

Pete shifted its location accordingly.

“Begin pumping the pump. Seems the structure has a thick, double wall with about a quarter of inch of space in between that fills with air and provides a stable structure. No center poles – no poles of any kind. There are eight metal stakes that we pound into the ground through the openings in what it shows to be flaps around the perimeter at the ground.”

“Okay. Here goes. This may take all night. Remember those plastic mattresses we have for the pool that have to be inflated this way? Takes forever.”

With the first depression of the pump, the green mass began springing to life – unfolding itself. By the fifth, it was standing – not fully erect, but nearly. By the tenth, it was rigid and fully assembled.

“Well, I’ll be. I guess a little air goes a long way. I apologize to its genius inventor.”

They soon had the stakes pounded in place attaching it

firmly to the ground.

“Like it was always here,” Pete said. “Sure not going anywhere.”

“Look,” Dave said beginning to point out the obvious. Its twelve feet square and shaped like an arch right to left with straight up and down back and front. There’s one window on each of three sides with roll up and down flaps. A door, a floor, and two built-in air mattresses – one along the right wall and one along the back. That will call for a big decision.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Heads or feet?”

“What?”

“Touching, there in the corner. Wouldn’t be a head on one and feet on the other, now would it?”

“I see. I will let that be one of your first high level decisions for us.”

“I vote heads together. That way if we hear untoward sounds in the night we can whisper back and forth about them.”

“*Untoward?*”

“*Troublesome.* No idea where I picked it up. You need not thank me.”

“Well, I vote we turn in. Run the light cord in through the flap there near ground level in back – the one labeled ‘Electrical Entrance’ – and bring the box inside. How about you do those things and I’ll lock up the van.”

With the light hanging from one of the two permanent ropes that crisscrossed the seven foot high ceiling from corner to corner, and the box deposited inside, just to the left of the door, Dave had his part finished. Pete returned with a pamphlet of some kind in hand.

“The manual for the Van. Get this, an alarm system that we can also hook into our cell phones. That baby has bullet proof everything – tires, windows, the sides and top and undercarriage. It’s water proof with air tanks for breathing and it’s fire proof up to an hour at 2,100 degrees. I guess we carry a part of the old ways with us, Dave.”

“Actually, above and beyond my immediate feelings of revulsion, loathing and seething anger about anything connected with our past, I find a good deal of comfort in that

information.”

“Pete began to laugh.”

“What? I was serious about *all* of that.”

“I’m sorry. I really do understand. It’s just that it’s been a long time since the two of us have been alone together for this long at one time. I guess I sort of forgot how you were.”

“I’m laughable, you’re saying?”

“Oh, no. Well, yes, but not in that way. Just you being you. You’ve always had a slightly different take on things and you use dollar words where most of us mortals use nickel or dime words. Nothing wrong with any of that. It’s wonderful, in fact. You notice things nobody else does – like saving our butts tonight by knowing the van’s license plate number. Me, I’m just another 19-year-old stiff who, all my life has tried to be like all the other kids so I’d fit in. You’ve always insisted on being yourself and doing things your own way, regardless of the consequences. Mom used to say that you’d rather fail doing something your way, that succeed using somebody else’s.”

Dave nodded and shrugged. He couldn’t imagine being any other way.

“I do have one confession to make, Pete. You know that diaper problem you mentioned earlier? Well, I still hate wearing clothes, but on that I usually bow to social convention.”

“I am well aware of that.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been in your room after you were asleep at night – boy who likes to sleep on top of his sheets wearing nothing, but the nighttime air.”

“I see, so we might say you ‘nude’ the ‘naked’ truth all along.”

“That was *terrible*.”

“Your smile belies your contention – that means your expression contradicts your words. You do know, ‘contradicts’, don’t you.”

“Did dad pack me a pocket dictionary in any of those boxes?”

The comment immediately turned Dave sober and he drew up his lower lip. He couldn’t help it; he felt betrayed by

the most important person in his life.

Pete was sorry, but he believed he needed to keep trying. He went for the automatic, age old reaction from a big brother – a head lock and a full minute of grinding knuckles against little brother’s scalp. Dave squealed and kicked and flailed. Once over, it called for cheek busting smiles and laughter, and reclaimed memories from their little boyhood days, when that scenario had played out to the tune of actual annoyance rather than brotherly love.

The heat from the light bulb kept it comfortably warm inside their *Micro-Sheath Inflatable Shelter*. They spread sheets on the mattresses, but left the blankets in the box. Once the light was out they were soon asleep – something that would amaze them both the following morning.

* * *

“Pete. Pete. Wake up. I hear something outside the tent.”

Pete sat up.

“You hear it?”

Pete nodded.

Together they peered out the window into the darkness. What they saw had to be the worst kind of news; six men, spread eight feet apart with long guns, were moving slowing in their direction.

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CHAPTER TWO

You Scratch My Tent and I'll Scratch Yours!

Before panic had completely overtaken them, Dave pointed out the window and whispered.

"Isn't that the Ranger? Why is he with the bad guys?"

Since it was obvious to the men that the boys were inside the shelter, Pete figured turning on the light so they could see what was going on couldn't do them any harm. That may or may not have been the best decision. Dave had the leather case open, suddenly realizing he had no idea what to do with a hand gun. They looked nothing like the six shooters he'd seen on reruns of The Lone Ranger.

The moment the light went on they heard the Ranger calling out.

"Hey. Martin boys. Ranger Cal out here. Open up."

Pete complied with the request – just enough to stick his head outside.

"Peter, isn't it?" he began as he approached. "Got a report of a young mountain lion roaming the park. Just stay inside and you'll be fine. A young one is more likely to roll over on its back and want its belly rubbed than do any damage. Plenty of small game this season so it won't be hungry. You alright with that."

Dave made room to stick his head out below his brother's.

"So, you're saying it might not have been a good idea for me to have left that saucer of milk outside the door this evening?"

It produced a chorus of chuckles from the men. The ranger waved them back inside and the group continued on into the park.

Pete zipped the door closed and they sat on their mattresses backs against the walls

"*Whew*, as it always says in books when they get to this point," Dave said.

"You are really something else, little brother. Not sixty seconds after we both thought we were as good as worm fodder you're cracking jokes."

"Some crack jokes, some wet their pants. I've now

done the first and believe I am merely seconds away from adding the second. Think it's safe for a short visit to Mother Nature's latrine out there?"

"I would certainly prefer it be out there if I have a choice. I'll keep watch from in here and call the gate house if I see you're being dragged off into the woods."

Dave unzipped one side of the door and slipped outside, not without a comment of course.

"If I don't survive tell my fans the last thing I did was offer a p^{ee}ce sign."

"Go! Literally, go! It wasn't worth a comment."

"A yet you just . . ."

"I have the power to zip you out, you understand."

Pete remained seated. Presently, he was startled by scratching at the rear of the tent. 'The cat?' he wondered. He moved close and turned, kneeling down to investigate. Oddly, the scratching intruder was giggling.

"Not funny, Thomas David Martin! Get your butt in here."

Dave was quickly back inside. The dark had never been his friend.

"As a parent figure, you're just no fun at all, Peter James Martin."

"Parent figure?" Pete asked zipping the door shut. His inflection had been that of a question.

"Sure. I'm no dummy you know. I'm the younger one. You're the older one – by quite a bit. You're in charge. I get it. I'm okay with it. It's how I want it to be, *daddy*."

Dave flung himself onto his mattress and kicked his feet in hysterics. Pete couldn't help but catch the giggles, as well. They were both relieved that conversation had taken place. It was one Pete had been reluctant to begin, but knew had to take place. It was one that greatly relieved Dave. The idea of being fully responsible for himself at thirteen was terrifying.

"What time is it, anyway?" Pete asked.

"Two twenty. Middle of the night. Suppose we can sleep?"

"We did earlier. I'll get the light."

"It's a three-way bulb. I suppose we could leave it on low," Dave said.

“Sounds like an excellent idea. Low it will be.”

His younger brother was uneasy in the dark – *disquieted*, Dave would have called it. Pete was surprised. One thing was becoming very clear to Pete during those past eighteen hours – as brothers went, they *really* didn't know each other well at all. They loved each other and trusted each other, but they really didn't have a whole lot beyond that. They had lived in the same house and had rooms next door to each other on the third floor, but had led very different lives. They met each day at breakfast and again at dinner. In between they had very little contact and even at meals, conversation was mostly back and forth between each of them to their parents. Pete wondered if he should mention that so they could catch each other up on their interests and so on, or if the recognition of their ignorance about each other might bring even more uneasiness to Frankie – that is, Dave. Taking on the parent role was not going to be easy.

It came unexpectedly – soft – sincere.

“Good night, Pete.”

Pete couldn't remember ever hearing that from his brother before.

“Back at ya, Dave; good night, partner.”

Something about the exchange required the unexpected trickle of tears down four cheeks onto two pillows.

* * *

By sunup at 7:10 the next morning the park was alive with the cheerful sounds of birds – well, cheerful to early rising, eager to get going, Dave – annoying, to sleep in 'til five minutes before breakfast, Pete. Dave's eyes popped open, eager to meet another day. Dave's languished in a sluggish flutter for long moments, fighting the pitiless light and urgently wanting to celebrate the darkness for just a while longer.

Neither boy knew one bird from another, but they were used to birds in the morning; their estate was encircled by woods five yards deep, which had been home to a wide variety of species. That was the woods that grew just inside the fifteen-foot-high stone wall with iron gates and guards at the gate houses.

When Pete finally forced his eyes open, stretched himself to life and sat up, he saw Dave was missing. There

was a note on his pillow.

'Gone to shower. If I'm not back by eight o'clock, it means I probably wandered into the girls' side of the facility by mistake and they refuse to let me go.'

Pete shook his head, slipped into pants and set out in search of the showers. Well before he entered the small, rustic building he heard a boy singing at the top of his lungs – probably Dave, although he couldn't remember ever having heard him sing – not since his voice changed at least.

"Hey Pete. Great showers. Liquid soap dispensers. I brought a towel for you figuring at this early hour that might not enter your grey matter. Glad to see you remembered pants. What are we going to do for breakfast? I recall there are cans of hash, bread for toast – we can do that over the fire – instant juices, and something called powdered eggs – the picture suggested a scrambled like texture. Also cans of fruit and two canned hams."

"You can decide while I wake up and flush the road dust off my body. I even have grit in my teeth. This does feel good. Soap smells like a girl I dated once."

"Well, I better get out before I prune up," Dave said. "I'll go get our first home cooked meal started. I'm really looking forward to roughing it for a while. This is your towel here on the bench."

"Thanks. Sounds good. We have lots to talk about. A ton of decisions to begin thinking through, plus all that new personal stuff."

"Gotcha! Code talk. Very good for this early in your day."

Pete hadn't intended any code talk, but he'd admit to it if it made him seem smart.

By the time he got back to their camp site, Dave had a fire going and several things cooking.

"I found unlisted pans and this skillet in the old leather trunk at the rear of the van. It also contained things like flour, sugar, dry pancake and biscuit mix, and dry milk. The milk tastes awful, but should work for pancakes and whatever else takes milk. One big thing is missing."

"My dictionary?"

That morning Dave was able to smile about it.

“No – well, yes, actually – but I meant a cookbook. It’s like having all the parts to a tractor with no instructions on how to put them together.”

“Have you even ever seen a tractor, Dave?”

“You missed my point.”

“Oh, I *got* your point. *My* point was we really don’t know diddly squat about each other.”

“I know,” Dave said. “I’ve been thinking about that this morning – most everything called it to mind yesterday. Here’s my thinking on it; we can feel bad about that distance that’s grown up between us and struggle through some process of trying to get each other up to speed on things, or we can just enjoy getting to know each other – let it flow as it will flow – a new surprise at every corner. My vote is for the second option – less stressful at several levels and it fits right in with your ‘grand adventure’ suggestion about all this.”

“My suggestion?”

“Sure. A few minutes into our escape. I was really down, talking about being stuck in limbo forever and you said I had to start thinking about our new life as being a *grand adventure*. That helped me more than anything so far I think. Thanks, parent figure.”

“You’re welcome, whatever you are. I hope as I come up with other memorable gems like that you will keep track of them and pass them along – even a parent figure’s ego needs a boost from time to time – I am suddenly learning.”

“You’re going to be just great especially since you have your secret weapon along.”

“My secret weapon?”

“Sure. ME! One advantage for you is that we are finally going to get to become best friends. Second, I figure that by the time you make all your mistakes raising me, you’ll be ready to become one whale of a father.”

Pete wasn’t sure how to respond so he didn’t.

“Smells good. What you got?”

“Scrambled egg thingys – figured we needed to know if they were any good – add water, stir and scramble – seems to have worked so far. And ham slices and reconstituted yellowish sort of juice. It won’t be refrigerator cold but the water her is really cool. Toast will be up to each of us. There

were metal hot dog forks so I skewered two pieces of bread and they're ready for the fire. Won't be butter and I didn't open the jam because it says it has to be refrigerated afterwards."

"Sounds good. If not, of course, I leave you behind. I figure Ranger Cal can use a pet."

"Speaking of the ranger, that's him stopping in his pickup out there at the end of our lane."

Pete turned around to look.

"Probably wondering how we got on with kitty last night."

Dave waved as the man approached them on foot.

"Hey. Just in time for ham and scrambled something," he said.

"Smells great. That's usually a good sign. I've eaten, but thanks. Comfortable last night?"

"Yeah, once the militia passed without taking prisoners. Find the cat?"

"No. Them big cats have a inbuilt dislike for humans. We were mostly just spreading our scent around to scare him off."

"Speaking of scent, we used the showers this morning." Dave said. "They're great. We feel presentable again. Thanks."

"Part of the package. What I really stopped by for was just to relay a piece of information. None of my business – not prying – just information. There was a man here a half hour or so ago inquiring about two boys – his nephews, he said. Sort of a scruffy looking man in his forties wearing a suit – 6 feet tall, 250, white, full red beard and hair. He said he was supposed to meet up with them, but he wasn't sure if it was this park or the next one on west. Described a couple of Italian youngsters – one 13 and one 17. Said he didn't know what kind of vehicle. I told him there weren't any kids here those ages or with Italian sounding names. The plate on his black Lincoln was New York – from the city, I think. He didn't leave any contact information – odd I thought. Like I said, none of my business, though. I'm here if you need anything. You two have a great day. And, oh, there's a family that pulled into lot 40 early this morning with a couple of teen age

girls – for what that might be worth.”

He winked.

“Well, even though it’s a false alarm we appreciate the head’s up,” Pete said. “Very thoughtful.”

“Do they ever let you sleep, Cal?” Dave asked.

“I manage. Later.”

They waited to talk until he pulled away.

“So? What do you think?” Dave asked clearly agitated.

“A mob guy?”

“There seems to be a mob guy rule, Dave – Always travel in pairs. It seems unlikely one would be alone.”

“Maybe just a coincidence, then?”

“Maybe, but I don’t think we should chance it.”

“You really look worried. Suddenly our Grand Adventure feels more like a terrifying journey. Shall we leave?”

“Let’s think about the possibilities – like dad told me we need to give everything a long hard think through before we make a decision.”

“Well, how about this, for a starter question?” Dave began. “I’m thinking if he was after us, he’d have expected that if the Ranger was protecting us, he’d relay to us about the man so the man would stick close to see if we left immediately.”

“Believe it or not I followed you and that makes sense, I guess, although I’d think he’d think time was precious here at the beginning of his chase, so he’d move on, not wanting us to get too much of a head start. Probably depends on how believable Ranger Cal was.”

“Do you really think they’ll be after us, Marco, er, Pete?”

“I think we have to believe they are. Also, I just imagine the FBI may be looking for us, too.”

“Why the FBI?”

“Follow me, here. Dad, a long time suspected mobster, and his wife are killed and his two children are missing. Could the other mob have kidnapped them for some reason? Could the boys have just taken off to get away? Regardless, they could be in danger. Either way we’re missing persons. Could the kids have also been killed and the bodies just not been found yet? If still alive, what might they know about their

father's operation they could tell the authorities?"

"I see. Much more complicated than I figured. Much more depressing than I figured. So, two groups after us?"

"With this red bearded guy, I'm counting three."

"I see what you mean. A red beard really doesn't seem likely to be Italian," Dave said trying to sort things out.

Pete nodded.

"And probably not FBI. I think they are typically clean shaven."

"And most likely not driving a Lincoln," Dave added.

"Good point. But who or from whom? I don't get it – the third guy."

"Well, we are paid-up here until noon tomorrow so we have some time to think, I guess," Dave said. "We have food."

"Sounded like the ranger didn't provide any information about us to Red Beard – like he could have said, 'No, none those ages, but there are two here in a blue van with Illinois plates who are a few years younger and could be Italian with a very English last name that could, of course, be an alias.'"

"I get your point, Pete – he helped us stay as safe as he could. Good for him."

"He suspects something's fishy, though, you can bet on that," Pete said.

"So, where has all this discussion taken us?"

"That we stay here for a while and then bug out when it's safe."

"And how will we know when it's safe?" Dave asked.

"We won't of course," Pete said trying out his new honesty tactic.

He watched for his brother's reaction.

"Exactly what I was thinking and thanks for that, by the way."

"For what?"

"Being straight up with me. It's the only way we can go, I think – complete honesty about *all* stuff."

"I agree. A good plan. So, any ideas about the best bugging out time?"

"One twenty three in the morning," Dave said as if anybody should have known that.

Pete chuckled.

“Just what I was thinking, Dave.”

“Really?”

“Of course not. Give. How did you arrive at that?”

“Well, since check out time is noon, that time would seem reasonable – if we planned to stay here until the last possible moment to give the man time to get far away. But if we had decided to try and trick him, then we might select the magical, dark time, moment of midnight – us being just two, dumb, wet behind the ears kids. If he believes that, he’d stick around, probably for a little while after that when we don’t show up – no more than an hour I figure. Therefore, the perfect time for us – 1:23 a.m.”

“I have no better suggestion. It will give us some time to practice on our identity stuff.”

“And to get some matches.”

Pete chuckled again.

“That response wasn’t even in the ball park of what I might have expected.”

Dave offered a quick grin.

“One problem solved, so time to move on the next.”

“How did you start the fire if you didn’t have a match?”

“Didn’t say I didn’t have a match.”

“But?”

“But, I always carry a match in my wallet. Just never know when you might need one. I must admit this was the first time that I’ve needed it since I started doing it back when I was nine, but experience seems to have proved me right.”

“What else do you carry in there, a skateboard, water skis, a snow boots?”

“All very odd suggestions. What else is none of your business, but one could say it’s also for hot times.”

“You’re way too young for those kinds of hot times, little brother.”

“Remember our motto, ‘Always be over prepared’. Remember the match was in there for four years before I used it.”

Pete shrugged.

“See that it stays in there for at least four more. I assume dad had the talk with you.”

“I am inclined to say ‘no’ just so you will have to

struggle through it with me, but he tried. It was unbelievably embarrassing for him. I seemed to know more about it than he did. He was more than a little bit relieved when I informed him he was off the hook – what I needed to know I knew and any auxiliary information I was sure I could Google. By the way, if *you* have any questions . . .”

It deserved knuckles to his shoulder and he received them. It really stung but was worth a long laugh between them as Dave bent over holding his shoulder. Pete was surprisingly strong, but then he'd been a jock in high school.

“I think we are distracting ourselves from our main concern,” Dave said at last. “So, we leave at 12:23 in the morning, but where are we going?”

“Atlas time, again, I suppose,” Pete said depositing his paper plate in the trash can. “That scrambled stuff was really good and I love fried ham. Can't say the same for the juicy stuff.”

“I agree on all counts.”

Dave took care of his plate and stowed things back in the big trunk. He had thoughts.

“If we're going to be living out of the van maybe we should look into adding a small fridge – they have camping models that run on propane gas instead of electricity. It would let us have real milk, butter, ground beef for burgers, cheese, pop and stuff like that.”

“And cold water,” Pete added. “Later we need to try out the laptops and the wi-fi. You can do a search. Maybe we can find something that we can pick up in a retail outlet that we can access along the way.”

“*A retail outlet that we can access,*” Dave said with a smile. “You've already been around me too long!”

Pete raised one eyebrow. It was worth smiles.

“You said you were my secret weapon – who knows how far I may be able to go!”

Those times were comfortable – silly times between them. Still, they didn't dare set their vigilance aside for more than a few moments at a time. There seemed to be a real danger looming out in the big world. In fact, if Pete were correct, at least *three* real dangers.

“Dishes done,” Dave said tossing the last paper napkin

into the can and raising his hands as if it had been the game winning three pointer. "I've spread out the burning kindling. Fire will be out in a flash – no, in a blink, might be better. What you have in the atlas?"

They sat beside each other on the ground, backs more or less against the van. They draped the large book across their laps.

"Back to pages 87 through 89 – two, two page sections making one, long, westerly spreading, Pennsylvania."

"How about we stick to campsites for a while? I like this. There seems to be a sense of safety out in the open like this. Room to skedaddle if we need to. If there's a park either north or south of here it would offer a shift in direction. I understand that wasn't dad's instruction to you, but I'm thinking Italian men may think alike so maybe we could add a curve ball, so to speak. Also, if it weren't far, it might play the 'fool them' card."

"How's that?"

"Like I tried to imply, I'm betting they'll – and I use *they* to include all unfriendly forces – think that we'll try to put as much distance between us and the city as we can as fast as we can."

"Interesting. I would certainly not have considered the 'fool them' card."

"Perhaps my penchant for seeing the world differently from others will actually be of some real-world use," Dave said seriously. "It pushed my essays to the top of the curve in school. Who'd a thunk it might actually be useful in life? See any camping sites north or south?"

"Let's see; only about ten dozen," Pete said intentionally exaggerating. "Pennsylvania is loaded with them, lots located in state and federal parks. See: Allegheny National Forest up in the northwest corner – it's huge. Susquehannock State Forest just a bit north west of where we are here close to Lewisburg. But just look at all those smaller green enclosures across the state. Must be two dozen of them plus all the smaller roadside campgrounds."

"Looks very promising," Dave said. "The sooner we examine the laptops and wi-fi the better I'm thinking."

"Won't each big park have a website, Pete asked. "We

can narrow things down that way to begin with.”

“I’m sure they will. I’ll get on it.”

“Okay, then, big versus small – advantages – disadvantages?”

It had been Pete. He was beginning to understand that just laying out a topic for his brother soon brought more options than they could use in a lifetime – that was assuming they, indeed, had long lifetimes ahead of them. Bummer!

“Let’s talk on the way to the store,” Dave said. “Matches, remember, and I have some other ideas.”

“You! Have ideas? I just can’t believe that.”

They put things in the van and locked it before starting toward the store, which the park map indicated was near the pool in the center of the campground.

“That’s nice, you know?” Dave said.

“You’ve lost me, pal.”

“We hardly really know each other and we’re already beginning to define each other as people – you asking exactly the right questions and me with ideas about them. Me a bit uneasy about the dark last night and you sensed it and accommodated to it without mentioning it or rubbing it in.”

“I see. Yes, those are good things. Once you understand I am your Lord and Master, begin bowing down and kissing my feet, and doing my beck and call, we will be well on our way to the proper sort of understanding.

They exchanged smiles.

‘That kid’s really okay,’ Pete thought.

‘That kid’s really okay,’ Dave thought.

“Back to big or small,” Dave began. “I suppose it would be easier to blend in and hide in a big place – something bigger than this park. But, smaller ones probably have fewer rules and cost less. The big ones would probably be searched first – there are so many fewer of them so in that respect the smaller ones might be safer. We can determine the facts of those matters on the websites, I’m sure.”

“I liked the layout of the Susquehannock State Forest. You can get the information on that when we get back to our campsite. Now, what besides a box of matches were you considering?”

“A disguise for you so when we leave out of here you

won't look like yourself or your age."

"What about you?"

"I figure I'll make a nest in the back and stay out of sight. One of us instead of two should, by itself, make us less suspicious."

"I see. And you expect this tiny store to carry a full line of disguises?"

"On the back of the map the Ranger gave us it showed a beard and glasses like some old mountain man – available at the store it said. Just a thought."

"I'm not saying, no."

"Why are we going this way?" Dave asked after just a few minutes. "The pool is that way."

"But camping lot 40 is this way."

"Ah. The female of the species. I see how your several extra years of having hormones raging through your system have honed your sensitivity to the fairer sex. What do we say to a girl if we come upon one?"

"Listen and learn, grasshopper."

Lot 40 held no girls – a car, two small tents, but no girls.

"On the trails or swimming I guess," Pete said. "They have no idea what they missed."

"I'm certainly not used to hearing you talk like that, Marco, er Pete. That's the third or fourth time I've messed up on your name."

"I get the idea that when the topic of girls comes up *your* hormones scramble your neuro-circuitry, small fry. Have you really had many girls as friends?"

"I'd say so. But, it's really only been the past year that I've habitually noticed they are different from boys. Well, that really didn't say it right."

"You mean view them with a sexual interest where before you knew all about their parts, but they hadn't yet started to hold your attention."

"Exactly. One might think you've already been where I am? Count on fielding numerous questions for me – probably as a big brother rather than as a parent figure."

More chuckles as they shifted course and followed the trail marked *To Pool and Store – 100 yards*.

They settled for a three pack of Bic lighters. The beard

set came in three sizes and three colors – black, brown and gray.”

“People won’t by your young physique as having a gray beard. Since your hair is black, how about the black set?”

By the time Dave had completed his logical rambling, Pete was already trying on the large, black edition. It came with clear glass wire rim glasses.

Dave clapped and giggled.

“It’s you, Pete. It’s really you!”

“Yea or nay on sun glasses,” Pete asked, trying on several styles. “We should each have a pair anyway since we’ll be outside a lot.”

“Definitely, yea. Doubt if it matters which you wear, so get some you’ll like when you’re not in costume.”

“How do these look both ways? . . . Here with the beard . . . Here without.”

“Look fine to me. I suppose I should get a different style. We don’t want people to think we’re attached at the hips, you know.”

“Why not? We’re brothers and I’m proud of that.”

“Okay, since those are the ones I really wanted for myself in the first place.”

They walked to the register and laid out their selections. Pete turned to Dave and pointed to the candy.

“You still like PayDays?” Remember when you were real little and mom wouldn’t allow you to have them for fear you’d choke on the peanuts.”

“Yeah. And you’d get one, pretending it was for you and then you’d get it to me later on. I loved you for that. It made me feel like I was important to you. I’d forgotten. We mustn’t forget the things that make us love each other.”

Pete looked down at Dave putting on a serious face.

“Can you stretch that idea a bit to include our present circumstances?”

“What? . . . Oh. Not fair to turn my personal revelation back on me. I know what you mean. The way I remember mom and dad. I’ll work on it, okay? That’s all I can promise – but I do promise that much.”

Their purchases – disguise, lighters, glasses, and two PayDays, came to just over \$28.00.

"I had no idea sunglasses were so expensive," Dave said.

"Yeah. And we picked from the cheap rack. We never really ever had to look at the prices of things – we just got what we liked. I think it's called being spoiled rotten rich brats."

They walked to the pool before returning to their campsite. It was loaded with several dozen people, mostly old with sagging everything. Certainly nothing that revved their engines, so they moved on.

"We need to buy suits – swim suits," Dave said. "Unless my parent figure will authorize a midnight skinny dip."

"We'll look into suits at our next stop. We still have a lot to take care of before 2:23 a.m. rolls around."

Dave took that as an opening to roll out a list.

"First, now that we know what's in each container in the van, we need to organize it, pile it up appropriately, secure it all in place along the sides and back with that sack of bungee cords I found, get the laptops set up and, right after dinner, get some sack time until midnight. Then we'll collapse the shelter, stow it in the van, and be ready for the next leg of our adventure. How far away is that state park?"

"No more than a hundred miles as the crow flies to its southern border. We'll take route 144 north, just north of Potters Mill, which we'll intersect when we take 192 west from here. I guess maybe three hours."

"Wow! No offence, but you remembered more than I expected from the short time you spent with the atlas."

"You will find I am very good with directions out in world. I top the charts on spatial relations tests. That's why I'm more than just a decent athlete, little brother."

"I will add those tidbits to my growing picture of you. I'm a pretty good artist – seems we may share that spatial relations gene."

"Do you know you always smile when I call you, 'little brother'?"

"Didn't. Do now. Don't doubt it. Nobody else in the whole world can call me that."

"I suppose not, unless I decide to sell you to a band of gypsies and then, who knows?"

"I really didn't know you had a sense of humor, Pete. I'm glad you do. We laughed a lot at home, but that was mostly because of things dad said. He was a pretty funny man."

"Yes, he was, at least when he was with us."

It sounded like Pete, also, was beginning to voice his own second thoughts about the man.

"I can't imagine him doing the things you indicate he did. I'm really working hard to remember him as the dad I knew instead. Boy, that's hard, right now."

Pete offered one of those half smiles where the lower lip is pulled up a bit. It indicated he hoped he could do that as well, but he had real reservations about whether it could ever happen. Dave hadn't ever been close to it like Pete was. Perhaps, because of that, it really could work for little brother.

They went to work organizing the van. Pete turned it around, heading in toward the shelter so the side door would be closer and make packing easier. An hour later the organization met with their approval. Sleeping bags took up less useable space when rolled open on the floor right down the middle of the back. It also made for a nicely padded space that should also muffle road noises. Dave had saved space for the fridge if they found one and, of course, for the collapsed shelter up near the side door for easy access.

Outside, Pete showed Dave the auxiliary gas tanks and warned him they only had eight good inches of road clearance because of where they hung.

"You ever driven a vehicle?" he asked Dave.

"I took and passed the drivers performance test on our game box. I have the idea I could manage in a pinch."

"Maybe we can get you some practice time on back roads in the big park. It would be good in case of an emergency."

"Sounds like you are expecting emergencies, Pete."

"Not expecting – preparing for the possibility."

"Preparing for the *probability*, the way it sounds."

"You want to practice driving or not?"

It wasn't that Pete had raised his voice, but his voice had taken an aggravated tone. Dave was familiar with that from the old days. It reminded him that it was the first time he

had heard it since they left home. Odd. Wonderful.

“Of course, I want driving time. Sorry if I got gnarly, there. *Stuff*, you know.”

“Yeah. I know. *Stuff*. Me, too. I’m going to spend some time learning about Peter James and Thomas David Martin, now.”

Dave moved on as well.

“I want to get online and find out about the park and refrigerator.”

He made certain the Wi-Fi was on.

“We also still need to count our money,” he added as an afterthought.

For some reason, they seemed to be avoiding that.

They left the van – Pete always locked it and set the alarm. They found places to sit outside – Pete up against an ancient oak, and Dave backed into a fallen tree trunk.

“Got stuff about the park, here on the internet,” Dave said almost immediately. That Park’s a head full to try and spell – Susquehannock. It’s huge! 265,000 acres with forests, mountains, valleys, streams, falls, cliffs, swimming holes, trails, deer, a section called Spook Hollow and – oops, snakes. Fees seem reasonable. They suggest making reservations over the internet well in advance. Shall I do that?”

“Do they need a credit card?”

“Yes, doggone it!”

“All is not lost. The store sells prepaid credit cards. It would be a good idea to have one any way. Let’s take five hundred dollars and put it on one.”

“Great. Now?”

“I suppose. The Susqu-whatever park may already be booked.”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Dave said. “Let me check – there seem to be three main camping sites.”

While he waited, Pete sorted through the envelope of identity material mostly just to remind himself of what sort of things they had.

“Good thing we did that. They’re all full for a month. Bummer!”

“The atlas showed lots of little camping places outside

the park – probably privately owned. Maybe the Ranger knows about them. I'll give him a call."

Five minutes later Pete had spoken with the ranger and there were a number of brochures at the gate house that listed dozens of smaller sites.

"Ranger Cal has the info we need. He said he was about to come our way and he'd bring it to us. He's really a nice man. Wish there was something we could do for him."

Dave felt it didn't require his response so he left it at a nod. Cal arrived about fifteen minutes later and the boys met him at the road.

"Gonna leave us are you?" he asked as he handed the brochures out the window to Pete.

"Maybe," Dave said. "We need to get back home by next Saturday so we're trying to take in everything we can while we're here. You have a beautiful state with lots of interesting places and things going on. Hard to make choices."

"Well, I'm sure I'll see you before you leave. Have a fine day. Oh, did you find those girls?"

"Tried, but no show," Pete said.

"We believe they are the figment of the imagination of a very well preserved middle aged man with a fondness for brown uniforms," Dave added, humorously peeking out from behind his brother.

"I will miss having you two around. I remember when my boys were your age. Make your folks some grandkids like mine did for me. They're the delight of my life. Later."

Pete slid the brochures into his back, jean pocket as they walked back to the van. The comments about grandkids were immediately depressing. Pete tried to sidetrack such thoughts.

"Let's get some money and go get the credit card."

Dave bought into the distraction and wondered out loud.

"I was wondering if maybe I should also have a card with a few bucks on it in case we ever get separated."

"I was going to suggest that. Let's get out seven hundred, then, okay."

Dave nodded. Inside the van with the doors closed,

Pete sat in the passenger seat which swiveled so he could face the rear. Dave sat cross legged on the floor. He took one of the four boxes of bills from the leather case. While we're into the money shall we go ahead and count it?"

"I suppose. I *have* been wondering, but for some reason I really haven't wanted to know."

"Me, too. Exactly that." Dave said. "I vote we go ahead and make the count right now – no more procrastinating."

"Okay, let's count first, then take out the money we need. We've removed \$200 so far. How do we do this – count together or separately?"

"Faster separately," Dave suggested as he handed Pete a box.

Dave started his box first by laying the open, slipover lid, beside the bottom section and began counting the bills into it. Pete followed suit. They worked quietly and carefully with no concern about time.

"Wow! Did you get as much as I got?" Dave asked clearly amazed.

"I really have no way of answering that, yet, you know."

"Oh, yeah. I got \$25,000."

"And I got \$25,000 less the \$200 we already removed."

"I assume the other two contain the same amount," Pete said – "if that's so, that's \$100,000 dollars. That should keep us a while. I had no idea it would be that much. I don't think we should keep it all together."

"I think we shouldn't either, neither, too, maybe, wherever, whatever."

It had been Dave humorously stumbling through the possibilities. He looked around the inside of the van.

"Inside four different big boxes?"

It had been a tentatively voiced question from Dave.

"Four different places, for sure."

"How about the cooking supply trunk for one, and maybe we can make a small incision in a bedroll – the stitches at the base of the built in pillow – and insert one box in there."

"Those are good – maybe wrap up one box in the trunk in a flour sack or something."

"Good. What if we get separated from the van?" Dave asked.

“What you saying – that we need to keep some on us?”

“Nobody would ever guess a couple of boys were carrying a sizeable amount of money on them out in the big world.”

“You’re probably right. It would be scary wearing that much money, though.”

“Fanny packs or backpacks, maybe – no I hate wearing them,” Dave said amending his own suggestion. Maybe we each just carry a second, slim wallet in our other back pocket. We could carry a lot in a thin wallet with only bills in it.”

“I like that. Did you see any at the store?”

“No, I didn’t, but there will be other stores in our life.”

“Let’s at least each begin carrying five hundred instead of one, okay,” Pete suggested.

Dave agreed. They verified that the amounts in the other two boxes were the same as the first two, reloaded their wallets and distributed the boxes in several places there in the van for the time being.

“Remember how mom uses to buy Christmas presents for us in the summer and hide them until it was to wrap them – then she couldn’t remember where she’d hidden them?”

Pete did keep trying to preserve happy memories.

“That was offered as a caution to our own memories. Never fear, Dave is here.”

“Nobody can break into this vehicle so it will all be safe in here. Did you notice the door key for this rig?”

“No. Haven’t had reason to even see it I guess.”

Peter took it out of his pocket.

“Special made locks I’m sure. See. I count ten grooves or whatever the points and valleys on a key are called. I’m thinking that would be nearly impossible to pick and the windows are strong as steel.”

“I think they’re called ‘cuts’ – the points and valleys,” Dave said.

Pete nodded, taking note of the information.

“I wonder why it doesn’t use the click type of electronic key?” Pete asked.

“Car thieves are using sophisticated digital equipment that can breach that kind of a lock in short order. Sometimes the old way is the best, I guess”.

Pete nodded having learned something both interesting and important.

“Feel better about the money, now,” Dave asked.

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah. Straight out relieved and thankful to dad for supplying it, but with some real reservations about how he came about the money.”

“He had some legitimate businesses. Just assume the money came from them.”

Dave threw Pete a look, but didn't follow up by voicing his assumption that the so called legitimate businesses were probably only fronts for some sort of money laundering.

Finished there, they exited the van. Pete had a suggestion.

“Race you to the store,” squirt.

He took off across the road to the trail. Dave would give his best effort. He had a way of always giving things his best effort.

He arrived only about ten feet behind his brother who spoke first.

“Didn't have any idea you were that fast, little bro. Good going.”

“Thanks. I ran cross country at camp. I'm really good at paddling a canoe, too. May I assume you didn't hold back just now?”

“You can – our honesty thing, remember.”

Dave smiled clearly pleased with both his performance and the arrangement between the two of them.

They went inside, attended to their business and began the walk back to their campsite – each enjoying a second PayDay.

“We should stock up on these things,” Dave suggested. “I just realized we have the freedom to do things like that now.”

It was nearing noon when they crossed the road from the trail to their campsite. The ranger's truck approached from the north. It stopped and he motioned the boys to him.

“There's a family reunion today down on the lawn west of the pool. I give them a good deal on the day fee – almost 50 of them – so they fixed me a box of food big enough to feed

my extended family. Strange as it may seem, this *very well preserved middle aged man*, as I have recently been described, has diabetes so I can't eat a single thing they brought for me. I figured you two could put it away. The cold fried chicken will keep another 24 hours. I wouldn't trust the potato salad and coleslaw past sundown."

"Thank you, so much, Sir."

It had been Dave – rapidly commandeering the position of spokesman for the pair.

"Sorry to hear about the health problem," Pete added.

"Best thing that ever happened to me, boys, if you can believe that. I weighed 230 when it was discovered – well on my way to an early grave. Been 175 for the past twenty years. Feel great! Odd how terrible things like that can work to make life so much better than it had been before. They said to keep the foam cooler box with the food in it so I guess it's yours, now."

He drove on. The boys each caught the life lesson the man had delivered – terrible things often can work to make life good.

They sat on the big log with the cooler at their feet and enjoyed the food.

"Cold fried chicken," Pete began. "I have never even contemplated eating cold fried chicken on purpose. It's great."

"I had it at camp. Love it."

They spent the afternoon drilling each other on the basics of their new identities and by six had it all down pat, including their new social security numbers. They were both smart young men – another good thing that had come from their parents. That 'good things' list seemed to be growing. Someday they would be thankful for those things.

Their camp was already deep in the shadows that would soon become the dark of night. They had finished the food Cal had brought them earlier and were sitting, watching the sun move low over the trees to the west. It was not quite seven o'clock. The sky was putting on quite a show with streaks of ever changing reds and pinks playing chase among the slowly drifting clouds.

Pete spoke, pointing to the road.

"Does that look like a black Lincoln to you?"

The vehicle was still some forty yards down the road to the north.

“Could be. Hit the ground, I’m thinking.”

They did, heads lifted slightly through the tall grass, so they could see the road. The car moved slowly – unrealistically slowly they thought compared with most. They couldn’t see inside – dark windows. It slowed even more as it neared their lane. A spotlight mounted above the mirror on the driver’s side door came on and turned in their direction scanning the area.

“Belly crawl left, into the trees,” Pete said. “Stay low.”

Once among the stand of trees and brush that bordered their lot on the south, they knelt, well out of sight, watching as the sleek big car turned and entered the lane. Red Beard got out carrying a large flashlight. He walked to the van and examined it. He walked around the shelter, poking it several times as if it were something new to him. He tried to unzip the door. The padlock prevented that. He could have cut around it but didn’t. That aspect about the lock had bothered Dave right from the start.

Red Beard stood and moved the beam from his light around the campsite. The boys fell to the ground. The beam of light had come close. They each wondered if, in fact, it had revealed them to the man. He began walking in their direction.

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CHAPTER THREE

Upward and Onward!

The big man stopped at the edge of the woods moving his light from one place to another in an orderly fashion. Presently, he turned and returned to the rear of the van. He bent down as if to feel something on the lower right side of the back end, then continued around the far side of the van on his way to his car. He backed out, leaving the way he had come – toward the gate house.

The boys waited until the sound of the vehicle had faded into the distance. They returned to the campsite, standing there, hands on their hips looking around as if expecting something to have changed.

Before they could get on with anything, Cal returned and stopped at the lane. They walked to him.

“Keep it casual, now,” Pete whispered to Dave. “Nothing has happened.”

Dave began the conversation.

“Sorry, Ranger. The food’s all gone.”

“Cal chuckled. Just making my early evening rounds. Everything okay here?”

“Perfect, sir. We were just saying how we were going to miss it – and you. How many rounds do you make a day?”

“Four routine – often more. This time of night I open the gate at the bottom of the old logging road on west. Local kids like to use it for their private place. They know it’ll be open from about seven to eleven – some night I forget to close it.”

“That seems very . . . open-minded of you,” Dave said.

“If not here, they use the narrow road over on Pusher’s Hill. Not at all safe. Here they’re in no danger – from the geography, anyway.”

He chuckled.

“I take it they can easily enter it from 192,” Pete said, really asking.

Cal nodded and winked. He looked around the area more than seemed necessary.

“Well, have a good night.”

He moved on.

Dave turned to Pete, face to face.

“Does this change our plan, *daddy*?”

“It sounds like you want to lay that responsibility on me, *son*. I thought we were a team.”

Dave shrugged.

“You’re right. I was, but we are. I’m thinking you have a new idea, however.”

“I think it was really Ranger Cal’s idea – suggestion, maybe. He’s a sly old guy. I’m betting he had to know the Lincoln came in again – there is the entrance fee to pay – and he put that together with his growing suspicions about our story and came to offer us an alternative escape route if we needed one.”

“That never entered my head – brain, mind, thoughts, whatever.”

“Maybe I was wrong, Dave.”

“About what?”

“Your neurons and girls. You seem to be loopy tonight even when there are no young maidens within fifty yards.”

It garnered a smile and his shrug – a feature that was becoming a defining characteristic of the kid in big brother’s eyes. Dave didn’t know when to leave well enough alone. He spoke.

“Well, Pete, you *are* exceedingly attractive. Giggle. . . . OUCH!”

He would say it had been worth it. It seemed some sort of protective armor would be in order for his upper arms – or, he’d need to learn how to keep his mouth shut. Case closed – he’d search the internet for armor in the morning.

“I wonder what he was doing at the back of the van,” Pete said moving in that direction.

“Not sure. There’s only the license plate and that bumper sticker back there.”

“Bumper sticker? I don’t remember it.”

They stopped at the rear of the vehicle and Dave turned on the small LED light on his keychain.

“Well, he has the license plate number for sure now,” Pete said.

“But, he has no way of knowing for sure that it’s ours, right? I’m just now beginning to understand why that sticker

was put on the back. It reads, ‘*Granny and Gramp – Utah or Bust*’. That’s the disguise for the van – good thinking somebody – dad probably. It makes it seem the van belongs to a retired couple on their way to Utah. And it’s new. That’s why he felt it I’m thinking – to make sure it was current and not left over from three owners ago.”

“Your logic is impeccable, little brother.”

“Good word – *impeccable* – big brother. Bet you can’t spell it.”

“Bet you’re right. He also spent time on the other side, the passenger’s side. Let’s see what your sharp eyes may pick up over there.”

Dave shined the little light in sweeps across the side – moving from the top down. He stopped half way to the bottom on the door.

“Oh, oh, parent figure. *That* can’t be good.”

Hanging on the rearview mirror was a noose – brand new, ¾ inch rope, looking just like the ones the vigilantes used in Westerns. It had a three-foot tail.

“Now, *that*, just may just change our plans, Dave.”

Pete removed it and examined it.

“The real thing for sure, little buddy.”

“Some kind of warning, you think, Pete?”

“Let’s say at least it must hold some sort of message and I think a noose is pretty straight forward. Our lives are in danger from somebody.”

“Probably that rival mob, you think?” Dave said.

“My best guess. Let’s rethink things in the tent.”

“It’s called a shelter, but under the circumstances the slip is reasonable.”

Pete shook his head. At the *shelter*, he knelt and unlocked the padlock that lay at ground level below the door flap. Inside, Dave turned on the light – lowest brightness. They sat on the mattresses. Dave was immediately out of his shoes, sox and shirt. The heat from the light went a long way to keeping the inside warm – it had happened the night before.

“So/so,” they said at the exact same moment.

It drew no more than the slightest of smiles. Life had suddenly become frightening.

“One thing,” Dave began, “Red Beard didn’t have a

noose with him so it had to have been put there earlier.”

“Okay. That’s good. Two thoughts come to my mind immediately,” Pete said.

“Blonds and brunettes?” Dave asked.

“Cut it out. It looks like we’re just centimeters away from big trouble.”

“Sorry. Just trying to lighten things up.”

“I’ll be able to appreciate that more once we are safely away from here.”

“Me, too, actually. Go! What two things?”

“I’m going to bring the leather case in here from the van and make sure the guns are loaded. Like it or not, I’m going to make sure you know how to use them.”

“I hate thought *One*, you know. What’s *Two*?”

“We’ll still leave at 1:23 – I think that was a stroke of logical genius – but between now and then we’ll take turns staying awake and sleeping so we can monitor the road and any activity outside our *shelter*. Can you sleep in short stints, okay?”

“I’m a rapidly growing thirteen-year-old male; I can sleep anytime, anyplace for any length of time. I’ve been known to fall asleep in the shower.”

“I figured. Boy, we really don’t know any of the important stuff about each other, do we? I blame me for that – never taking time for you.”

“Or, we can just be really, really, happy that at last we’re getting to know each other right down to the most intimate aspects of our lives.”

“I don’t know about you, Dave, but I got some intimates I’m probably not going to share.”

Dave smiled and nodded.

Pete brought in the leather case and locked the door. The hand guns were already loaded, the safeties in place. He gave Dave the sixty second course in their use. They were small caliber and not automatic, so kick would be minimal and control would be no problem. They put one under each pillow – safeties on.

“Who takes sentry duty first?” Dave asked.

“I will,” Pete said. “I’m all wound up.”

“Okay. I’m off to dreamland, then. How long?”

“How’s an hour sound? That way the one who’s awake will more likely stay awake.”

“Good. Keep track of any girls’ names I may call out in my sleep.”

Pete hurled his pillow across the tent with such force it pushed cross-legged Dave over onto his back.

About a dozen slowly dying giggles later he was sound asleep.

In addition to the small, foot square, clear plastic windows on the three walls, there was also one in the door. There were roll down flaps on the inside. Pete considered turning off the light, but figured if the tent was lit it would look like somebody was still awake and keep anybody else away. For no particularly well thought-through reason, he put on his beard and glasses disguise. For no particularly well thought-through explanation, it made him feel safer.

They each stood two watches. It hadn’t been enough sleep, but once safely away, Pete figured they could pull over and rest. They pulled up the stakes and put them in their carrying sack. They set the dial on the air pump to ‘deflate’, and Dave did the honors working it with his foot. As advertised, it sucked out the air and, with only minimal help, re-folded itself right back into the neat little rectangular package it had been in the beginning.

“Does my beard make me look older?”

Sure does. You look just like Paul Bunyan.

“He wasn’t old, was he?”

“Who really cares?”

That time it was Pete who shrugged.

Dave carried the shelter and Pete the leather case, stakes, sheets and pillows. Dave had saved spots for all of those things. They looked around the campsite one last time and got in the van.

“Lock the door. . . . Seatbelt,” Pete said.

Dave smiled – his parent figure was looking after his welfare. Pete handed Dave the map of the park who lit it with his LED light.

“See here, ‘Logging Road’,” Pete said pointing. “We just follow this main road on south and then loop west and meet up with it right here. You keep me on track, now.”

Dave understood it was just a ploy to keep him occupied and feeling useful, but he was happy to play along. 'Play with the ploy' – for some reason that tickled him and lightened the otherwise very serious situation. He knew Pete was really trying hard. Dave was gradually coming to see what a tough job his brother had. Dave had always just assumed he loved his big brother, but what he had felt before didn't hold a candle to what he had come to feel during those last thirty or so hours.

Presently:

"We follow the road around to the right just ahead," Dave said.

They drove on for another ten minutes, which, at the fifteen miles an hour speed limit covered only a few miles. Both boys glanced frequently into their side mirrors just to make sure they weren't being followed. The half-moon should light any vehicle.

"Okay, the Logging Road should be just ahead off to the left. Looks like it goes down a hill or maybe it's just a slope. Can't tell geography from the drawing. Then it winds around to the right 'til it finally meets the highway."

"Oh, oh," Pete said. "May have a big problem. A vehicle sitting off just beyond our turn."

He pointed.

"I see. It's sitting back in the shadow. Do you think it's the Lincoln?"

"God, I hope not. Open the leather case, now!"

"It had not been a mere suggestion. His brother's tone had been commanding. Dave did more than he had been asked to do; he inserted his hand into the case and managed to get a proper grip on one of the handguns. He was ready. If it would be needed he had the plan – remove it, turn the safety off and flip the case so the open end was toward Pete."

Pete slowed, making ready to turn. If he would switch the lights to high beam they would be able to see the vehicle. He hesitated to do that thinking it might be better to let whoever it was think they hadn't seen him. It might just be a couple enjoying alone time, although Cal's information suggested they stayed down below on the Logging Road.

That vehicle's lights flashed on and off – twice.

"This may be it, Dave. You ready?"

"Ready."

He removed the gun and turned the safety latch.

"You going to try and outrun him?"

"Not sure. Keep your eye on it while I make the turn."

Unexpectedly, the dome light came on inside the other vehicle.

"Look, Pete!"

It was Cal sitting in his pick-up. He waved. Dave reached over and flashed their head lights and they continued down the narrow road.

"Whew! What a scare!" Dave said.

"Yeah! It was really nice of him though. He wanted to make sure we got away safely. He knew all along something wasn't right. He was taking care of us. We may have to rethink that 1:23 thing when wise, middle aged men are involved. We must write him after all this is over."

"You really think it will ever be over, Pete? Dad said, 'Once in, Always in', right?"

"But not for us. Dad worked all his adult life to make sure we never really were 'in' so we could get out."

They fell silent as they descended the narrow, dirt, road. Near the bottom of the slope, Dave spoke.

"Sometime you need to instruct me about making out in a parked car with a girl. I assume you know all about that."

Pete chuckled.

"Add one *leash and studded collar* to our shopping list."

They each smiled into the night, one wondering, and one remembering.

Dave locked the safety on the gun and moved to put it back in the case.

"Let's leave that out until we're back on the highway and a dozen miles down the road, okay?" Pete suggested.

Dave nodded.

"Sure. How'd I do?"

"You did better than any boy your age ever should have to do. I hate the gun stuff, too; I just need to know you understand that."

"I do."

"Then, I now pronounce us man and wife."

“Your sense of humor is coming along nicely, big brother. Before long I’ll have you being the life of the party.”

“I’m counting on it. Think you can find us a party?”

Pete reached over and patted Dave on his leg.

“We’re a good team, little brother. Really good!”

Just as Pete had figured, Cal had left the gate open. They reached the highway and turned left – west – in their search for route 144 that would take them generally north to the park area. Dave got on the laptop with the intention of locating some possible smaller campgrounds that sat back, away from the main roads. He found lots of webpages, but none of them took reservations.

“I guess just guide us to them starting on the south and we’ll work our way north until we find one that’ll take us,” Pete said.

Dave got to work and soon had a list and locations of seven.

“This computer is loaded with software,” Pete. I hadn’t taken time to look, before. A world map program with detailed maps of town and city streets, a first aid program, one called High School on the Run – that’s sort of ironic, I suppose – there are foreign language programs in Advanced Spanish and Portuguese, about a billion songs for guitar and piano – reminds me we should get instruments – you a keyboard and me a guitar. I’m already missing my daily practice time.”

“I was thinking about that while I was playing sentry last night. We got room?”

“We’ll make room. Maybe we need one of those roof carrier thingys.”

“Or, a bike carrier to put on the back. Those bikes take up a lot of room in here.”

“Excellent idea. I’ll add it to our list. Looks like, alphabetically, ‘bike carrier’ comes right before blonds and brunettes.”

Pete turned his head and smiled. Dave caught it and nodded, satisfied he had brought a smile. They continued in silence for some time. Dave eventually broke it.

“You think we’ll end up in Brazil?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. What do *you* think about that possibility?”

“I’d rather stay in our own country if we can. I’d like my kids to be Americans. It sounds like we’d be rich in Brazil, though, the way things have been arranged. I still don’t like the idea of dirty money.”

Pete nodded, not feeling like pursuing it just then. Dave continued.

“I suppose as soon as I can, I should get back to my school work – I still have a couple of months of 8th grade work to complete, and then Freshman and Sophomore years in order to catch up to my new age.”

“How about I leave your education up to you?” Pete said. “You love to study and learn things. Me, not so much. I’m thinking you will push yourself harder than I ever would. Like right now, for example, when I’m going to suggest you take a short vacation from it until we get some major decisions made between us.”

Dave smiled. Other than having to attend school according to the law, he had always really been in charge of his own education. He assumed his teachers’ assignments were merely suggested starting points and he usually went well beyond them. He figured the more he knew the better chance he had to have a successful and happy life.

“You going to wear that beard full time, now, Pete?”

“I guess I thought just when we figured a disguise was required – entering and leaving places. What do you think?”

“I agree. Could you grow your own? I’ve noticed you haven’t shaved since we’ve been gone.”

“Unlike most Italian boys my age, my beard really hasn’t arrived yet. Sometimes I shave before a date, but that’s more macho stuff than a necessity. I keep the dark fuzz shaved off my upper lip. I think that looks gross. By the way, you need to make a decision about that, too. You’re getting quite a shadow there under your nose.”

“I know. I’ll think on it.”

There was another moment of silence. Then it was Dave again.

“I’d really like to hear about your dates, you know. The private stuff.”

“And I’m really not going to tell you about my dates, the private stuff, you know!”

Dave nodded. It was how he had figured it would be. One thing their father had demanded of them was that they respect women and girls. That being so, Pete wouldn't share private things that went on between him and them.

There was virtually no traffic as they moved on through the night. Pete stayed well under the speed limit. They were in no hurry and he didn't want to risk a confrontation with the police even though all their papers and such were in order.

Pete realized that he suddenly really felt 21 with the new responsibilities. He wasn't sure how he felt *about* it. He wondered how Dave felt. His brother had always acted older than his years. He remembered back to a wedding the family attended when Dave was nine or ten. His father told Pete to go find him. He was sitting with the old men talking politics – and, he was holding his own. Having to *act* older would certainly pose no problem for him – heck, he'd have to work at trying to act *only* 15. *Looking* the part was going to be another matter. The next year should bring wider shoulders and more natural muscle development.

Pete thought it needed to be discussed.

"So, Dave. You've remarked about how you're afraid you don't look 15. I agree you don't. Have any ideas about handling that?"

"I've decided I'll just tell nosey parties that I didn't have my second birthday until I was four. I'm thinking the confusion should silence many, a flash of my endearing smile a few more, and what's left I'll just run from."

Pete chuckled.

"I have to ask. Had you thought about that answer earlier or did that just dribble out of your brain onto your tongue on a second's notice?"

"The latter, I guess. My mind seems to work that way. I can't remember a time when I've only had just one answer to a question. After mentioning three, most of my teachers shut me up. Mr. Marks used the 'slit your throat' sign with his index finger. Mr. Watson gave me the time out signal. Mrs. Baxter would just say, 'That's enough now, Frankie, we get the idea'."

"Speaking of three, it's going on 3 a.m. I'm tired. Let's begin looking for a place to pull off and sleep."

"There's a roadside rest stop just a short way after we

get on 144 north at Moshanon. We should be no more than a mile from that intersection now, according to the signs.”

“Sounds good. Goodbye 192. Hello 144. How far have we come?”

“Let’s see about 4 ½ inches at 12 miles an inch – about 54 miles. You must have been driving pretty slow – ly.”

“Taking time to enjoy the scene – ry.”

Dave smiled at his brother’s attempt at humor and offered more.

“In the dead of night with virtually no moon?”

“You enjoy *your* sights and I’ll enjoy *mine*. Just being extra cautious I suppose. Never been responsible for such a precious package before.”

“The money?”

“S u r e, the money. *No*, stupid. YOU!”

“Ah! I *do* feel stupid – precious, but stupid. Thanks for that.”

“Back to looking the part of a fifteen-year-old,” Pete said.

“I could let my hair grow longer. Mom has always kept it really short. I’m not sure what else. Maybe dress older if there is such a thing. I could wear a wedding band on each hand and a short but buxom blond on each arm.”

“Like you said, ‘not sure what else’. Are you really girl-crazy or is that just for my benefit?”

“Hey. I’m brand new to this hormone thing. I’m not sure how to handle it or them sometimes. You’re well past that ‘newness’ element. I need some leeway, here.”

“I needed that explanation. Thanks. I do remember, sort of. Funny how that fades.”

As they entered the rest stop there were separate areas for cars, semis and RVs. Pete figured they qualified as *car*, so he headed down that lane.

“Question,” he said. “I’ll take as many answers as you have. Should we park out at the end by ourselves, or right up in the middle of all the vehicles?”

“One answer; two reasons. Up in the center of things. Reason one: less chance any bad guys will try to pull anything with so many other people around. Reason two: It is closer to the restrooms and my bladder is about to burst.”

“The center it will be, then. I hear burst bladders are the worst.”

Ten minutes later, with their bladders intact, they walked a bit to stretch their legs before returning to the van. Dave’s earlier suggestions about sleeping arrangements – Pete on the padded central area of the back and he on the front seat – worked quite well.

“Sun will be up soon and the van will get hot without the AC on,” Pete said. “Let’s open one of the rear windows a crack and one up front as well.”

Pete handled the rear window and Dave the front. Pete handed a pillow forward to his brother.

Pete slept until nine. Dave had been up for half an hour working on the computer.

“You finally awake, Pete?”

“I’m getting there. Give me a minute. Unlike you, it takes me longer than a nanosecond to re-greet the world after sleep.”

Dave basically ignored the explanation although was impressed his brother knew about nanoseconds.

“I found stuff, Pete. There are several strip malls not far ahead.”

“Leave it to *nudist boy* to find a ‘strip mall’,” Pete said.

“Very good coming from your semi-somnambulistic state. Anyway, there are cafes, and all the usual sorts of places. A couple of outdoorsman type of places. One restaurant advertises an endless stack of flapjacks. That sounds good to me. Are we going to eat out occasionally or do all our own cooking?”

“I figure we can afford to eat out once in a while. What do you think?”

“Well, having had absolutely no experience in budgeting money, I have no basis for rendering an answer based in actual, real world, knowledge, I guess.”

“You could have just said, ‘yes or no’. If we could just find a way to sell your big words, we could eat out three times a day and hire those dancing girls. I bet we could get five bucks just from that semi-somnambulistic thing.”

“Need an explanation?”

“On the verge of being more asleep than awake. Will

that work?"

"Very well, in fact."

Dave smiled. He understood his brother wasn't making fun of him about his vocabulary. It was more like he was celebrating the way he was.

"Tell you what," Pete came back. "You flip a coin; heads you'll be my guest for breakfast and tails I'll be your guest for breakfast."

"I like the way you think or flip or whatever. How are we going to pay for stuff – cash or credit card?"

"Pros and cons?" Pete asked.

"Credit card would avoid letting anybody see how much cash we are carrying, but it means we have to keep buying cards and flashing big bills to do that."

Pete responded:

"Solution: Before we go into a store we each put some money in our pants pockets so we don't have to even show our wallets or more bills than necessary."

"Great. Also, let's remember to use hundreds where they are expected – like tourist places – and build up a reserve of the smaller bills we'll get in change – for places that don't easily deal with big bills – like smaller cafes."

"I say it again; what a team we make!"

Pete opened the side door and got out to stretch. He walked the van around to check tires, lights and such. He called out.

"Dave, hit the brakes so I can make sure the tail lights are working. . . . Good, now flip the turn signals. . . . Good again."

That done he entered the driver's seat.

"Point us at those flapjacks, young man."

"As soon as you don your facial hair, oh great one!"

"Oh, yeah. Thanks. You scooch down until we're out of here."

Pete donned his beard and Dave scooched.

Once back out on the highway Pete announced:

"UC!"

"What?"

"UnScooch."

A little sleep had done wonders for their spirits. An hour

later the endless stacks of flapjacks had done wonders for their growling, teen-age, stomachs. Once back on the road north, Dave spoke.

“That endless flapjack thing was very clever. Once you put four pancakes in your stomach, there really isn’t much room for any more. I’ll admit I had to work hard at inserting those final four.”

It didn’t require more than a brief smile from Pete.

“I’ve been wondering something,” Dave said.

“Take the boy’s temperature, nurse! The boy is breaking out in wonders again. Perhaps there is an inoculation.”

Dave chuckled. He felt good Pete was showing his playful side. He figured that before it had been something between Pete and their father – something about the oldest son needing to be serious thing, maybe – that had kept him wrapped so tight all his life. They would have to discuss that later.

“Anyway, I’ve been wondering why dad just made me fifteen. At sixteen I wouldn’t have had to run the risk of trouble over mandatory school attendance and in some states I could get a driver’s license and even get married.”

“Whatever else we may think about dad, he was a wise man. I’m quite sure his reason behind it is spelled – m-a-t-u-r-i-t-y.”

“More please.”

“In reality you are 13. In reality more drivers under 18 get killed off by making poor judgments while behind the wheel than any other age group – by a bunch. Developing good judgment is like developing wisdom – you can’t hurry it. Like puberty, it comes in its own time. It can’t be rushed. It is not a put down to say a 13-year-old doesn’t have the level of judgment required to be a safe driver any more than it is a put down to say a nine-year-old boy can’t father a child. Both of those things arrive on nature’s time schedule. As brains develop, judgment develops. If he had made you into a 16-year-old – something you *really* can’t be in certain ways regardless of how smart you are – it wouldn’t have been fair to you or me. Can you see that?”

“I can. That was a really great explanation. It

explained, without putting me down, that I'm not capable of making certain kinds of good judgments yet, but that that's okay because that's just how it is supposed to be – on nature's timetable. I still have important things to learn – things I'm not supposed to know at this point in my life – things I *can't* really learn yet because my mental functions haven't developed sufficiently yet. And, interestingly, because those mental skills haven't yet developed, I can't yet be aware that I don't have things like adequate judgment. You are really good about this stuff, Pete. Thanks. I'll have lot's more stuff to ask you about."

Pete sighed. Just what he had always hoped for: a young genius with more stuff to ask him about. He'd do his best. The twist their lives had taken dictated that he *had* to do his best.

Dave went for the laugh.

"Now, Pete, about me getting married . . ."

Had Pete not been driving, there would have been knuckles to the shoulder for sure. There still might be. He wasn't going to be driving forever.

The billboards had been pushing the advantages of 'Uncle Bill's Everything Outdoor Store' just ahead. They agreed to stop. Within an hour they had outfitted the van with a bike rack for two, a bicycle repair kit, a first aid kit, metal plates and cups, and a propane gas powered refrigerator for which they received detailed instructions about installation and operation. And, two PayDays, not really as afterthoughts.

Dave choked on a peanut. Pete slapped his back.

"See, mom was right all along," he said.

They took time to install the bike rack, and before they left had secured the bikes outside. They were on the road again by eleven.

"Look at all the room, back here now, Pete. Lots of room for those blonds and brunettes."

"Just when *did* you hit puberty, anyway – seven?"

"No. As you pointed out I am overcompensating for what you have and what I'm afraid I don't have enough of yet."

"Can you diagram that sentence?"

Dave smiled from his cross-legged perch in the back. Pete was afraid to ask when Dave thought he had pointed that

out to him, so he kept quiet. Dave rambled on.

“I mean you already know all about guys’ grown up feelings and I’m still an amateur trying to figure it all out.”

“Remember about nature’s timetable. It will all work out just fine.”

“I tend to be impatient – did I tell you that?”

“I’d have never guessed, although the fact you wear a watch on both wrists should have given me a clue.”

“I do not. . . . Oh, a joke. I see.”

Dave returned to the laptop.

“Believe it or not there’s a music store about ten miles ahead. Can we stop?”

“I’d like you think about how you just phrased that and remodel it in light of us being a team.”

“Huh? Oh! Okay. I think I get it. How about this: ‘Believe it or not – sibling to whom I am equal in many respects – there’s a music store about ten miles ahead and I suggest we stop and take a look around’.”

“*Bravo* younger sibling, or, translating that Spanish word into Portuguese, *Bravo*.”

The comedic side of his big brother was so foreign from how he had been before, Dave wondered how he had managed to conceal it all those years. He imagined that, perhaps, he had kept his school friends and dates in stitches. My, how Dave wanted to find out about Pete’s romantic life! Perhaps he could use hypnosis just at the moment before he naturally slipped off to sleep at night – while in the *somnambulistic* state. The thought made him giggle. Pete took note, but let it slide. His guess was he’d found something on the internet his mother would not have approved of. *Now* whose mind was wandering to blonds and brunettes?

They enjoyed considerable time in the music store trying out instruments. Even the most expensive didn’t compare with the seven thousand dollar Bellucci guitar Dave had at home and Pete’s, Steinway grand piano. Still, they settled on one apiece. The keyboard was short an octave and a half, but he’d make it work. The keys had good motion and for his purposes, that was more important than the quality of the sound – no \$900-dollar electronic piece of equipment would compare with his Steinway.

They drew quite a crowd as they improvised through several pieces from the old standard, Blue Suede Shoes, through Brahms to Wagner. The owner was amazed and let them know it.

The boys made their purchases and left.

“Invoking my equal sibling status,” Dave began, once they were outside, “I think we just made a big mistake – playing like that. If word about two kids our ages playing those two instruments falls on the wrong ears we may be toast.”

“I agree. I hadn’t considered that, but it was fun, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah. It was. But not just from playing together, you know. Also, the reaction of the onlookers or *onlisteners* or whatever. I have to admit I liked it.”

“Me too, equal sibling, but I agree we have to be more careful from now on. Whether we will or not, understanding that teens tend to live in the unfiltered present, I won’t try to predict.”

“I’m starved again. Can we – I mean – *I suggest* we find a burger joint.”

“Sure we can, I mean, what a good suggestion!”

Even eight of the world’s largest flapjacks couldn’t stay a teen boy’s hunger for long. They would see if burgers, fries, nuggets, fried pies, shakes and pop to go might handle it.

They ate in the van parked in the shade.

“We should probably keep track of what we’re spending so we’ll have a baseline for making a long-term budget,” Pete suggested.

Dave turned his laptop so his brother could have a look.

“Been doing that since dollar number one. So, I guess, that indicates that I agree.”

“How did you get to be so organized?”

“I think it goes back to that day in my crib when I discovered my big brother had put two different colors of booties on my feet. The horror of it drove me to take steps that would assure nothing of the kind ever happened again.”

“In other words, it was a dumb question because there is no way of actually knowing. I love you, you know, small fry.”

“Yes, I do, big fry, or maybe with that very attractive,

wavy beard it's *curly fry*."

Then, it was time for the knuckles. Dave giggled himself into hysterics over it.

Finished eating, they were back on the road.

In back, partly to let his upper arm stop throbbing, Dave sat with his guitar and played. Pete kept time with his thumb against the steering wheel. Presently Dave stashed the guitar and moved back up front. He had things on his mind.

"Back when I made that lame comment about me thinking you were attractive, you really knew I was kidding right?" Dave said.

"What! You think I'm *not* attractive?"

"That wasn't my point and you know it."

"I do. Why are you bringing it up?"

"Trying to get to know you better, I guess. I wondered what you thought about gay people. I had a friend in school that said he was gay. He was a great kid and I enjoyed being with him. Whether he was gay or straight played no part in our relationship, just like with any other boy."

"Any problems with him?"

"Only that we couldn't share our special kinds of under the mattress magazines."

Pete laughed out loud and reached over and mussed Dave's hair.

"I take it there is more to this conversation," Pete said.

"Yeah. How do you think about them – gays?"

"Well, our father hated them with a passion. I couldn't understand why – some of his away-from-younger-brother-ears-humor dealt with it. I never confronted him about it, but I it did trouble me. Like you, I've known some great gay guys. I've come to think that what other people do sexually, so long as it's consensual and doesn't hurt anybody who doesn't want to be hurt, it's all their business and none of mine. I have no right to try and be anybody else's sexual boss. Gays are born to be gays just like you and I are born to be straight. The end."

Dave nodded both agreeing and pleased Pete would share so honestly with him. He felt closer.

"I wonder why dad thought that way."

"You have to remember he was raised in a very strict,

Italian Catholic home. It was a different time. If the church said something was bad, or in the case of homosexuality intolerably, go-straight-to-hell, evil, then you were required to believe it – not to research it and think it out for yourself, but just accept it.”

“I guess you’d say we were raised in a no religion home, huh?”

“Yeah, we were. Never understood why. Mom was raised Latino Catholic. Can’t see why they wouldn’t have held the same basic religious beliefs.”

“Any chance dad got excommunicated or some such thing because of what he was?”

“Maybe. I understand most mob families are very religious, though. I just don’t know. In a way it’s not all bad – for us, I mean.

“How you mean?”

“Well, most of my friends were so thoroughly indoctrinated in their parents’ religion by the time they were five or six, they had no chance of ever making their own decisions about religion themselves – just had to go along with it or the voices that had been installed in their heads before they were old enough to defend themselves would start screaming at them.”

“I guess it’s not wrong to just believe what your parents or church taught you, though. Most churches turn out some pretty good people.”

“They do. I never put anybody down for his religious beliefs unless they require hurting some group of people or shunning them or speaking badly about them.”

“So, you’re saying we have a chance to explore and find something that makes sense to us. I like that. I had never thought about it like that. Thanks. It answers a long held wonder and provides some direction for my future. You really are a great person for me to have in my life – parent figure.”

“Brothers and best friends can also talk back and forth about things like this, you know. Often more easily than with parent figures.”

Dave nodded, thoughtfully and turned his attention out the window. They were driving through the *Sproul State*

Forest with hundreds of acres of tall old trees and even more, smaller, younger ones making ready to replace them someday. That's how nature worked – the old gave way to the new. Dave figured he was just beginning to really understand about such things.

“How far to the first little camp site?” Pete asked at last.

“Less than a half hour, I'd guess. Maybe we should look several over before picking one.”

“Maybe. What are our requirements?”

“First, set back from the main road. Second, private, individual lots or sites. Third, allow cooking fires. Fourth, swimming. Fifth, surrounded by armed guards – just kidding – and Sixth, swarming with scantily clad teen girls begging for our attention – not kidding.”

“Girls again,” Pete said. “Your libido will be worn out before you're of legal age.”

“Libido – sexual desire. I read where the desire in a guy never really leaves even in old men. I also read the average teen male thinks about sex related topics more than a dozen times an hour.”

“I'm not knocking it. I'm not saying it isn't wonderfully normal. I guess I'm just pointing out that a guy doesn't dare crowd out other important aspects of his life with those thoughts.”

“I gotcha! I will do my best to . . . think about girls all the time – no, where was that thought supposed to go?”

It made for a really good laugh. It was, however, very much like being told NOT to think about the green elephant sleeping in the purple bed. An impossibility. They drove on north each considering their own versions of that elephant.

The first campground was right on the highway. It was already full, anyway. The second was much better, but the lots were all right next to each other. The third, like in the three bears, was just right. It was nearly two miles off the main road and smaller than the others. The lots were large with electricity and water and they had a sizeable section of woods between them. There was both a pool and a swimming hole in a creek. There were three miles of bike trails up and down hills, across creeks, and through meadows. There was no store, but at the highway were several including a mom and

pop café. It was more expensive than the first two, but, all things considered, it seemed worth it. They signed up for seven days thinking it would give them time to give their situation a good thinking through and learn more about each other.

By four o'clock they were all set up.

"This is like paradise," Dave said. "And, so far, at least, no black Lincoln."

"I'm betting we gave Red Beard the slip," Pete said.

"Let's hit the trails on our bikes," Dave suggested.

"Sounds good. You take the lead."

The temperature had risen into the high seventies so they soon shed their shirts. They found the swimming hole. There was a sign that caught Dave's interest. No Skinny Dipping 6 a.m. to Midnight. Pete assumed it was a humorous attempt to imply its use was off limits after midnight. Dave assumed that gave permission for a nature's best swim after midnight. Neither mentioned it.

They rode for the better part of an hour. On the way back they passed a camp site occupied by parents and three girls – about fourteen, sixteen and eighteen. They were quite friendly. The parents invited the boys to come back for supper – the evening meal the boys had always known as dinner. They talked with the girls for some time before heading back to their place.

As they were securing the bikes back on the carrier, Pete had something more than a suggestion.

"Boys. Perspiration. Showers. Now."

They took a change of clothes along and twenty minutes later felt better, looked better and most certainly, smelled better.

"We need to buy deodorant in the morning, little brother. I assume you've started using it."

"Yeah. My friend Jerry explained to me that his father had explained to him that teen boys develop bad smelling sweat. I hadn't been aware of that. Funny how you can't smell your own stink, you know."

"You speak so eloquently about the adolescent male aroma."

"Just answering your question – with, perhaps a little

extra information. Bottom line, yes I use deodorant – prefer Mitchum if that's of any consequence."

"Me too. What a coincidental consequence."

"Not really. I investigated the medicine cabinet in your bathroom to get headed in the right direction."

"You're welcome then," Pete said with a smile.

They walked back to the new neighbors.

"Got the makin's for burgers and hot dogs," the girl's father said when they arrived. How about you boys get a fire going in the fireplace"

They were closely supervised by the girls. Dave figured the two younger ones were his. Beyond that his brother could fend for himself. It turned out to be a good meal and a lot of fun. Their father had a million funny stories. The girls liked to sit close beside the boys and their mother didn't seem uncomfortable about it. Of course, their father had leaned his shotgun up against their SUV right up front.

Dave noted the gun.

The oldest girl commented.

"Don't give it a second thought. Dad hasn't shot a boy visitor in almost a month."

There were lots of laughs. It was what the boys needed: good food, a happy time with a nice family, and feminine companionship – even if strictly neighborly rather than romantic. They talked together until the stars had commandeered the sky and the fire died down. They finished the evening roasting marshmallows over the embers. When they stood to leave, each girl planted a gentle – friend to friend – kiss on the boys' cheeks. Humorously at that point, their father said, "It's a double barrel in case you missed that."

The kisses had been fully unexpected. Dave had to talk about it as they walked back to their place.

"Kisses! That was unexpected. Should we have kissed them back?"

"No. For some reason girls can give those kinds of kisses to boys and nobody thinks twice about it, but if guys do the same thing, girls – and their parents – think they're hitting on them. Believe me, I've told you more than I understand about it."

"Thanks. I'm really dumb about that stuff and I'd really

like not to be.”

“What have I told you? You’ll get there. For thousands of years young males have learned the lessons well enough to keep the species alive and flourishing for thousands of years.”

“I’ve never been on a real date,” Dave said as if admitting to some terrible sin. “Six of us went to the winter dance together this year – three guys and three girls. We were paired up, but that only meant we just did things as couples while we were there – the punch and cookie thing, the standing on the sidelines thing until one of the boys broke the ice by getting up the nerve to ask his girl to dance. Then we all did.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Oh, yes, very much. I guess it was like a practice round – sort of beginning to learn the ropes, you know.”

“I know. I went through a half dozen group dates before dad allowed me to go on one alone. I was fifteen. Our driver took me, picked her up, and returned us after the movie. He drew the curtain and allowed us privacy in the back seat.”

“You kiss her?”

“Of course, I kissed her – not real successfully, but it counted. I’d advise you to practice the nose thing ahead of time. It requires synchronized head tilts. Girls seem to practice those things. We guys have no clue the first time.”

“Thanks. Perhaps you can show me how to do it.”

“You try to lay a kiss on my mouth and your lips will be so fat you won’t be able to use them ‘til you’re thirty.”

Dave laughed out loud.

“I didn’t mean that and you knew it.”

“I did.”

“So that was like lesson one in boy girl stuff for me. I look forward to lessons two through one hundred.”

“You won’t give up will you?”

“After fifty continuous hours with me, surely you know the answer to that question.”

“I’m told there are excellent, informative sites online.”

“There are. I’ve visited many of them. But they aren’t big brothers.”

It was late and they were soon on their mattresses ready for sleep.

“Good night, big brother.”

“Good night, little brother, although I’m coming to realize that’s definitely the wrong term for you.”

“You don’t think I’m your brother?”

“No. The ‘little’ part. I need to find something different.”

Dave giggled. Lots of luck. I could probably find some alternatives if you were to ask.”

“Good night, younger sibling.”

“*That* was one of them.”

Within the half hour Pete was leaning over Dave, jostling his shoulder

“Wake up. May be a problem.”

Dave immediately became aware of something unusual. Just outside, lights were flashing directly at them. Cops? He looked up at his brother, fear all quite clear on his face.

CHAPTER FOUR

Suddenly a new player!

"The van lights," Dave. "I set the security system so they flashed instead of sounding the siren. It's why I pointed the van at the tent today."

"What do we do?"

"You remove the padlock from the door and run the zipper up to the top. I'll get a gun and we'll go take a look."

Just before they ducked out through the door Pete turned the light on high. They heard a man's voice swearing and arrived outside just in time to see a figure running off into the night.

"Way too small to be Red Beard," Pete said.

"And too fast, I'm thinking."

"Some new guy after us?"

"Could be or it could have just been some local thief. In the morning, we'll ask around to find out if anybody else was bothered."

Pete removed his phone from his pocket and reset the car alarm.

"Tomorrow you'll have to show me about the alarm in case I ever need to mess with it."

Pete nodded. They walked around the van examining it with the beam from the large flashlight Dave brought along – more as a weapon, actually, than a light source. They found nothing out of the ordinary and soon had themselves zipped back inside with the light turned down. They lay on their sides on their mattresses, heads propped up on their pillows so they could see each other as they talked.

"In a way it's a good sign," Dave said.

"*This, I have to hear.*"

"Well, it wasn't Red Beard."

"I suppose that may be good. I've been wondering. Do you suppose that beard is real or maybe like mine?"

"Interesting," Dave said. "Hadn't crossed my mind. He can't disguise his huge size, however. I think he has what's called a barrel chest. That's why his suit coat doesn't seem to really fit well."

"I'm thinking if choosing a beard as a disguise, red

would not be a first choice – too memorable, don't you think.”

“I hadn't – thought that – but I see what you're saying. It makes sense. So, we go back to sleep or sit up shivering in fear?”

“Any even half smart thief will stay away after all that, don't you think?” Pete said.

“I suppose so. Assuming Red Beard is from the other mob – as we've been doing – we haven't met up with the FBI you said would also probably be on our tail.”

“The other mob would have taken up the chase immediately – they were there and probably saw us turn and leave. The FBI wouldn't get involved until later. They may not even be involved yet.”

“And why are we afraid of the FBI, again? They're the good guys, aren't they?” Dave asked.

“I don't want us to get in the middle between the mobs and that's where the FBI will put us. There will be infighting now to take over dad's . . . group. We'd have to testify about what we saw. I might even be a target of the guys left on dad's side as his assistants each try to take over – it may seem like I'm in line for the job so I would need to be killed to make room for somebody else.”

“And with the first in line dead, that leaves me next in line. I wish you hadn't said all that, but I'm glad you did. The scary side of all this just got a hundred times more terrifying. We really need to become invisible in a hurry, don't we?”

“I'm sorry to lay all that on you, but I figured it wasn't fair to try and keep it from you.”

“I understand. I appreciate your honesty. That doesn't change how it multiplied the fear factor by gazillions!”

Pete nodded.

“You going to be okay?”

“Ask me on my 90th birthday. Sorry, that was uncalled for. Honest answer, no, I'm not going to be okay, but I figure I will learn to live with it. It's the only alternative either of us has. How can we ever marry and have a family if this is always going to be following us?”

“I understand. Is Brazil looking any better?”

“I suppose there are mobs in Brazil, too.”

“I'm sure of it, but I don't see how we'd be connected

with any of them.”

Dave grew silent, then:

“I think we need to sleep on it, okay?”

“Sure thing. See you in the morning.”

* * *

Uncharacteristically, Pete was awake first. It was chilly. He doubled his sheet and covered his brother. They were further north so he should have planned for cooler nights and brought in blankets. Dave’s remark that he wasn’t okay troubled Pete. He understood it was a normal reaction – the only reasonable reaction, actually – to a terribly abnormal situation. A kid his age shouldn’t have to go through any of that. The fact was that Dave would never have normal teenage years. It stunk and there didn’t seem to be one thing he could do about it. Pete’s anger grew.

At a few minutes before eight, Dave’s eyes opened and his feet hit the floor immediately. Pete witnessed it, but he couldn’t understand it. How could a person shift into high from idle in five seconds? He figured his personal best time had been five minutes.

“Thanks for the extra sheet. Got chilly.”

He hugged himself in that beat on the other arms sort of way and got dressed.

“I’m starved. Shall we cook for ourselves this morning?”

“What do we have?”

“Ham, that scramble stuff, the makings for pancake and biscuits, canned hash, canned fruit and some other stuff.”

“I’m in the mood for steak and eggs again. That was really good – what we got at Madge’s Café.”

“Okay. I’ll bet that café out on the highway can fix us up.”

“Van, bikes, or walk?” Pete asked.

“How far is it?”

“A couple of miles. Half hour walk. Fifteen-minute jog.”

“It’s a good morning for a jog, don’t you think?”

“A jog it will be then.”

Pete wondered, but didn’t ask, how his brother was really doing after a night’s rest. He seemed to be in good spirits. It could have been an act. He’d not press just then.

“Let’s get the hoodies from the van,” Pete suggested once they were outside. “That light of yours really does keep the tent – sorry, shelter – pretty warm.”

There’s a small cube, ceramic, electric heater in one of the boxes. We should probably begin using it if it’s going to get this chilly at night. I’m okay with the light off now.”

He offered no reason as to why, after such a scary night, he was suddenly fine without the light, but again, Pete didn’t press it.

“You set the pace, Pete, and I’ll see if I can keep up.”

Pete set an easy pace – after all, it was a jog, not a dash – nobody had anything to prove. That was a refreshing revelation. Pete had always been excessively competitive – sports, father’s approval, girls and such. It was a good thing to have left in his old life.

Dave kept up a constant chatter. Dave just listened, understanding it was a great way to get to know the boy without ever having to ask a single question. It did interest Pete that Dave could run, talk, point, and maintain his patented grin all at the same time. He wondered if *Guinness* had a world record category for such a four-way event – the *run-point-chat-and-grin*. He smiled to himself.

By the time they arrived at the little café, most of the early diners had left and the late ones hadn’t yet arrived. There was one older couple in the rear. The boys took a table near a front window. Dave noted to himself that had become their pattern – always a front window. He didn’t understand why; something connected with their survival, he suspected.

“Speaking of survival,” he said pointing out the window.

“Who was speaking of survival?” Pete asked.

“One part of my brain conversing with another – sorry we left you out.”

He made with his grin and shrug and grew silent.

“Out there.” Pete pointed. “More interesting than frightening this morning,” Pete said. “Three black Lincolns parked within the same block. Convention or coincidence?”

“I’m thinking – hoping – coincidence. From the room rates at the hotels in this area I’m thinking it must be a rich people’s playground – they start at \$200. Lincolns seem reasonable. Note that only one of them has a New York plate.”

“Can you make out the number, Dave?”

“Looks like 7 something 4 7 something 0 5.” You?’

“Those two somethings could be either sixes or eights.”

“Five out of seven gives us good odds of making a match if we need to.”

Once the initial Lincoln-induced, adrenalin rush passed, they both felt pretty good again.

As they ate, they made plans for the day: another bike ride, see if the girls were available, a swim in the creek, see if the girls were available, a swim in the pool, see if the girls were available, take a long hike either to continue thinking through their futures or to enjoy the company of the girls – if they were available.

“Let’s stop at the store and get things to stock the new refrigerator,” Dave suggested.

Half an hour later they were walking the sidewalk in front of the stores.

On a rack in one front window were bathing suits.

“We need those,” Pete said.

“Correction: We are required, by senseless laws, to wear them,” Dave came back.

Again, he let the topic just lay there. It seemed to be a choice among three styles: the skimpy swim team style briefs, the long baggy variety, and muscle crushing speedos, which looked excruciatingly uncomfortable. Dave begrudgingly selected the first style; Pete the second. Dave’s were red, white, and blue. Pete’s orange with green and black palms. He could wear his around the camp like just below the knee shorts. Dave would look out of place anywhere, but in the water – and even there, if one leaned toward being a prude.

Ten minutes later they each had a small sack of new treasures, which also included milk, juice, ham salad, potato salad, bread, butter, apples, two potatoes and eggs.

“Hope all this will fit in the refrigerator,” Pete said. It only has one and half cubic feet of space as I recall.”

“I’ve been keeping track of the cubic inches of each item and, allowing for the necessary unused space, like above the milk container, we are just fine.”

“*Who*, in the whole history of mankind has ever kept track of the number of cubic inches of food they were

purchasing?” Pete asked sincerely astounded.

He could have predicted his brother’s response – a shrug and a grin. Thankfully, he thought, something is still predictable in that new life of theirs.

They walked back along the dusty, dirt road, enjoying the trees and early spring flowers. As they moved along, they took note of the warmth of the sunshine compared with the cool of the shadows. They stopped to commune with a few inquisitive ground squirrels and to watch a sitting rabbit move its eyes, wiggle its nose and flip its tail. For wild animals, they seemed quite comfortable with the two legged beasts invading their world.

Dave spoke:

“You know, mom would have loved this place.”

“Yeah, she would have.”

No more was said on the topic. Pete was happy Dave had been willing to bring it up. He’d not push. He seemed to be working things out on his own schedule.

They stopped at the office, which was the front room of the log house where the caretaker lived. Pete did the talking.

“Just wondering if anybody reported a problem with an intruder last night. The security system on our van was activated. Nothing is gone. Just inquiring.”

“Nobody’s said nothin’ to me about it. I’ll ask around.”

“Don’t mean to stir things up where nothing may be present.”

“Sometime deer cozy up to a vehicle and set those noise makers off. Could a been that.”

“That probably answers the question. Thanks.”

Dave needed to add his two cents worth.

“We really love your park. Having a wonderful time.”

They left having learned nothing reassuring. They doubted if the park was populated by two-legged deer. They moved on down the road.

There was a note pinned to the girl’s tent – the pink one.

“If you guys come by, our family is spending the day in Sproul Park. Hope we can see each other tomorrow. Maybe at the pool.”

So much for the girls being available.

"I wonder what kind of bathing suits the girls have," Dave asked figuring the question would be ignored. It was.

"I wonder how they'll like ours," Pete said.

"Well, yours is no fun – might as well wear a gunny sack. Mine is probably just plain embarrassing for the typically prudish American. Maybe they'll strike some average between them and decide we're acceptable."

"You do have bizarre takes on things, younger sibling. Are you even aware of that?"

"I prefer to think of my takes on the world and those that inhabit it as reasonable, and those that disagree as unenlightened."

"So, you are the center of the universe?"

"I am the center of *my* universe. We all are the center of our own universe. I'll be happy to justify that if you like."

"Some other time, although I get the idea, and it does give me something bordering on profound to contemplate."

They stocked the refrigerator. Everything fit, with room left for two bottles of water, on their sides, near the top. Dave gave his brother the 'I told you so' look, but said nothing. Dave had shed his shirt after they left the 'girls' tent and Pete followed his lead as they took seats outside on a rustic bench that faced the fireplace.

"We need to begin getting serious about our future," Pete said. "Do we just keep moving from place to place or do we research an ideal place where we will be able to live in safety?"

"Do you think we'll really be in charge of it – our life?" Dave asked. "I mean how long will the bad guys stay after us?"

"I can't say, of course. In my fantasy, I see us finding a secluded little town filled with friendly, but not nosy people, where we can have a great life, meet two wonderful companions, get married and live happily ever after."

"Right now, that probably sounds good," Dave said. "But I don't think that's how life needs to be for us. Your fantasy makes it sound like we'll forever live in the same house together, married to identical twins. Our time together as young brothers is going to be fantastic and we will always treasure it but, Pete, we have to understand we are going to

grow up and probably develop different interests, different career paths. The normal thing is that brothers eventually go their separate ways. Right now that idea really stinks, you know, but look around us – that’s how it is.”

They remained silent for some time. Pete knelt down and placed wood in the fireplace. Dave went about the process of lighting it. It wasn’t that they needed a fire – it was neither time to fix a meal nor chilly anymore. It was brothers cooperating. It was filling time as they wondered through their own private thoughts. It was just a quiet time together. Fires were good that way.

“Good fire,” Pete said at last, as they moved back to the bench.

“Yeah. Good fire.”

Uncharacteristically it was Pete that broke the silence that had lingered on for several minutes.

“In five years, you’ll be eighteen – actual age – and I’ll be twenty-two. Maybe we can find that ideal place with the idea of just making it our home base for that long. Then, we’ll see how it looks like life should move on for us. At that point we will need to find a really great college for you. You’ll be offered all kinds of scholarships.”

“But you need to be in college, now, Pete.”

“So, *attribute number one* for our home town is that it has a college – doesn’t need to be big – a place for me to start at least.”

“I’d really rather go to school with kids than hole up in a corner someplace doing it all by myself,” Dave added. “Female friends. Guy friends. Did I mention, Female friends?”

“*Attribute number two*, then,” Pete said, “is a comfortable high school setting.”

“How will we live – I mean support ourselves?”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that,” Pete said. “I told you dad made all those arrangements for us in Brazil. I have access to bank accounts he set up there. I think if you put your brain to work on it – learning whatever we need to learn about such things – we should be able to tap into all that money.”

“Why me?”

“Dave, on a bad day you’re twice as smart as I am on

my best days. I'm no dummy, but you are brilliant. I don't mean it's *all* on you – we are a team.”

“It could be quite a challenge. Lots to learn. This will be the greatest thing ever!”

Dave had gone from a somewhat reluctant ‘quite a challenge’, to, ‘the greatest thing ever’, in two seconds flat.

They exchanged a long smile.

“You meant that didn't you?”

“Meant what, Dave?”

“Brilliant.”

“Yes, as if I even have to say it after looking at our grades and all your test scores.”

“Is that okay with you?”

“I'm not sure what you're asking, I guess.”

“Me the younger one being smarter.”

“Look. You are you and I am me. I think it is wonderful. Just look at it from my perspective. I don't know something I need to know, I ask you. I need a list of pros and cons before making a decision, you spit it out for me. I have to write a paper in college and you proofread it for me – or maybe fact-check it *or* even write it for me?”

“Don't push it, beloved sibling. Proofing always. Fact checking probably. That other thing probably not unless you are holding my head underwater in the toilet.”

“And there is that fourth thing I failed to mention, before,” Pete said; “to have you as the source of continuing amazement, wonder and ever-present laughter.”

Dave grew silent for just a moment. He became somber in look and tone.

“You know what my first thought was when I realized mom and dad were dead down in the front hall?”

“I have no idea.”

“There was terror and great sadness, of course, but I think during one of your *nanoseconds*, before either one of those, I asked myself, ‘who's going to love me now?’ ”

He scooted close against Peter.

“I know it was really selfish, but it was the most powerful thing that came to mind. During these past few days with you I've found my answer. I know love comes free of charge so to say thank you isn't appropriate, but I just want to

make sure you know, that I know, that you love me.”

They tilted their heads against each other.

“Me, you, too. I suppose you understand that.”

Dave nodded his head. Pete felt it moving. He reached his arm around his brother and pulled him even closer. Their tears flowed together. It was time for that. They both understood. It was saying good bye to the love they knew their parents had felt for them, and it welcomed the new unbreakable bonds of love and trust they felt growing between them.

“We’re missing their funerals – probably tomorrow I figure,” Dave said.

Pete just nodded and sighed.

Dave continued, some conversing and some just thinking out loud.

“Do you think dead is dead or do you think there is something else that follows that?”

“Probably the biggest question man has ever asked – and keeps asking. I don’t pretend to know. Our parent’s church says yes there is something more – an afterlife of some sort.”

“No way to prove that, of course,” Dave added.

“Nope, no way.”

“I guess I don’t have to come to any conclusion about that right now.”

“I’m sure you don’t.”

“I’ve heard kids saying that in order to get into heaven you had to be a really good person.”

“I’ve heard it too. I think most religions teach that.”

“A great way for church leaders to control their members isn’t it. ‘Do as I teach or you’ll go to hell.’ That’s a *lot* of power.”

“Religion probably yields the most power there is in the whole world.” Pete agreed.

“It makes more sense to me to be a good person just because that makes a better world, a better and happier life for everybody. To do it just to get into heaven seems really selfish, don’t you think?”

“I can honestly say I have never thought about it in that way.”

“Just seems from what I’ve learned about religions is that one thing they all teach is not to be selfish – to be altruistic instead. So, to turn around and force their members to actually be selfish about that, ‘why to be good thing’, seems really twofaced – hypocritical. I guess I still have a lot to learn. It should be fascinating.”

“Keep me informed, brilliant sibling.”

“Pop. We forgot to get pop. There’s room for a couple of cans above the milk.”

Dave soon felt a strong arm around his neck and knuckles massaging his scalp. That time it was all playful. His big brother was clearly going out of his way to keep it all easy. He hoped that didn’t signal the end of the fists to his shoulder. They really hurt, but they also felt like love.

Dave got a book from the van and took it to a spot under a tree and read. Pete curled up on the grass and took a nap. They hadn’t solved problems – either practical or philosophical – but they were having a good dialog about important topics and they were both growing to treasure that.

An hour later Pete woke up and rolled over through his stretch so he was on his side facing Dave.

“What you reading?”

“Small Town America, a book that was in one of the boxes. I think dad had an idea similar to yours – find some ideal little town and make it home for a while. I’m making notes so you can have the rapid tour later.”

Pete rolled over onto his back. He was not all surprised. Where Dave had spent lots of time with their mother, Pete had spent a lot more time with his father. They had come to know each other very well. He remembered something his dad had told him within that past year. ‘People are good and bad in several different ways – in several different parts of their lives. A man can be a good or bad husband, a good or bad friend, a good or bad brother, a good or bad parent, a good or bad provider, a good or bad role model. Never judge all of a person’s goodness or badness in terms of just one of those areas.’

Pete understood it had been his father’s disclaimer of a sort, his way of asking his son not to judge him on the sole fact he had been a mobster. At that moment it was a big

order. Pete knew the man's ruthless reputation. He was happy Dave had been spared that even though he knew at some point he'd ask and Pete would be totally honest with him. That would be the most difficult conversation of all. He hoped he had some time yet in which to sort through his thoughts and rehearse the best possible response.

Pete added wood to the dying fire.

"Must be time to begin thinking about din . . . supper, don't you think?"

Dave put down the book.

"I was thinking we could have fried potatoes. Remember how mom used to make them when we'd go on picnics out to that big meadow in the country? I loved them. Was that part of a park?"

"No. That was part of a large farm dad owned. It was about the only safe place aside from our lawn where we could be outside with lots of room."

"What will happen to those things now – the things he owned?"

"Truth?"

"Yes. Truth."

"Dad had four lieutenants. They will now begin killing each other off until only one remains. That person will take over as boss and with it claim everything dad had. It's one more reason for them to try and keep us out of their hair so we can't make claim to anything. I don't know if we could or not. I don't know if dad left a will or not. If there is, it's probably in the form of trusts rather than property."

"By 'keep us out of their hair' you mean kill us."

Pete nodded.

Supper consisted of skillet fried potato slices, pork and beans, and canned mixed fruit. They each enjoyed a glass of cold milk with a Payday for dessert.

"We got time to wet or new swim suits," Pete said, trying to think of things that might improve his brother's spirits.

"Sure. Pool or creek?"

"Your choice."

"Then, I choice creek! I've never swam, swum, whatever, in a creek."

They biked to the swimming hole. Nobody else was

there. They played in and out of the water for over an hour. It was a good time. They both relaxed and laughed a lot.

The shadows were growing long by the time they got back to their campsite. The sunset was colorful as the huge splotches of red and orange hues swirled and mingled in their slow dive into the horizon.

"I wonder why the pretty skies only come early mornings and early evenings?" Dave asked. "Why aren't they that colorful all day long? I'll have to look into that."

"Maybe it has to do with the angle – the sun looking up at the clouds at those times rather than down on them at other times," Pete suggested.

"Good thought. I'll bet you're right. Oh, by the way, when I went to the van to get the book about small towns this afternoon I noticed the license plate was loose. I think one of the bolts or screws came out – got jarred loose. There's a pack of bolts and screws in the tool box."

"Let's go ahead and take care of that now, then," Pete said. "I don't know where the tools are."

"I'll get them. In fact, I'm sure I can fix it."

"Okay. While we're at it, it's probably a good idea to check out other things, oil, tire pressure, windshield fluid."

"You know about that stuff?"

"While you were bugging your teachers for additional homework, I was hanging out with dad's mechanics, learning things about cars and how to string swear words together in fascinating ways."

"If it weren't so horrible, that could have been funny."

"I don't get it."

"*Mechanic* is another name for a *hit man* – a paid assassin."

"You have a certifiable, twisted, sense of humor, little brother."

They each worked at their projects.

"Pete. I think you should see this."

"What?" he said walking to the rear, wiping his greasy hands on a towel.

"Look here on the back of the license plate."

"I see it. I don't know what it is."

"I'm not sure, but my guess is, a GPS device."

“A tracking gizmo?”

“I can look for pictures on the web. Shall we take it off?”

“Let’s see what you can find, first.”

Five minutes later Dave had located the exact item – among the most expensive there were.

“Transmits fifty miles. Taps into the van’s wi-fi. Somebody’s been tracking us.”

“That could be how Red Beard found us,” Pete asked. “I’m sure there wasn’t a black Lincoln following us on the road when we first started out from the City. I was being very careful to look for such things – of course it was dark. But how would anybody have known we were leaving? Confusing.”

“I’ll say. So, take it off?”

“I suppose so. What shall we do with it?”

“I’ll tell you what would be funny,” Dave said, already giggling at his idea. “If we’d put it on some other vehicle.”

“You are an evil genius, brilliant sibling. How about one of the semis that runs cross country?”

“Hilarious. Do you think it would put them in any danger?”

“It hasn’t us,” Pete said. “I mean Red Beard, whoever he is and whoever he’s working for found us, but made no move to harm us.”

“I see what you mean. I suppose it is connected with him.”

“Unless that guy who set off the alarm.”

“Still, he made no attempt to hurt us.”

Pete nodded.

“I feel a nocturnal hike to the truck stop out by the café coming on,” Dave said. “We need to change out of our suits.”

“You need to change out of that band aid you call a suit. I’ll be fine. We’ll need shirts. It cools down fast once the sun sets. You change and get shirts. I’ll finish up checking the fluids.”

When Dave returned, Pete was scratching his head.

“Lice, tick, or chiggers?” Dave asked, humorously referring to his scratching.

“Dad, again.”

“Not a sufficient explanation.”

“Look here. Tied to the handle of the oil dipstick.”

“A clear, little plastic envelope. What’s in it?”

“Haven’t opened it, but it feels like a plastic card inside.”

“Like a library card, you mean? Open it!”

Pete untied it from the dipstick. There was a draw string that closed it. He untied the string and held it open toward his brother. Dave put his fingers inside and removed a plastic card and an index card.

“Okay, it looks like a debit card from a bank account – actually there are two cards here that are stuck together.”

He handed them to Pete.

“The index card has printing on it. The name, address and other stuff about a bank in Iowa City, Iowa. Two account numbers – a savings and a checking account. They are in both our names – the Martin names. There are also instructions for internet banking and the password and ID. Hand written at the bottom it says *No Limit per Transaction*. What do you make of it, Pete?”

“The same as you do, I imagine. Straight forward don’t you think? Money available to us from that bank.”

“Why would he notify us in such an odd way?”

“I can only guess, Dave. He wanted to make sure only you or I discovered it. If he put it inside the van and other people searched it he didn’t want them to find it. Who’d have ever thought to look in the engine compartment?”

“He really put a lot of thought into our future, didn’t he?”

“He sure did. Like he once told me, don’t define a person by just one of his traits. He hated who he was – the mobster – Dave. He loved who he was – the husband and father. He wanted to make certain nothing ever got in our way of having a good life. He arranged alternatives for us – Brazil and now this.”

“So, there might be even more ways,” Dave said partly asking.

“There might be.”

“I’ve been making that mistake, you know,” Dave said.

“What mistake?”

“Judging him on just that one thing. And, I can see it isn’t going to be easy to shake – to change – that way of

thinking. He was good to mom, wasn't he?"

"I'm very sure he was. Everything I ever saw between them spoke of the love they shared – for each other and for us."

"How's the oil?"

"I have no idea."

They chuckled as Dave re-dipped the stick and took the reading.

"Looks fine. I can see by looking we have a full windshield fluid tank. Let me take another minute to look at the coolant. . . . These hills put a strain on a powerful engine like this. . . . Full up, it says. We're good to go."

Pete closed the hood. Dave handed him his shirt and without words they began walking back toward the highway.

Presently:

"Pie would be good," Dave said.

"What?"

"Pie. Café next to the truck stop."

"It would – be good. When we get back we need to get into that new bank account and see what's what," Pete said.

Dave nodded.

"Oh, yes. The old 'what's what'."

"Feel like a jog?" Pete asked.

"Do I!"

Dave took off at a full sprint. Pete followed close behind, letting his brother lead the way. Between the GPS – in Dave's care – and the bank cards – in Pete's care – their heads were both on overload.

They walked the final hundred yards to the parking lot in front of the stores. By the time they arrived their breathing was back to normal.

"How do we select a truck?" Pete asked fully expecting a long dissertation on the subject with numerous options. Instead the response was short and sweet.

"Plates. Find the one from furthest away."

They kept to the shadows as they worked their way along the rear ends of the parked trucks.

"How about this?" Pete said. "Alberta, Canada."

"I'd say you hit the jackpot, brother."

Within a few seconds, they had it in place on the back

of the plate. The epoxy adhesive merely had to be kneaded and it came back to life ready to hold the device in place forever.

As they walked away in the general direction of the café, they couldn't contain their giggles. At the door, a huge man, with tattoos and a nose ring and dressed in leather everything, came out of the café. He stopped and looked them over. It was a terrifying moment because neither of them had ever seen any man who looked so petrifying. Each wondered if it had been he who had been after them. Dave was certain damp pants were in his immediate future.

Then the man smiled, held the door for them, and tipped his Harley hat. He moved on to the parking lot. The boys followed him with their eyes.

"Look!" Dave said. "He's getting into 'our' truck. I pity Red Beard if he tries to pull anything on that guy."

They giggled themselves inside toward cold peach pie alamode. They lingered over it a long time, saying little and thinking a lot.

"You know what would really make me feel good right now?" Dave asked.

"I'm eager to hear."

"You see that old couple back in the corner. Let's pay for their meal and not let them know it was us."

"They may be billionaires for all we know," Pete said.

"This has nothing to do with what they're worth financially. They just seem sweet. I've been watching them. I can tell they really love each other. It's just about letting them know there are still some kind and thoughtful people in their world – like renewing their faith in mankind. You have to know that a lot of what's going on in the world today must make them very sad. It'll be like sending a little dose of love their way just out of the blue."

"Let's do it. You are the most tender hearted and loving person I have ever known," Pete said. "Combine that with your smarts and in your life, you are not going to fail at very much. There is one thing, however, you would fail at miserably and I think it's largely due to how mom and dad so thoughtfully raised you."

"What in the world is that?"

“Being a mobster. Can you imagine how you’d suck at that? I mean really, really, suck.”

Dave thought for just a moment. He cocked his head and nodded.

“Good going mom and dad, then. Thanks, Pete. I needed that – all of that. You’re not such a slouch in those departments yourself, you know.”

They got up and went to the register. Pete made the arrangements and they slipped out in a hurry not being sure the waitress would really keep it a secret. They headed back along the road into the forest toward their campsite.

“Did that just come to you?” Pete asked.

“No. It’s not even my idea. I read a discussion about charity somewhere. It made the point that if a person takes credit for his gifts and donations, it really isn’t charity in the highest sense. When a person takes credit for it, it’s for the clear purpose of making himself look good – looking better than those who don’t give to others. I’ve thought a lot about that since, and I really believe it. I mean don’t you feel fantastic right now?”

“Yes, I do. We must put that into our life plans, little brother who just oozes with big wisdom – I think that would be your Native American name.”

“Like I said, I can’t take credit for it. I guess it’s close to the opposite of being greedy – taking things for yourself even when you now other people need them more than you do.”

“There’s a word for that. What is it?”

“*Altruism*, I suspect. Putting other people’s needs at least equal to your own. Some definitions say putting other people’s needs ahead of your own.”

“Yes, that’s it,” Pete said. “I want to tell you something even though it risks blowing your mind, okay?”

“Sure. I love having my mind blown. You may want to note that and not forget it.”

“You know the boy’s club we went to, of course. Our dad paid to build it and continued to pay its yearly expenses.”

“But the plaque in the lobby says it was an anonymous gift – oh, I see. Really? And yes, that’s a mind blower – considering recent events.”

“Mom told me about that just a few months ago. He

didn't want our last name associated with it – he thought that would tarnish the whole thing.”

“I guess the good side he always showed to us was a real part of him then, wasn't it. I've been concerned these past few days about that – wondering if what we saw was just all a show – like acting. I'm glad you shared that with me.”

“Didn't the kids ever tease you about dad being a gangster or some such thing?” Pete asked.

“A few did – they were never the nice kids, though. I talked to mom about it when I was in third grade and she asked me what kind of a man I thought dad was. I told her – kind, gentle, helpful – and other traits in that same vein. She patted me on the hand and said I must always trust my own judgment and that I must never let other people's unkind words bother me. She said statements like that always told more about the vicious nature of the person making them than it did about what or whom they were putting down. I remember I had to go look up the meaning of the word 'vicious' before I could make complete sense of it.”

“I can tell you, Dave, I really don't have him figured out yet. Being brought up in the environment he was brought up in, it's hard to imagine why and how he came to be the type of man he was. Most would just follow the line they were taught and become the next generation of bad guys, period. He was caught in between what he had to be – or apparently get killed like his brother – and what he knew a man should be. I give him a lot of credit – I really do.”

Dave nodded. His brother had had the luxury of having thought about it for several years. Dave hadn't. It was new. It was diametrically opposed to what he had always believed – to what he had been given any reason to believe. It was the most confusing part of life he'd ever come up against. Well, there was puberty. The verdict was still out on that.

They got set up in their shelter for the night. The first order of business was to figure out the new bank accounts.

“There it is,” Dave said after just a few minutes. “It's a real bank for sure.”

Pete moved and sat beside him on Dave's mattress.

“Enter the password and ID and let's see if our account is for real.”

“The index card is over there in those pants pocket. You can reach them.”

Dave copied the information into the spaces and hit enter.

“We get a screen that lists several questions to further verify our identity.”

“Read off the choices.”

“City of birth, name of first pet, favorite teacher, mother’s favorite flower, mother’s maiden name. Let’s think carefully before we try any of them. I’m sure after a few failures we’ll be cut off from trying and have to call the bank or something.”

“Okay. Good idea. You have some thoughts?”

They made a quick glance at each other and smiled. It recognized the fact that Dave always had thoughts.

“Most of those answers could be discovered rather easily by somebody who was hell bent on getting in. Only one is really private – mom’s favorite flower.”

“Good. I agree. Do we know that?”

“We will probably need to figure it out. She always planted petunias out around the pool, but I heard her tell a friend that was because they were the only flowers that were even tougher than her boys. Dad didn’t give her flowers much, did he?”

“Not that I recall. Hmm?”

“Here’s a far-out possibility. I always picked her a bouquet of Lilly of the Valley flowers from down by the gate house as soon as they came up in the Spring. She always ooded and aahed over them. It’s all I have. You, Pete?”

“I got nothing. Let’s try those Lilly things.”

Dave took a deep breath and very carefully entered the words not wanting to risk a mistake, which might disqualify them.

“Look at that. A polite bank. It says, ‘Thank you’ and gave us access to a page that asks us to enter the account number. Which first?”

“How about checking – that’ll let us know what we have to draw on right now.”

Dave entered the number – the very long number. Pete moved in closer so he could see better.

“Suppose that amount will get us to ‘Perfect Town USA’ big brother?”

“\$102,345.56. Yes, I think that should do it. What an odd amount.”

“Look at the deposits. Two dozen or more interest payments added to the account over the past six years. He had this thing set up since I was seven, Pete.”

“I’ll be. So he did.”

“Think we can survive looking at the amount in the savings account?” Dave said already moving to it on the screen.

They both swallowed hard as the total came up.

“Do you count six zeros to the left of the decimal point, little brother?”

“I do count six; recounted three times to be sure.”

Dave set the lap top aside and leaned back against the tent. They sat looking into each other’s faces for a really long time.

Pete finally asked a question.

“What was the number in front of all those zeros?”

“Seven. Seven million dollars. I can’t believe it. I had no idea dad was a millionaire, Pete. I guess I had no reason to ever wonder. I assumed he was rich because of the house and cars and help and stuff, but I can’t remember ever even thinking about putting a number to it.”

Pete reached out and took Dave’s hand. He looked him in his eyes.

“If any of the bad guys know or find out about this account, our chances of becoming toast just moved from lightly browned to burnt crisp.”

“What are you saying? I mean, I fully understand what you are saying. I guess the question remains the same – where can we go to be sure we will be safe?”

“Did any place pop out at you in that book you were so absorbed in this afternoon?”

“Several. I dog-eared the pages for ease of finding them. Miss Oliver, the school librarian, would have had me by the ear all the way to the principal’s office for that.”

He managed a smile. Both boys had locked horns with, ‘*The Olliver*’, as she was so fondly called by the students.

Dave removed the book from under his pillow and handed it to Pete. Before he could continue with his explanation the laptop pinged.

“What’s that about?” Pete asked. “Isn’t that just for email alerts?”

“I thought so, although this is a relatively new, top of the line model. It might mean something else. I really haven’t worked through the tutorials yet. Let me click on the email icon and see how it operates. Nobody should have our email address. We’ve never used it. I didn’t even think about having one so I couldn’t have left it on any of the sights I’ve visited.”

“So, what are you finding?”

Pete leaned in again to see what he could make out.

“It’s an email alright. From like a company, maybe: Protec Tortrip. I’ve never heard of it have you?”

“No. Spam, you think?”

“I doubt it. The address shouldn’t be available to anybody on any list. Whoever has it, knows about it in some legitimate way.”

“If you open it will that give the sender any information about or location or the computer or anything?”

“No.”

“How about the risk of getting a virus or some gosh awful thing?”

“Not a chance. This baby is loaded with three levels of top of the line protection systems. Every email is ‘washed’ before it can be read.”

“Then I guess open it – what do you think?” Pete said/asked.

Dave clicked on it. The message was brief and perplexing.

“FBI about 90 minutes away from you. Travel southwest. Have the vehicle painted medium green ASAP. Do not respond.”

“Look,” Pete said. “It’s signed: DtOM42shERs! You know what that is, Dave?”

“Yes, unobservant one. It’s the password to our bank accounts.”

“My, that’s an odd turn of events,” Pete said. “I’m at a loss.”

Dave tried to make sense of some part of it.

“Clearly, whoever it is, wants us to avoid the FBI. So do we. We seem to be together on that. The message sounds like he or she’s on our side.”

“Had to be, I suppose to have been given the password,” Pete said agreeing with his brother’s remark.

“Now, I’m wondering if that password is something more than just a series of random letters, numbers and the punctuation mark,” Dave said. “Look at it and see if anything jumps out at you. It could begin, ‘D to M’, suggesting a position between two somethings.” [DtOM42shERs!]

“D to M – DiLapio to Martin for two SHers!” Pete offered tentatively. “I don’t get the SHers!”

“Very likely beginning though – good job. My only association with SH is the cover of that book mom and dad gave me on my ninth birthday – the history of Super Heroes from DC Comics. But . . .”

“But nothing. What does the exclamation point do to it all?”

“Technically it makes it into an order, but commonly it adds excitement or emphasis.”

“So, think about this: DiLapio to Martin for two Super Heroes!” Pete said trying again.

Dave nodded.

“Let’s go with that for now. The most important part of the message, though, is for us to get our butts out of here, now.”

“You know the drill, Dave. You empty out the tent and I’ll begin collapsing it. Probably should remove our trash from the trash can in case they go barrel diving. Use a grocery bag and we’ll take it along.”

Ten minutes later all those things had been taken care of.

Fifteen minutes later they were in the van ready to leave.

“We’re getting good at this,” Dave said. “I’m keeping the laptop the atlas and the book up here with us. Put on your beard.”

They looked out the front of the van into the darkness hoping there would be nothing to see – no black Lincoln and

no black SUV. They were on their way again.

“Scooch time,” Pete said as they neared the highway.”

He didn't relate to his brother that one of the black Lincolns pulled out of the parking lot right ahead of them. He noted he had failed to take care of one important detail; the leather case with the guns was way in the back of the van.

CHAPTER FIVE

Trail of Tears

Pete held his breath until the Lincoln turned north. He paused and turned south.

“Okay. You can Unscooch I guess. Get out that atlas. We need an off the beaten track route south west.”

Dave soon had driving instructions:

“Back south east on 144 like we came.”

“That’s what we’re on now.”

“In about ten miles we’ll intersect with 555. We’ll take it south west. After fifty miles or so we can pull over and select what looks like the best route from there on. You know more about what kind of roads we’re looking for.”

“Sounds good. You need to find us a car painting place. I wonder why the email recommended green.”

“It is obviously different from the light blue it is currently. Green is a nondescript color. We wouldn’t want red or yellow, I suppose. There may be some other reason. I don’t know. The bigger question is who and why?”

“Maybe you can figure a clue from his signature on the email – what was that?”

“*Protec Tortrip*. Like I said it sounds like a company – professional temporary tortoise riders – I don’t know.”

“If we connected the c and t the first part would spell protect,” Pete said.

“That’s interesting. Also, then add the ‘or’ and we have *protector*.”

“And that leaves . . . ?” Pete said leaving it open for his brother to finish.

“Trip – *protector trip* or *trip protector* in a slightly more likely form. This is getting more and more confusing. Like a guardian angel for our trip? That would have to be a good guy from dad, right, Pete?”

“That’s my best guess. Somebody he knew he could trust in this kind of a situation. Someone above the inevitable infighting that would follow his death. But why not contact us in person?”

“Have to trust him on that, I guess. Maybe to make

sure we absolutely can't be linked in any way to dad or the mob through him. But what if it was all just a trick to get us out on the open road so he can do us in?"

"We made a choice, Dave – stay put and risk the FBI, maybe, or risk the open road and maybe stay safe. If you can't live with our decision, we can go back or find another camp site close by."

"Given the choices and given our present state of ignorance about any alternative and given the fact it would have been virtually impossible for a bad guy to have emailed us, I guess I vote to move on according to plan."

"I'd like to let him know about *Red Beard* and *Skinny Guy Into the Night*."

Dave chuckled at the new name for the second person.

"He said we weren't to contact him. If we are going to risk our lives being out here on the highway strictly on the basis of his word, then I think we need to trust his word about no contacts."

Pete nodded. He was in full agreement. Suddenly there were so many new questions.

An hour later Dave pointed out a small rest stop. They pulled in and inspected the atlas.

"555 seems to become 256 just ahead. Interstate I-80 is just to our south. It appears that other than Interstates, there aren't any straight roads on the entire west side of Pennsylvania. Look at this. Highway numbers seem to change every time there's a change of direction."

"Let's draw a path along the roads that gets us out of the state on the west side and not mess with numbers. You'll have to be really alert to keep us on track?"

Together, they traced a route with their fingers from where they were to an exit point northwest of Pittsburgh. Dave figured it was 150 miles as the crow flies so added 50 to account for all the curves.

"Five hours and we can be into Ohio. You're running on no sleep again so we should stop a few times to put coffee in your system and then probably have to stop a few more times to let the coffee out of your system."

"Speaking of letting it out, let's hit the restroom here before we go on."

Several minutes later they were back on the road – whatever number it might have been. Dave had taken note that his brother was a good driver – more cautious than he would have expected for a nineteen-year-old. He had the idea some of that had to do with the ‘precious package’ thing he had mentioned earlier. It was good to be considered a precious package.

After a few more miles Pete saw a flashing light in the mirror. It was quite some distance behind them.

“There might be a cop coming up behind us, Dave. Should I ditch the beard? If he pulls us over it will only make me look suspicious don’t you think?”

“I think you’re right. Can’t see why they’d be after us. You’ve been obeying more traffic laws than there can possibly be – not meant as a bad thing, understand.”

Dave swiveled the chair to face Pete. From there he could turn his head and keep watch out the back window. The light seemed to grow in size as the car came closer. They began hearing the sound of the siren.

“That cop must be going eighty,” Dave said not explaining how he came to that conclusion. Doesn’t seem reasonable he’d be coming from that far behind to stop us.”

“I’ll slow down to thirty-five until he catches us. If he signals us over I can do that in a hurry. If not, I can speed up again.”

He slowed. The Police car didn’t, and soon sailed past them in a roaring flash.

“My pants are still dry,” Dave said more serious than not. “How about yours?”

“So far so good. That coffee is sounding like a good idea. Be looking for a spot.”

“You can probably take an hour’s nap if you’re sleepy. We’re way out of the FBI’s hair by now.”

“I’ve been thinking that, too. What time is it?”

“Straight up midnight. And speaking of straight up, straight up there is the telltale sign of a small café – a pink neon sign of a cup of coffee with three wavy lines rising out of it.”

“Let me get some coffee in me and we’ll decide about the nap after that.”

“I’ve heard that chocolate pie with cream frosting is a great way to keep awake,” Dave said, probably not really joking.”

“Actually, chocolate does contain caffeine, doesn’t it?”

“I’ll wait to look it up until we leave the café – in case it doesn’t, I wouldn’t want to deprive us of at least giving it a try.”

“About the time the swirly light came upon us back there, I was thinking I need to start reading to us about some of the towns in the book. That should help keep you awake. First, I guess, I need to find a car painting place.”

Pete pulled into the drive that led to the cafe. There were several businesses spread out along a gravel road that paralleled the highway back some hundred yards.

“Quite a collection of places. I’m surprised out here in the middle of nowhere,” Dave said. “The café, a motel, a combination filling station and body shop.”

“And back on the other side of the entrance lane are two more automotive shops. There must be a story.”

He parked and they got out, stretching. Dave went to the rear to make sure the license plate was still in place after he had fixed it.

“Good as new,” he said.

“What?”

“The plate. Solid as can be.”

“I’m surprised the café is still open.”

“The sign says open 24/7,” Dave said pointing. “Stranger, I guess, is that two of those automotive places are all lit up inside. I’m thinking it should be a *very* good story.”

The boys were the only patrons. She could have been the clone of the waitress in the first café they were in – hair a bit bluer, granny glasses, enough lipstick to turn a small boy into the devil on Halloween.

“I think we can fit you boys in.”

She smiled a wonderful smile and extended her arm as if indicating for them to sit anywhere they liked. Again, they took the front corner booth by a window.

“Got a burger and fries special midnight to four a.m.,” she said. “Biggest burger you’ve ever seen and an endless basket of fries – plain not curly or seasoned.”

“Sounds good to me,” Pete said.

“You got pie – chocolate?” Dave asked.

“Best in the county. My sister makes ‘em in her own kitchen. Brought fresh by no more than an hour ago. Make you a deal you can’t resist. The special, with a drink and pie for seven bucks each.”

“Let’s do that,” Pete said. “Make mine strong, black, coffee.”

“Make mine strong, hot chocolate if you have it.”

“Got it. You’re gonna OD on chocolate, you know.”

She giggled herself back to the kitchen. They wondered if she was also the cook. Apparently not, since she returned almost immediately with the drinks and the first basket of fries. They clearly interested her. Dave felt the need to give her a story.

“We’re delivering a van to a woman in Pittsburgh. She bought it from us on the internet provided we’d deliver it – for a fee, of course.”

Pete sat back. He could hardly wait to see where *this* adventure ended.

“We got one big problem though, she thinks she bought a green vehicle and it’s really blue. Somewhere between here and there we’ll have to get it painted. The places we’ve stopped at so far are way too expensive. But that’s *our* problem. What can you tell us about this little area? It must have a great story.

She slid in beside Pete apparently so she could talk across the table to Dave. The locals call this strip, Barrington – that’s the last name of most of us folks, here. I’m Francis Barrington named after my pa. The motel’s run by my aunt and uncle – Mary and Bart Barrington. The gas station is my brother’s, Kenny. The three speed shops are owned by his sons, my nephews.”

“I’m amazed there is enough business way out here, ma’am.”

“There’s the speedway about a mile on west. If you come from the east, you wouldn’t have saw it. Races five nights a week, year-round if the snow don’t interfere. The boys – my nephews – keep their employees busy nearly 24 hours a day working on motors, bodies, glass, you name it. Marty even claims he can repair ex-wives so they’re as good

as new.”

The boys chuckled. It did seem humorous.

“Well, we’re both happily married so we won’t need his service I guess,” Dave came back.”

Francis did a double take before she caught on that it was a joke. She enjoyed it and waggled her finger at him.

“Gettin’ serious, about your situation, though, I’ll bet Marty could do that paint job for you and real reasonable, he owes me one.”

“He owes you one?” Dave asked.

“Yeah, fer not killin’ his dad back when we both was kids livin’ under our parent’s roof. We both came close, I’ll tell you that. Love him to death now, but when he was sixteen pa had to chain us up in our rooms at night to keep us away from each other’s throats. That was a joke you understand.”

A bell rang in the kitchen and she got up and left to get the food

It seemed to take some time, but presently she was back. She had not been exaggerating. The burgers were eight inches across and better than a half inch thick. They learned the extra-large buns were also specially baked by her sister.

That time she slid in next to Dave and addressed her comments to both of them.

“I called Marty and he says if you can have the vehicle at his shop by one, about an hour from now, he can have it ready to drive away with a new green look by six in the morning. That’s assumin’ you like the green he’s got and it don’t need body work.”

“Really! How nice. No, its body is in good shape,” Pete said. “We’re not picky about the shade. He give you a price?”

“How does \$250 sound?”

The boys looked at each other and nodded. Neither one had the slightest idea what it should cost because, of course, the really hadn’t asked anybody else.

“Sounds fine. It’ll need washing first.”

“That’s part a the deal.”

She patted Dave’s leg and got up.

“I’ll let him know then. One o’clock. You’ll make it easy. Welcome to wait in here while the work’s bein’ done or the

motel has a vacancy. Thirty bucks a night for the two of you. Can probably talk them down since it will only be a few hours. Don't cost 'em no thirty bucks to wash two sets a sheets."

The motel option had not entered their thoughts, but it sounded like a good idea.

"Can you reserve that for us from here, Francis?" Pete asked.

"Consider it done. You just enjoy. Marty's is the shop just beyond the motel on west."

The burgers were great. The fries were as well. What can be said about café hot chocolate and coffee? The pie was out of this world. They ordered a takeout breakfast for six o'clock the following morning.

Pete was shaking Marty's hand right at one o'clock. He wouldn't take money up front. He insisted they were pleased with the job first. The woman at the motel did accept money up front. Apparently, their waitress negotiated a rate of \$15.00. It was a small, but clean and pleasant room with two double beds. They noted that on the back of the door the rate card had it going for \$125 on race nights. They turned in immediately. Dave set his phone alarm. Sleep came immediately.

At five thirty the alarm went off. Dave was up and in and out of the shower in ten minutes. It gave Pete the time he needed to rejoin the living. They were at the shop before six. The paint job was more than acceptable.

With the breakfast containers in hand, and accepting hugs all around from Francis – apparently, the overnight shift was hers start to finish – they were back on the road by a few minutes after six.

"I feel much better," Pete said. "We'll still get into Ohio by noon."

Dave had a comment.

"You know there is something very humorous about the past six hours."

"What's that?"

"We filled you full of black coffee to keep you awake on the road and then a half hour later you were sound asleep in the motel."

Pete offered a broad smile.

"I guess that is humorous at that. Perhaps the rumored result of caffeine is just a placebo effect."

He switched the headlights to high beam since there was no oncoming traffic.

"Keep your finger on that map. As I remember the roads wind around like spaghetti from here to Ohio."

"One finger on the atlas and one in the book. I'm getting eager to start evaluating some of these towns."

During the next hour, the sun rose behind them causing long shadows out in front of them. Because of the high hills they drove in and out of light for some time. They ate and Dave read. When a town showed promise, he would find their website and further investigate it. By the time they crossed into Ohio on 164 near Negley, they had learned the basic characteristics of a dozen possibilities from Maine to Arizona. As they studied them, several guidelines seemed to emerge. They came to believe it needed to have a population of at least ten thousand so they could have some privacy; their situation was so strange – two kids alone – that they didn't want to draw attention to themselves. They put a tentative top limit of forty thousand to begin with just to keep life manageable and safe.

"I think it would be a good idea if we stayed away from cafés for a while so we don't leave a trail that anybody could follow," Pete said.

"We're using cash, not credit cards."

"I know, but our description is still quite clearly the *DiLapio* kids to any of the people who are looking for us."

"I see. You're right. Guess that's why you get the big money, huh?"

They shared smiles, neither recognizing they had made that same 'no-cafes' promise once before.

"Speaking of money, how we doing on billfold cash? Pete asked.

Dave removed his wallet and counted.

"I have a little over three hundred."

Pete handed over his wallet.

"I spent most of what I had back there for the paint job."

"Looks like sixty-four bucks. Shall I replenish us from the boxes?"

“A good idea I suppose. If we’re going to feed ourselves do we need to stop and get groceries?”

“We can manage three or four meals from what we have,” Dave said. “If we get close to fresh fruit that would be good. And bread. We haven’t touched the peanut butter yet. I suppose we could use some cheese.”

“Got room in the refrigerator for all that?”

“I think so. If we wait to get milk just before we eat, then a half gallon container won’t even need to hit the fridge.”

“Can you find another campsite, say four hours or so ahead?”

“I will work my magic, oh Great One.”

He searched websites for fifteen minutes. Two good prospects; the one near a town called Belmont looks like the best one. It’s southwest of the intersection of Interstate 70 and County Road 149 – Barkcamp on Belmont Lake. There’s also a rest stop just a few miles ahead and I for one am in need of it.”

“Yeah. Me too. Just wanted to get as many miles down the road as we could. We’re six hours behind where I figured we’d be by now – the motel and all.”

At the rest stop they took care of their necessary business and then walked around the grounds to stretch. They came upon a truck driver doing the same. Dave said hi. The man began to talk.

“Got bad weather moving in from the southwest. Probably arrive by four or so. Rain, wind, even the possibility of a stray tornado or so. You kids may want to hole up somewhere until it passes – not ‘til midnight the way I hear.”

“Thanks for the heads up.”

Tornados were rare occurrences on the east coast where they had grown up. They had certainly seen them on the news and understood the dangers.

“So?” Dave asked. “We need a plan.”

“We’re averaging about forty miles an hour on these curved road. We can put on another hundred miles by three. How about we drive ‘til three and then look for a place – probably another motel. Our inflatable won’t do well in a high wind, I’m thinking.”

“Maybe get a free trip to The Land of Oz,” Dave said.

Smiles.

“Sounds exactly right to me,” he said more seriously. “I’m hungry though. We got a couple of apples and fried pies and between us we can drain the milk and juice.”

Fifteen minutes later they were ready to move on. It was going on one o’clock.

They were soon on the road and Dave got back to the book of towns. The storm seemed to be arriving early. As it neared two o’clock the sky became black and the wind picked up measurably.

“It looks like it’s about time to hole up as the man called it,” Pete said.

Dave nodded and put the book away.

“A motel sign there. Three miles up that road to the right.”

“Not much of a road, Pete said. “Can’t be much of a motel, you think?”

“I can try to find a web site – give me a minute.”

Pete pulled off to the side of the main road just short of the turn and waited.

“Got a picture. Looks good. Seventy-five bucks for a double. A restaurant and pool and a small gym the way it looks. The main road comes in from the other side – from the south. I say go for it.”

Pete nodded and pulled back onto the highway. They were soon heading north through a narrow valley with tall, rocky hills on both sides. Thick clouds rolled in and it grew even darker and more active.

“I don’t like the looks of that sky, big brother.”

He climbed into the back and positioned himself by the rear windows.

“If a tornado really looks like a swirling funnel, then I think there’s one following us up this valley. We need to get off this road in a hurry.”

A moment later Pete turned the van to their left across a narrow meadow toward the hillside. Dave turned back toward the front to see what was going on.

“What?” he asked.

“I think I see a cave over there. Look!”

“Looks like one. Push it. That thing is catching up to

us. Can't be more than a half mile behind."

Push it he did. The opening was at ground level and roughly eight feet high and ten wide. They couldn't tell how deep, but deep enough they couldn't see the rear. He slid to a stop in the wet grass just a few feet in front of the entrance.

"Bring the backpacks," he said. "Let's go!"

By then the rain was coming down in powerful, swirling sheets. Not a good sign they each figured. Inside, the cave was dry after they passed the first ten feet. It continued for another thirty.

They dropped their backpacks and turned to watch the weather.

"I think we should have driven right in here," Dave said. "Look there! The wind is rocking the van."

Without saying a word Pete ran back to the van and a few minutes later had it just inside the opening with them.

"That was a damn fool thing to have done," Dave said as Pete got out and closed the door.

"Then next time don't make suggestions, kid."

They were soaked through to their skin and because of it, cold and shivering.

"Dry clothes in the van," Pete said.

"And, look back there," Dave said. "Wood stacked against the wall. Somebody else has called this home in the past the way it looks."

"Let's get a fire going before we chatter our teeth into powder," Pete said.

They worked for fifteen minutes arranging the wood and working to get it lit. They had lighters, but there was very little small kindling. Dave cut splinters off a piece of dry oak – not an easy process. They lit right off. Presently, the fire was struggling to life. At Dave's suggestion, they began with a very small one until they figured what would happen with the smoke. It found its way up and out through a crack in the ceiling. Pete added wood. Dave moved back toward the opening to see what was really going on.

"You need to see this, Pete. That black swirl is still moving right along the road between the hillsides. I hope the motel won't be in danger.

Pete joined him, arm around his brother's shoulder.

They watched in disbelief. Trees were being uprooted. Fences were being lifted into the air like strands of string. Even large stones were being picked up and tossed thirty yards in all directions.

“The wind is moving right past the cave opening like there was some sort of invisible shield out there,” Dave said.

“I’ve heard that will happen. We’ll take it whatever is causing it,” Pete said.

The cave warmed quickly. The boys got out of their wet clothes, dried off and were soon in dry outfits. They slipped into their jackets. Even so, the shivering went on for some time. The air began being sucked out of the cave. The smoke drifted toward them as they stood close to the van near the opening.

“There it is, Pete – the tornado. Can’t be more than 25 yards away.”

“I suggest we move back further from the front,” Pete said, taking Dave by the shoulder to immediately force the issue.

They ducked to avoid the smoke which stayed mostly near the ceiling. From behind the truck they could still watch outside. The tornado moved on by. As it did it spawned a smaller one, trailing by twenty yards and lighter in color.

“Looks like they’re playing chase,” Dave said. “Like me chasing you.”

“Who but you would find himself surrounded by nature’s most devastating danger and find time to anthropomorphize a pair of tornados?”

“Good word, Pete.”

“Tornado?” Pete said smiling.

“No, anthro . . . “

“Oh, I see. Putting me on. Well, I have a few 16 letter words myself.”

“How do you know that? Sixteen letters. I’d give a week’s allowance to play inside your head for just ten minutes.”

Dave became immediately serious.

“No more allowances, I guess, huh?”

“I imagine we will need to figure something like that into our budget.”

Dave nodded. It was more the sadness associated with the memory of the family than the actual allowance to which he had been reacting. Pete understood, but had no idea how to respond. Sometimes being a 'parent figure' left one feeling completely helpless. He assumed, for the first time, his own parents had experienced that as well. They had certainly disguised it well, if they had. He'd do his best.

"It looks like we out foxed the storm," Pete said at last. "Since we're here how about making this our place for the night? No pool or gym – home cooking, I guess."

"As I recall, pools are filled with water. I've had enough of that for some time. The best thing about going to a gym would be watching the girls in skimpy outfits. We have no assurance that would be the case up at the motel."

"So your vote, Dave – about the night?"

"Here seems fine. I've never lived in a cave before. How about you?"

"Well, there was that one summer when it was just me, the cave, and seven gorgeous girls."

"So, *no*, then?"

"You got it."

"You did initiate a fine fantasy though, didn't you?"

"Down boy. Get a book and read, do pushups, or something."

They chuckled together.

"There is something humorous about us being in a cave, Pete. It seems you really took that truck driver at his word when he told us to 'hole' up. This is nothing if not a hole."

Pete shook his head in disbelief.

The angry sky continued to offer swirling, black clouds for several hours. The sun had set behind them and evening had overtaken the world. The rain eventually stopped. The fire kept them warm and Dave's home cooking satisfied their hunger – well, not really; teen boys were always hungry.

"I'm going to turn in early," Pete said.

"I think I'll stay up a while," Dave came back. "Not tired."

"Maybe you can trace us out a route across Ohio, southwest to either Indiana or Kentucky?"

“That was my plan – after reminiscing about Miss August.”

He bent over in hysterical laughter at what he thought had been a stupendous piece of humor. Pete ruffled his hair and returned to the van to stretch out between the rows of boxes and to contemplate once more how in the world a *flame* could possibly keep that refrigerator *cold*.

* * *

As out of place as it seemed, once again, it was Pete who awakened Dave the following morning. He had scrambled eggs, fried ham, and juice ready and waiting by six.

“Rise and shine, Dave. A big day ahead of us. You get that route traced?”

As was typical of the younger brother, his eyes popped open and he was dressed and ready to start the day in two minutes’ flat.

“I did. Two actually, but I like the one that goes south across the Ohio River into Kentucky the best. There is a ferry that takes cars across. I’ve never been on a ferry before and I’m thinking you haven’t either. So, what do you think?”

“I think I’m starved and the food is getting cold. We’ll study that river route after breakfast. My clothes and hair stink like smoke. So do yours.”

“They do, come to think of it. The old woodsman’s cologne as I’m sure somebody must have once said.”

Pete noted it, but didn’t respond.

They sat cross-legged at the fire looking out the front of the cave.

“Still dark, big brother.”

“I noticed that earlier.”

“Why you up so early?”

“Have a revved up feeling about today. Unsettled. No idea what it means. Couldn’t go back to sleep. Ready to get on with things. Ready to figure out where we’re headed. I guess I miss having a home base. I guess I miss a lot of things.”

“Maybe we’ll find an ‘old Kentucky Home base’ south of the river.”

Dave thought his play on words was quite funny. Pete offered not so much as a look. He clearly had his ‘serious’ on

that morning.

“Wish we could shower. I hate this stink.”

It had been Pete – oddly serious Pete.

“If you’ll remember, there’s a creek across the road from the cave. I imagine we could de-stinkafy in there,” Dave said, testing the limits of his brother’s mood.”

His newly coined word received not so much as a smile.

“That’s probably the best we can do,” Pete said. “Finish breakfast, look at your map, agree on a route, go to the creek, clean up, put on new clothes and be on our way.”

“Sounds very organized for my big brother.”

“Seems suddenly that’s pretty much become my life. Let’s get to it.”

It was as close to being really gruff and unpleasant as Pete had been since they left home. Something seemed to be getting to him. Dave let it pass, thinking he’d see how things developed during the day.

Half an hour later they were full, knew where they were going that day, were creek-water-clean, and had just turned back onto the main route in the van.

“We need to stop and do a wash,” Pete said. “These are our last clean clothes.”

Dave nodded and returned his attention to the atlas.

“So, we keep heading south or southwest until we hit highway 22. That goes clear across the state – east to west. When we come to Wilmington – that’s a little over 200 miles from where we are – we catch 68 south and just past Wahlsburg we take 271 on south to the ferry. From Wilmington to the river is only about 50 miles.”

“Kentucky by early afternoon, then?” Pete said making it a question.

“That’s the way it looks. I know you aren’t used to driving in such long stretches, Pete. Maybe we can break it up with lunch and a Laundromat.”

“I can drive for as long as it takes.”

Again, Pete was being short. Something was in his craw. Dave thought it was time to find out what.

“There’s a road side stop about three miles ahead, Pete. I want to stop.”

“Stop? We just got started. What’s the deal?”

“Our 50/50 deal – don’t I get to choose a stop if I want to?”

At that point they each had a question about what was wrong with the other one. Pete pulled into the rest area – basically just two picnic tables and country restrooms all on a graveled lot. They didn’t get out. Pete turned off the engine and folded his arms, looking straight ahead. Dave spoke first.

“What’s your deal this morning?”

“What’s *your* deal this morning?”

“My deal is trying to find out what your deal is. You’ve been out of sorts with me ever since you woke me up.”

“No . . . I . . . haven’t!”

Pete emphasized each word as one will do when trying to justify your point of view.

“There you go again. If I’ve done something wrong I need to know. We promised to be honest with each other. We’re all we have, Marcus. We have to keep things good between us.”

Marcus/Pete looked over at Dave and stared. There was nothing friendly or ‘good between them’ about it.

“I can’t tell you what it is.”

“Yes. You *can* tell me. You have a brain that formulates words and a tongue that expresses them. I need to know what’s going on.”

“Okay. You won’t like it.”

He paused and looked out his side window as he spoke.

“I’m already sick and tired of having to take care of you. There. Happy?”

“Of course, I’m not happy. I’ve been scared to death for days, and now it just got ten times worse. I’m thirteen. I can’t possibly take care of myself. I didn’t ask for any of this to happen. I’m not the one who messed things up so you had to take care of me. I don’t know how to change that. If you’re as smart as I know you are, you must be frightened out of your skull – no parents, no home, lost all your friends, a fully unknown future and on top of that, a snot nosed little brother whose fully dependent on you and will be for several more years – four or five. I won’t say I’m sorry to you, because I

didn't do anything to be sorry for. I can't tell you things are going to just get better, because I don't know that – if anything my feeling is things will get worse before they have any chance of getting better. *I'm* doing the best *I* know how to do. *You're* doing the best *you* know how. I don't know how either of us can expect any more out of the other one than that.”

By then they both had well-dampened cheeks. They both wore that face that said, ‘I'm crying and I feel miserable and lost; I have no idea what to do; I have no place to turn; the only feeling I can find inside me is overwhelming desperation’.

They sighed together – deep and long. That seemed somehow humorous to both of them although it was detached, somewhere way out away from them so they couldn't capture it. They hadn't the strength to react.

They sat in silence for many minutes, staring out the windows at the woods and the path that wound through it. Eventually, Dave opened his door and got out, closing it behind him. He walked slowly toward the opening in the trees where the path began. He had soon disappeared into the woods. His quiet tears became uncontrolled, chest heaving, sobbing. He had never felt so alone and terrified in his life. He came upon some seasonally early wild flowers. He stopped and bent down, picking two of them. They had no fragrance. He wondered if they were sad because of that. They weren't even particularly pretty – the size of a dime, five petals, white with brown edges.

He walked on. The trees grew close together. The deeper he went the less sun penetrated to the ground and the sparser became the grass and flowers. There were beds of brown pine needles that had built up over the years – just lying there mounded up against the base of the trunks, wet and rotting. The air took on an unpleasant, pungent odor.

He tried to think, but couldn't determine the appropriate subject. He figured he was, therefore, in an even bigger predicament than he had imagined.

After ten minutes at a slow, aimless pace, he felt the presence of somebody behind him. Maybe it was a friendly, fellow, tourist. Maybe it was Red Beard ready to slit his throat. If he got a vote he would choose the second and just get things over with. Whoever it was didn't make a move, but just

continued to shadow him some ten feet behind. Dave was determined to let play out whatever was going to play out. He had no fear associated with it – he didn't care.

In a quick flash, he hoped Pete was safe.

“Poor Pete.”

It had slipped out across his tongue. It hadn't been his intention. He walked on into the ever-darkening forest.

The person behind him cleared his throat. It was obviously male. It spoke – in soft, familiar, tones.

“Pete's *not* poor. Pete's just about the wealthiest guy on earth. It took a snot nosed little brother to make him see it. Pete is sorry for things he said even though at the moment they *were* his honest feelings.”

Dave felt an arm encircle his shoulders as the person moved in beside him. Although he made no move to shed it, he kept walking in silence without looking. Presently he found his arm had reached out around Pete's waist. Still without looking up he offered him one of his flowers. It was accepted. He leaned his head against Pete's shoulder. They continued for some time before Dave finally eased himself away and stopped, turning in the path to face his brother. He looked him directly in his eyes.

“So?”

“I guess!”

“We lost a half hour.”

“Oh, no, precious sibling. It seems to me we just gained a lifetime.”

They embraced and stood quietly for some time, Dave's cheek against Pete's dampening chest. Pete made no move. It needed to be on his brother's clock and that was fine. His brother was amazing – intelligent and wise way beyond his years. Perhaps the wrong brother had become the caretaker – well, in some ways at least. Perhaps more of that 50/50 and less of big brother believing it was all on him.

* * *

Once they turned onto highway 22 the road straightened out considerably and they were able to make much better time.

“You know what's been missing, don't you?” Dave said.

“Miss August?”

Dave's face brightened.

"Well, yes, but actually I was thinking Hattie's great Italian food. We haven't had a single *past* since we left."

"*Past* – what's a *past*?"

"Well, I started out forming a singular sentence so I used 'past' as the singular form of pasta."

"You are a strange little man, David Martin. Thank you for that."

"Thank you?"

"Mostly, you are unpredictable in what you think, say and do. I am finding life with you is . . . stimulating – often dumfounding and puzzling, but always stimulating."

Dave nodded as if thinking about it.

"Do you think girls will like that – me being unpredictable in what I think, say and do?"

"The *right* one *will*, and that's all that's important."

"That was a great revelation. I can see my ad on the MATCH sight in a few years: Strange little man who is delightfully unpredictable in what he thinks, says, and does. Five feet ten in thick sox and for some time now, August has been his favorite month (quite willing to negotiate the month!)."

Pete laughed full out and slowed for safety sake.

"And the strange little man proved it all over again. You know I loved you, even earlier in the day when I was ready to leave you in a WalMart parking lot."

"WalMart. That was considerate at least. I have often thought I could survive comfortably in a supercenter quite happily."

The remark renewed Pete's chuckles.

"So, about that Italian pasta – *pasta*, that's more than one *past*, you understand?"

"It sounds/they sound good," Pete said. "Google us a dining delight."

"I imagine you just said something that has never been said before."

"You must be rubbing off on me, brother."

At two o'clock they found themselves being seated in the moderately fancy, '*Little Italy*'. Dave hoped the food was more inspired than its name. Moments later that seemed less important – one of the most beautiful women he had ever

seen arrived to take their orders and pamper them throughout the next hour. She was playful with Dave and flirtatious with Pete. Neither had any objections. They imagined the food was good – considerations of the palate suddenly became secondary.

“Well, that was . . .” Dave stopped to think.”

“How about, stimulating?” Pete said smiling over at his brother.

“That would be the word. That’s like our relatively new unspoken bond.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Our intense interest in females is shared and yet our thoughts about them seldom are – shared. That’s alright. I didn’t mean it wasn’t – the respect women thing from dad. I’m fine with that. It’s just a new part of my life and to know I have finally caught up to you in that respect feels very special.”

Pete had no words so he smiled again and nodded. It was hard to believe the fastest butt in the city had grown up to be a lady’s man – well, potentially, at least.

“We got another e-mail here, Pete. It’s from our protector. This whole relationship is so bizarre – as if we are being watched over by some invisible entity – maybe a silent drone with a cloaking device.”

“Are you going to sit there waxing philosophical or open it?”

“Sorry. Here, let’s see what he has to say.”

Boys – Good route selection. Stop at AAA Rentals at the intersection of 22 and 72 just south of Reesville. Pick up trailer number ILL030938. All arrangements made in Peter’s name. Suggest south to Kentucky. Make no response here.

“What do you make of that, Pete?”

“Somebody is obviously spying on us far better than somebody could possibly be spying on us.”

“Which probably means we didn’t find all the GPS devices on this van,” Dave said

“Ah. I see. Should we look for another?”

“How about we wait and see what this trailer thing is all about?”

“Makes sense,” Pete said. “If the emailer is really somebody who is looking out for our welfare, I suppose we

should play it out straight, shouldn't we?"

"Unless it's not really genuine."

"What do you mean?"

Dave explained.

"Well, if I wanted to track somebody cross country and wait until they were in an isolated spot to slit their throat, I might form a ploy that would appear like I was helping them so they wouldn't discard the tracking device in case they came across it. And I most certainly would have used more than one of them."

"Or, he could just be protecting us."

"Or that. Less challenging, but, of course, less threatening."

"We don't have a trailer hitch," Pete said.

"I imagine they have them at the AAA place. Email guy seems to know what he's doing."

Pete nodded. Dave's dark, alternative explanation bothered Pete more than he let show.

A number of hours passed.

"We should be very close to AAA. I found their web page. It will be on our right. Not a big operation. Sits out in the middle of nowhere – well, that can't be of course, but you get my meaning. May have to turn onto 72 for a hundred yards or so."

He had been right on all counts.

Pete pulled in. Dave had copied the receipt number or trailer number or whatever it really was, so they could hand it to the clerk. The clerk turned out to be the owner of the gas station associated with the place. He was ancient, but upbeat and physically capable.

Pete handed him the number.

"Oh, yes. The trailer was dropped off about an hour ago. The man said you'd be by shortly to pick it up. Padlocked just like it was when it arrived. I see you have the proper hitch on the van. Just back up and you'll be on your way again in five minutes. This is it over here."

The boys turned to look, first at the rear of the van – a hitch had been installed – then at the trailer. Nothing was clear about it. The trailer was small – fully enclosed, two wheels, four feet wide, six long, and six high. It was

nondescript beige in color with a matching, let-the-light-in, curved, plastic top. It bore an Illinois license plate.

The boys looked at each other. Pete got in the van and backed it into place. Dave helped the old gentleman make the connection. Dave had a question for him while he hooked up the lights on the rear of the trailer to those on the back of the van.

“Would you let just anybody drive in here and claim the trailer if they had the number?”

“Only if it was a late model, green ford van with that particular license plate number and a Chicago White Sox bumper sticker on the left side of the front bumper and was occupied by two young men 21 and 15 with black hair and brown eyes.”

“I see. Seems you did everything just right. We appreciate it very much.”

“What do we owe you?” Pete said removing his wallet.

“All prepaid. No charges.”

“You are an honest man, sir. How about we fill up while we’re here?”

The old man and Dave walked to the pumps while Pete moved the car – and trailer. It topped off at a little over 25 gallons, more than most tanks held when empty. They paid with cash ready to move on. The old man checked the safety chains one final time and had Pete work the turn signals.

“Wouldn’t hurt none to grease that hitch ball every thousand miles. I just assume from the size of that tank you’re on a long journey.”

As predicted they were ready to leave in just a few minutes.

Inside, Dave was the first to speak of the problem.

“We’ll need to cut or saw that lock off. What do you suppose is in it?”

“Frankly, I’m more interested about when that hitch was installed. Couldn’t have been last night at the cave.”

“Then it had to either be at the ‘trail of tears path stop’ or the restaurant,” Dave suggested.

“Probably the restaurant, don’t you think?”

Dave nodded and smiled.

“What?” Pete asked watching his face.

“You just said, ‘Frankly, bla bla ba. I’ve been Frankie most all my life. I guess it was just nice to hear you come close to saying it again.”

“Any time. Well, as somebody I know just said, ‘That can’t be of course,’ but nights I suppose if it’s important to you.”

“Not really, but thanks for suggesting the accommodation. I’m eager to see what’s inside.”

“Me, too, of course. Tell you what. Let’s drive on into Wilmington – that’s where we turn south, right, on 68.”

“Right.”

“Surely we can find a Laundromat there. While our clothes are washing we can open the trailer.”

“Just a minute. Another email from hitch-guy. It is just one word – *Battery*. Hmm?”

“What kind of battery – like assault and battery, flashlight battery, laptop battery.”

“Probably car battery,” Pete said.

“Ah, the pragmatic older youngster probably just nailed it. When we stop we can examine it, I guess.

“Unless you’re willing to risk crawling out on the hood, such as it is, while we are moving.”

Dave gave it a respectable grin and voiced the obvious question.

“But battery? Why? Makes no sense.”

“It will make sense when it makes sense, Dave.”

“You sound like some wise mystic on a mountaintop.”

There were a few minutes of silence.

“Think we are ever going to get to know who email guy is?” Dave asked.

“No way to know unless, as has been suggested, he accosts us and slits our throats.”

“Accosts, a good word. Where do you suppose I got that throat slitting thing?”

“Such things just seem to well up inside that brain of yours. It typically spits out a dozen options in situations where only one is really needed.”

“Look there! The first thing we see in Wilmington is a Laundromat. Luck or social expectation. I’ll go with the later.”

Dave moved into the back and collected the clothes.

“My how these stink. I hope they got worse over time because I’d hate to think I actually wore something that smelled this bad.”

He stuffed them into a black trash bag. Inside, Pete got quarters while Dave loaded two washers – clothes in one; sheets, pillowcases and towels in another.

“I selected these washers up front so we can keep an eye on them through the window from outside by the van.”

Pete understood that he would not have been concerned about that, but welcomed his brother’s caution.

Outside they opened the hood. The battery sat to the extreme right as they faced it – the driver’s left. Its sides were too close to other things for them to get a good look.

“You suppose we’re looking for another plastic bag like the credit cards were in.”

“We’ll know when we find it,” Pete said. “Can you reach in between things and feel the sides of the battery?”

“Me and my tiny hands, you’re saying?”

“You now they’re as big as mine. Mine are cramped from gripping the steering wheel.”

“Good save, big brother.”

He felt around for several moments.

“Bingo, as our favorite detective, Raymond Masters, of mystery novel fame would say. “Appears to be taped and taped again. Let me see if I can cut it loose with my pocket knife.”

A minute later he was carefully lifting whatever it was up away from the battery.

“A little brown pasteboard envelope inside a somewhat larger clear plastic envelope,” he said describing the obvious as he held out for them to see.

For some reason, which neither of them understood, Dave handed it to his brother who opened it. Inside the smaller envelope, they found a key.

“To the trailer padlock, do you suppose?” Dave said taking it from Pete. He moved around the van while Dave closed the hood.

“Another Bingo, Pete. Do you suppose the key has been on the battery from the start or just since the addition of the hitch?”

“Again, no way to know.”

“But I want to know!”

“Says the impatient boy who wants to know everything. Perhaps if you’d throw a kicking screaming tantrum.”

They shared a smile and paused a moment before removing the lock and swinging open the doors.

They stood there speechless, shocked at what they saw there in front of them. Dave raised his hands . . .

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CHAPTER SIX

Fooling Around

Dave raised his hands . . . to take hold of the top of the trailer and pull himself inside.

“Can you believe this, Pete? Our stuff from home. Your sit-on-the-floor electronic piano and my guitar. Look, my books, must be a hundred of them. My big globe and clothes, and our pillows and our bed spreads and hanging there some of the models you made when you were just a kid. And up front my file cabinet. Can you believe this?”

They allowed only ten minutes to look through what had come to them in the trailer, then were back on the road.

“Who did this?” Dave asked. “Nobody really knew us well enough did they? I mean to get our really most important stuff. Maybe our language tutor?”

“I’m guessing somebody that dad designated long ago to take care of things, just in case, and he did his or her research well.”

“That makes me think the email guy might be an email woman.”

“Might be. Does it matter? From what we’ve seen so far we’re never going to find out so such fantasies are pointless.”

They grew silent for several miles.

“We’re running a bit later than we thought,” Pete said, “but we should still hit that ferry by two or two thirty.”

“Across the Ohio River will be Kentucky. We need to figure a direction from there.”

“One good thing about us having no real plan is that nobody else can know either. But, your right, Dave, we need to pick a direction.”

He paged to the map of the United States in the front of the atlas, but was still thinking about Pete’s comment.

“That brings something to mind. How did whoever it was know where we were at lunch so they could attach that hitch? I’ve been watching for vehicles that might be tailing us and I haven’t detected a single one.”

“I’ve been doing the same thing with the same result. My conclusion is that we didn’t find all the GPS devices on this

van. There may have even been one build in, powered by the car battery maybe.”

“That raises a very interesting question: If there was a well-hidden one right from the beginning like you postulate – connected to email person, the good guys – then what about the one we found. Would it have been from somebody else – the FBI, Skinny run into the dark guy, Red Beard?”

“The question ran across my mind as well, Dave. I don’t have an answer.”

“Well, given what we both believe about there being no tail, the GPS alternative is the only reasonable one.”

“I suppose that’s a good thing and not something to be concerned about.”

“Not until you’re parked in a woods with a hot date and email guy comes knocking on your window.”

Dave thought it was quite humorous. Pete allowed a few chuckles.

They grew quiet again, clearly thinking about something pleasant.

“Last night after you turned in, I was remembering, about those books you read to me when I was five.”

“The ones about the Little People of the Ozarks? About as tall as a grape hyacinth as I recall and oozing with magical powers.”

“Those are the ones. I loved three things about them – the stories, of course, the two wonderful main characters, and that you took time to read them to me.”

“I have to confess that I didn’t want to, but mom thought you and I needed more quality time together. Once we got into them I’ll have to say I enjoyed them, too. They took place in the Ozark Mountains.”

“Yes, in Arkansas. Remember when we got out the atlas and somehow came to a conclusion right where those Little People lived.”

“As I recall, Dave, it only came after some serious debate between us.”

“Yeah. That was the first time I came to see that my opinion really mattered – you listened to me and my ideas and modified your own from what I said. Thanks, by the way.”

“You’re welcome, by the way.”

“I think I found that spot on this atlas – sort of in the center of the state right along the top edge where the Ozark Mountains spill down into Arkansas from Missouri.”

“Is there a town there?”

“One that sounds very inviting – Mountain Home.”

“That does sound inviting. How big is it?”

“On the small side of what we said – thirteen or fourteen thousand people in a county of forty-five thousand or so. It does have a branch of the state university there and a school system that has won some awards – their band marched in one of the big Holliday Parades.”

“How far is it from where we are, right now?”

“Let me measure. Well, that’s pretty much impossible the way the roads ramble around through Kentucky, Tennessee and Arkansas. My educated guess is between 550 and 650 miles. Travel time will be longer than seems reasonable given all the hills and the twists and turns.”

“It suddenly sounds like that’s where we’re headed.”

“It does,” Dave said, nodding. “It doesn’t mean it will be our final destination, but we’re going to want to check out in person any place that makes our list.”

“How far will that be away from the city, back home? How far will we have traveled?”

“All I can figure is as the crow flies – about 1,000. Wait a mileage chart here from the City to Little Rock comes in at 1250, but Little Rock is probably 200 miles further, so I was pretty close.”

“Ironic,” Pete said.

“Why?”

“Dad essentially said travel west for a thousand miles before you look back. He outfitted the van with gas tanks that would have taken us that far on what was in them when we started out.”

Dave grew silent and folded his arms across his chest, then spoke.

“I still have problems about that man, you know.”

Pete nodded. Dave saw.

“I suppose I always will. I just have to find a way to live with it. I’m smart. I ought to be able to do that. I suppose one thing I can never fault him for is helping mom give you and me

life. Regardless of anything else, that's of ultimate importance to us."

Pete looked over at him.

"That sounded like a rather successful conversation you had with yourself."

Dave smiled.

"It did sound that way. Although, it was sort of like me deciding I'm going to be valedictorian of my senior class. I have it all worked out except the hard part, making the grades."

"Valedictorian, huh?"

"It was just an example. I used to think about it. I had the highest grade point average, through Jr. High until we left. It doesn't seem as important any more. Can't say why."

"Can I take a stab at it?"

"Sure. My heart has always warmed when you took an interest in me."

For some reason Pete frowned, but then brightened and spoke.

"You have always wanted to learn in order to gain knowledge, not just for grades. You are interested in everything. I'm thinking you are figuring out that pursuing good grades – that is learning what the teachers think you should learn – no longer makes total sense. The End."

Dave chuckled and nodded.

"You may just be right. I'm not sure I had told that to myself in such a succinct manner yet, however. Thanks. It has earned a place on my 'think about' list."

"You actually have such a list?"

"Of course. I can't possibly consider everything that comes along all at the same time. So, I prioritize and come back. Some of my teachers were often not real pleased with how their priorities for me did not coincide with my priorities for me."

"How late does that ferry run?"

"Eight to eight seven days a week and it's the *Augusta Ferry*, it's been in operation in one form or another since the late seventeen hundreds. Not the same boat I hope. I think I read the toll is less than ten bucks."

"And we pick it up at . . ."

“A hop, skip, and a jump south of Higginsport, a very small town a mile or so north of the river. The ferry crosses to Augusta, Kentucky, hence its name. From there we pick up highway 22 and after that I’ll have to just direct every turn unless you feel okay about the interstate.”

“Backroads. That was our instruction. We’ll keep to them. All we have is time right now. No hurry. Besides, Kentucky and Tennessee are supposed to be really beautiful states.”

“Okay. I agree. How about stopping in an hour or so and find a motel with a real shower and real beds and a place we can eat a whole pie apiece if we want to. Then, while we tend to our sick stomachs we can begin doing some serious thinking about our money situation.”

“Good plan. Like dad said we need to be very careful in those plans – think it over and then think it over again. I don’t know anything about investing or maybe we just keep it in bank accounts so nobody suspects we have it. More things we have to learn about.”

“I learned from the town’s website that the average family income in Mountain Home is under forty thousand a year. That’s below the national average range I think so I’m thinking it shouldn’t be an expensive place to live. It’s not as diverse a community as I’d like ours to be – 95% white. Then, about where we will live – an apartment, our own house – it’s small enough we could have a house. Sounds very safe. Lots of things to think through.”

* * *

The ferry ran when cars arrived needing to cross rather than having a set time schedule. They only had to wait a few minutes and in another few minutes they found themselves across the river in Kentucky. One of the workers on the boat set them on the proper route and an hour later they were approaching Cynthiana, a small town off the beaten track as they moved between route 27 west to 25. They found a nice motel with a pool. It was within in easy walking distance of stores and restaurants. A river divided the community into two sections. The town had historical ties with both the author, JOHNNY GRUELLE, who wrote the *Raggedy Ann and Andy* books, and was the setting of *The Walking Dead* comic book – two

extremes on the literary charts, Dave thought.

After checking in, they walked the streets for a while stretching and relaxing. The people seemed exceptionally friendly – of course, in comparison to the City, most places seemed exceptionally friendly. They ate, swam, and returned to their room. It was pleasant, large, and overlooked the pool. Tree filled hills lay in the distance. They talked well into the night and finally crawled into bed at midnight.

The next morning, they found themselves 180 miles from Kentucky – give or take 25.

After breakfast, Pete walked around the van and trailer checking things. Like most mornings, he had Dave work the brakes and turn signal check, mostly to make sure the trailer was still connected. The old gentleman at the trailer place had used safety pins to connect the wires from the van. Pete continued to be impressed that someone was able to install that hitch within the short amount of time they were in the café.

He climbed in beside Dave who was preparing the atlas for the day. He pointed at it as he spoke.

“Basically, we will cross Kentucky north to south today. This route misses all the big cities and avoids the Interstates except several one or two mile sections that are essential to get from one road to another. We will be switching from route to route often.”

“Ready, then, sport?”

“Ready, captain. We really do have a time knowing what to call each other, don’t we?”

“That a problem for you?”

“I guess not. I believe I always respond appropriately. It’s like we’re not yet really sure who we’re talking to so we keep spinning alternatives.”

“Some of that is undoubtedly true – the still getting to know each other part, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. I suppose. It’s just hard to imagine brothers living just one thin wall away from each other in the same house and knowing so little about each other. Like, I assume you didn’t have a special girlfriend because you haven’t mentioned anybody, but I really don’t know that’s true.”

“I didn’t and I don’t; you’re right. How about you.”

“No. Like I said, I’ve never even been on a real date – one on one. I kissed a few girls, but nothing like what you see in the movies where their faces melt into each other and they groan and administer mutual back rubs during the process. I suppose you’ve done that.”

“I’ve groaned my way through a few, I guess.”

Pete looked over and smiled.

“You still have those first times to look forward to. Think of it as adventures still to come. That first groaner will be something you’ll always remember, I will say that.”

“We *are* talking about just kissing, right?”

“Yes. Just kissing.”

“I never saw mom and dad kiss each other, did you?”

“No. They didn’t express affection in front of others. I suppose that would have been considered a sign of weakness to a man in dad’s line of work.”

Dave just nodded. He wasn’t sure the word ‘weakness’ was accurate, but he would think about it. His ‘think about’ list had been growing rapidly that past week.

“They topped a hill. The view they expected to enjoy isn’t what grabbed their attention. Instead . . .

“An accident!” Dave said. “A bad accident. I count three vehicles.”

“Is that two black SUVs and a pickup?”

“I think so. Looks like one SUV rammed the back of the truck and the second rammed the front. There are flames coming from under the rear of the truck.”

Pete pulled off the road and they got out and ran toward the vehicles.

“Smoke is getting thicker,” Pete said. “Fires and cars are a bad combination. We need to be careful.”

“Wind is coming up from the valley,” Dave noted. “It will be better to approach from the other side.”

They reached the far SUV.

“Those plates are Federal Government plates,” Dave said.

Pete had no idea how his brother knew that, but he didn’t question it. Black SUVs were synonymous with the FBI – not a good thing for them he figured. Even worse of course, was that fact that whoever was inside was getting fried like an

over-easy egg.

“One man inside,” Pete said. “Looks to be unconscious and his head is bleeding. Let’s get that door open. Handle may be hot.”

With a great deal of effort, they managed it open.

“I’ll drag him away. You see about the other SUV. I’ll come back and see if I can get to the truck. That’s where the fire is. Looks like two in there – a man and a woman.”

Dave ran a wide circle around the growing fire and approached the driver’s side of the third vehicle. The doors on that side were badly damaged and would not open. He ran to the other side. There were two men inside, both unconscious and bloody. Those doors had jammed when the frame was bent during the crash – at least that was Dave’s take on it. He ran to their van and returned with the pry bar from the tool box. He inserted it into the rear passenger side door; it seemed to be the least damaged. He positioned one leg up against the side to gain leverage with the bar. There was no good position from which to work.

“Plan ‘B’,” he said out loud.

He broke the rear door window with the bar and cleared the glass so he could climb inside. Once in, he found places for his feet and put his back into the door pushing with his entire body. He felt it budge. He pushed harder. The door sprang open dumping him out onto the pavement. He was soon back inside releasing the back of the passenger seat down flat into the reclining position. He reached over the man and released his seat belt. With his hands under the man’s arms, he slowly worked him outside and pulled him into the grass drainage ditch 25 feet away. He returned for the driver. That one presented a far more difficult task. The release button on his seat belt was jammed. Using his pocket knife Dave sawed through the belt – not an easy task. After several minutes, it gave way. He scooted the man to the right, into the passenger seat and proceeded to extract him the way he had the other one.

Once he had them side by side on the ground, he did what he knew to do about checking vital signs. Both were breathing steadily and deeply, but neither had regained consciousness. He arranged them so their feet were higher

than their heads. In the process, he came across what he figured might be there – FBI badges clipped to their belts.

He left them and went to see about Pete.

“Having one hell of a time here, Dave. Doors are jammed and the fire is spreading. Check the gas tank. Is it leaking?”

Dave knelt down to take a look.

“Dripping. Not much. I just see one little hole. Give me a minute.”

He went to the side of the road searching for something. He found what he was after – a stick about a quarter of an inch in diameter. He sharpened it, as he walked back to the truck, then turned onto his back on the pavement and scooted under the tank. He screwed the stick up into the hole.

“The leak is stopped. Now, how can I help?”

He took the pry bar from where he was carrying it under his belt.

“Can we break the windshield without hurting the people?” he asked.

“I doubt if hurting them is an issue at this point. If we don’t get them out within the next few minutes this whole place is going to blow.”

“But I stopped the leak.”

“Which is a great short term fix. It may buy us time. But, sticks, especially sticks soaked in gasoline, tend to burn, brother.”

Dave saw the problem. In stopping the leak, he had essentially put a fuse in place right up into the gas tank.

Pete took the bar and broke the window. It was an older, inexpensive model so the windshield glass was not reinforced. Had it been . . . well, it wasn’t.

There was a folded blanket on the seat. Dave used it to pad the bottom of the window opening, which still had small shards of glass protruding. The fire flared up along the driver’s side door. On the outside, flames were lapping up as high as the roof, producing thick, black, foul smelling smoke. It grew dangerously hot.

Neither passenger had been wearing a seat belt, and upon impact they had apparently been tossed around the

cabin like rag dolls.

“Let’s start with the passenger – the woman,” Pete said.”

They each took an arm and with great difficulty pulled her torso forward so she lay face down across the padded opening. They couldn’t budge her from there.

Without a word, Dave crawled over her and inside. From there he could straddle her body and lift her hips, then her legs. They soon had her out on the hood and Pete carried her to the safety of the roadside. Dave arrived a few moments later. He was carrying two large brief cases.

“They were on the seat between them. Had been covered by the blanket.”

Dave turned to return to the truck for the driver. Flames grew to a height of thirty feet. There would be no returning.

“It’s going to blow. We need to move this woman and that man I got out of the SUV, up there to a safer place with the other men,” Pete said.

Pete took the man and Dave the woman. They stopped at the bottom of the drainage ditch, some forty feet from the fire.

“I’m thinking it’s everybody face down time,” Dave said.

“I agree.”

That had been one of the agents who had regained consciousness.

He rolled his companion down the slope to the bottom of the ditch. They lay down and waited.

The blast sent a ball of fire thirty yards into the air. After a moment, Dave started to raise up and take a look. The agent forced him back down.

“Two more gas tanks so probably two explosions yet to come, son.”

As it turned out it was just one more, huge blast that came just seconds later. It spread parts of vehicles a hundred feet into the air and across an acre of ground.

By then, two other cars had come upon the scene. One had called 911. They spotted the boys who by then were standing. The newcomers ran toward them. A second agent regained consciousness. The first one spoke, explaining the situation.

“Up in smoke I’m afraid, Jake”

“No! And we were so close.”

The boys, of course, looked puzzled at the comments. The first agent showed his badge and offered a minimal explanation.

“Bad guys. Making off with millions of dollars’ worth of stolen bearer bonds. Looks like the man perished.”

Pete spoke.

“He died in the crash. It’s why we went after the woman first.”

“He was dead?” Dave asked.

Pete nodded.

Dave turned to the agent.

“Would those bearer bonds have been in two briefcases?”

“They might have been. Did you see them in the truck?”

It was Pete who answered.

“Not only did he see them, he rescued them. They are in the ditch thirty yards south.”

Dave stood and trotted to get them, hoping they hadn’t been destroyed by the nearby explosions.

As he returned with one case in each hand, the EMT’s arrived from out of the north and State Police pulled in from the south.

“The cases seem to be in good shape,” Dave said, handing them over. “They don’t appear to even be locked.”

“The first agent opened one of them.”

“Gadzooks! You got them. Nice going young man. There is a sizeable reward.”

“Gadzooks? Really?” Dave asked.

The second agent smiled.

“It’s FBI code for, ‘Gee Whizz’.”

“Oh. Well, that makes sense, of course.”

They all exchanged weak smiles.

The EMT’s began working on the still unconscious woman and the third agent.

Pete spoke.

“Looks like things are all under control here so we need to be on our way.”

“Not so fast. We need your information so we can see

that the reward gets to you.”

“That should go to the Girls and Boys Club up in Cynthiana,” Dave said. “I assume you can take care of that.”

“I can take care of it, yes, but I don’t understand. We’re talking something in the neighborhood of \$250,000.”

Dave looked at Pete.

“Girls and Boys Club – is that like Sam’s Club?”

“Similar, I believe.”

“Then I just imagine that sum should buy several late model boys and girls, don’t you, Uncle Bill.”

“I certainly do, Jimmy. At least a few. Nice meeting you gentlemen.”

“But . . .”

They returned to the van and pulled to the other side of the road where the state trooper waved them on their way.

“Whew!”

“Can you square that for me, little bro?”

“I think that would be Wheeee-ew!”

“Are they following us Dave?”

“Doesn’t seem like it, but you know they got our license number.”

He turned around toward the front and slumped back in his seat.

“Are you as scared to death as I am?” big bro?

“I am, now. Wasn’t during the event. That’s odd, isn’t it?”

“It is. I had the same experience. I think I’ll wet my pants now.”

“I do hope not. We smell bad enough from the smoke and gasoline as it is.”

“Creek time again? The Ludwig River that runs through Cynthiana is in this vicinity somewhere.”

“I vote you find it on the map before we add the permanent aroma of gasoline fire to the inside of our van.”

He began looking and soon had relayed the directions.

“It’s such a shame you know,” Dave said.

“The smell, the accident, the injuries, the death?”

“Well, those of course, but I was thinking it was a shame we had to waste those great showers we took back at the motel. They didn’t last long at all.”

“I’ll tell you, again. Yours *really* is the oddest brain I’ve ever encountered.”

“And thank you, again.”

At the end of a gravel road they turned into a field through an open wire gate and followed a stream – apparently not the river – it didn’t matter, it would be wet. They found a secluded spot well away from the highway in the middle of a grassy area with trees.

They were soon engaged in soaping and shampooing and eventually feeling almost human again.

“It’s a really nice spot here, Pete. The water, the meadow, the trees and the squirrels.”

“I can’t disagree. You want to stay a while?”

“It might be a good coming-down-time-from-the-terrifying-life-threatening-experience-we-just-somehow-managed-to-live-through. And, no, I won’t diagram that for you.”

They lay back on the rather steep grassy bank and looked at the sky.

“Were we just very brave or were we just very dumb, Pete?”

“I once read bravery, by definition, contains an element of momentary stupidity. We could have been blown to bits. I knew that while it was all happening, but it didn’t influence my behavior for a second.”

“Yeah. I was just thinking the very same thing. I suppose we just experienced dumb luck, then.”

“I suppose, or a couple of dumb idiots just fell into some unlikely, good luck.”

They grew silent and watched the clouds move north.

“The clouds don’t seem to be in any hurry,” Dave pointed out. “I’ve been in a hurry all my life. Suppose I’ll ever be content to live in a slower gear?”

“The Frankie/Dave will always be the Frankie/Dave. Embrace what you are. That’s how you’ve always been – Fastest Butt in the City, remember.”

It produced a smile and a nod from little brother.

“You really are wise for an ugly, low brow, nineteen-year-old klutz, Pete.”

Pete was on top of him in a second. They struggled

and laughed and laughed and struggled on for some time. Dave managed a move that sent them rolling down the bank and into the water again. Had they not been able to stand up, their laughing would have surely drowned them.

It had been the first time in their lives they had tussled like that.

‘Unbelievable,’ Dave said to himself.

‘Unbelievable,’ Pete said to himself.

As they regained their footing and moved back toward the bank, a man walked up. He had seen seventy and maintained his flat top haircut from the ‘50s’. He had apparently been walking the river and had witnessed what had transpired between the boys.

“I take it you boys are okay – and friendly.”

“Oh, yes, sir,” Dave said. “It’s laundry day, you see.”

The man smiled and turned to Pete.

“A comedian in every swimming hole. This is my land. Happy to have you here for as long as you like. Just let me warn you that out in the middle there’s a deep trench where the water runs really fast. Could pull you under and you wouldn’t be seen again ‘till you hit Cincinnati.”

“I hear Cincinnati is a nice place,” Dave came back.

The old man shook his head and chuckled.

“Have fun. Just be careful, now.”

He walked on south waving over his head.

“The difference between a man and a woman,” Dave said.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, you know.”

“A woman would have gotten all bothered that we might have hurt each other or that there was some serious lingering problem between us and that we might get sucked under. She would admonish us to get out immediately.”

“And probably sit us in opposite corners,” Pete added.

They smiled as they sank down shoulder deep in the water. The breeze made wet skin feel quite chilly. Pete continued.

“Just remember, your world of women is quite limited – mom, teachers, the house help. They are all dedicated to the welfare of their charges – so, are probably overprotective by definition. I’m thinking that just may be a lopsided sample.”

“Ever been skinny dipping with a girl?”

“Where did that come from, Dave? No, but that’s really one of those personal things, don’t you think?”

“Too bad,” Dave said punctuating it with a nod and shrug.”

“You implying you have?”

“Sure, lots of times. Gerald, me and his dog, Flossie. Midnights, in our pool.”

“I must admit you had me going.”

“Coming *and* going, I’m thinking.”

Neither had another tussle in him although each momentarily considered the possibility.

They stayed in the water near the bank for quite a while. They took note that not only did they have laundry-fresh clothing in the van, but a supply in the trailer from the old days as well – the old days being a week before.

After an hour, they were ready to be on their way again. Pete had learned a good lesson. Don’t park in a narrow space from which you have to back a trailer a half mile in order to get out.

At noon, they stopped at a fast food drive through and then parked at the edge of the parking lot under a tree to eat. Normal size parking spaces no longer worked for them.

“Those endless fries were really good a few nights ago weren’t they?”

Pete nodded.

“If you want more fries go get more fries. We’re not exactly poor you know.”

Without a word, Dave got out and walked into the establishment. Five minutes later he returned with four large fries, two fried pies, and an upsized shake for each of them.

Pete smiled.

“Okay. NOW, we’re poor.”

Dave laughed. Pete noted it wasn’t his genuine laugh. He wondered what was up.

“A growing boy,” Dave said. “I don’t mind cold fries if it comes to that and I prefer cold fried pies.”

It had been a lot of talk about nothing.

“You okay little brother?”

“No! Of course, I’m not okay! We just almost got blown

to kingdom come, we may have been found out by the FBI, I saw my first dead person, I recently found out my dad was not who or what I thought he was so neither was I, I no longer have the home and family I thought would always be there for me, and I'm fully dependent on a nineteen-year-old who shouldn't have to be saddled with the responsibility for me. I'm not alright by any stretch of the imagination."

"Goodness. Well, *first*, I appreciate your honesty about your feelings and all. I don't really have a *second*, I guess, except we are in this together. I want you to know that I've grown up quite a bit in the last 24 hours – mostly thanks to you – and I am now fully committed to us and our future. Considering all the things that have taken place in our lives that have been completely out of our control, we still have each other and I, for one, wouldn't have it any other way. Don't for one second believe that we aren't *both* taking care of each other. There is no one way street here. I need you as much as you need me."

They both grew quiet. They finished the burgers, made a good dent in the fries, were still working on the shakes, and agreed without words to save the pies for later.

"Let's hit the restroom before we continue our journey," Pete said.

He put the trash in sacks, got out and walked toward the building. After a long pause, Dave followed. Five minutes later they were walking back across the parking lot arms around each other's waists.

"Sure you don't want me to drive," Dave said.

"It's not that I don't want you to, believe me."

"Thanks for accepting all that garbage I spewed back there. It's just so much all at once. I felt like my head was going to explode. I really didn't want fries I just felt like I had to get away. I don't know how you're handling it so well."

Pete found himself in a dilemma – admit he had most all of those same feelings and uncertainties in his role as bother, or keep a stiff upper lip in his role as Dave's parent figure. He decided to just let it flow.

"I'd be lying if I told you I didn't share lots – maybe most – of what you said, but maybe because I'm older and have lived through more things, I have developed a kind of

confidence needed to face misfortunes such as these. My experience suggests problems can almost always be solved and I have developed a degree of confidence in my ability to cope and overcome. With you as our secret weapon, it's going to be just that much easier."

"We do have something most kids can never get closer to than fantasizing about."

"And what's that?"

Dave thought for just a moment as if to fashion the words just right.

"We have the chance to plan our own lives the way we want them to be and when they seem to be veering toward the wrong path we can just decide to find another one and go on from there. Our lives will be what we make them; not something others tell us they have to be."

"The way you stated it, it sounded as if what we have is some grand privilege."

"It did, didn't it? Well, *that's* a revelation. Not the privilege we'd have ever wished for, but what we have is what we have and I guess I believe like you do, that we can be up to it. But that's all in the future, well, present and future. It's the past that's tearing me apart inside, Pete."

"Dad?"

"Yeah. You are clearly handling that better than I am."

"Look. On my sixteenth birthday dad sat me down and talked to me for three hours straight explaining who he was, what he did, his extreme reluctance about it all, and his plans for the two of us so we'd never have to be a part of it. You, see, I've had almost three years more than you have to think it through and find a place for it inside me. I was a wreck for months after that talk. I even ran away. I considered suicide. I didn't have it easy, but I've had lots more time than you've had."

Again, Dave grew silent. It continued for an hour only interrupted to indicate route changes.

"I didn't know about the running away, but imagine I understand now about the week you suddenly went away to piano camp when you were sixteen. I assume dad's guys found you?"

Pete nodded.

“I got as far as northern Maine.”

“So you have an advantage over me in all this, is that what you’re saying.”

“I guess I am. Who would have ever thought those seven most terrifying days of my life, would have been good preparation for anything.”

Small talk consumed the rest of the afternoon; they seemed to be intentionally avoiding anything serious. At a little after four the laptop beeped.

“Probably another email from our secret admirer,” Dave said.

They were both less concerned about it than they had been earlier. He opened the account and there it sat.

“Hathaway’s Highway Motel, south of you on 49. You have a reservation – room 200. Happy dreams.”

“That seems odd,” Dave continued. “What do you think it means?”

“Apparently that we have a room reserved for us and it will in some way be to our advantage to follow through on it.”

“What if this is where he jumps out of the closet and does us in?”

“What if this is the place he explains what he’s all about?”

“I like *your* scenario the best – given a choice. I’d sure like to know who he is and why he’s doing whatever he’s doing.”

“Seems obvious what he’s doing – taking care of us,” Pete said.

“Wish I could be as sure of that as you seem to be.”

“If it’s a person with malevolent intentions – did you catch that, *malevolent intentions* – he’s already had 700 or so miles in which to do us in.”

His brother’s silliness brought a sense of relief to Dave punctuated by his grin and shrug.

“I found the motel’s webpage. It is only about ten minutes down the road. I don’t get how he knows the routes we’re taking when we change highways every hour or so. It’s like he’s tailing us in some invisible vehicle.”

“More likely, I believe, is the hidden GPS gizmo telling him where we are at all times within a few feet.”

Another shrug. No grin.

"I guess I like to feel in charge of my life," Dave said. "That's always been a problem. Sometimes on tests when I thought the teacher hadn't asked the really important question about the material, I'd write my own question and answer it."

"That's a bit extreme."

"That's exactly what Mr. Thomas said this year in history. He was a really good guy. On the last chapter test, instead of the regular one the other students got, he gave me four blank sheets of paper stapled together. Across the top of the first page he had hand written, 'Frankie. Just tell me what you think I should hear about this chapter'. When I first saw it I looked up at him and he winked at me. A good teacher."

At four forty-five they pulled into the motel parking lot. It was long and narrow, two floors, brown brick and large windows. At five they were in their room. It was a very nice room – large, windows on two sides, both a tub and a separate shower. Dave did the sit and wiggle thing on one of the double beds.

"Comfortable."

He laid back with his head on the pillow.

"Oh, oh. Problem here."

"He sat up quickly and put the pillow in his lap. Something very uncomfortable about this thing."

He reached inside the pillow case and removed a large, brown envelope.

"Something in this."

"Imagine that!" Pete said. "Stop the presses! There is something inside an envelope. Will wonders never cease?"

Dave saw the humor in it and smiled as he slid out the contents.

"Get this, Pete. New license plates. Also, Illinois. Different numbers – one for the van and one for the trailer. What do you think?"

"I think email guy suspects the FBI got our plate numbers and is suggesting we put on the new ones immediately.

Dave giggled.

"What?"

"Look at the hand written note on the front – *Suggest*

you put on the new ones immediately'."

"That is funny."

Dave spoke in a loud voice as if addressing somebody.

"In case you have the room bugged, I'm just saying, we will take care of things right away. One suggestion, though. Next time you make us a reservation, be sure it comes with hot and cold running girls."

"Although that really was humorous, you do realize that you're becoming paranoid about this."

"Hear that, Bugging Boy," Dave said, again in a loud voice turning his head from side to side. "You've driven me to paranoia!"

"I think we better make that switch first thing, okay?" Pete said.

"Okay. Then we swim. Then we eat."

Down at the van they got to work.

"I suppose the plate that says, 'Trailer', on it is the one that goes on the trailer," Dave said attempting a joke.

Dave positioned the plates and Pete worked the screwdriver. They were finished within a few minutes.

"What do we do with the old plates?" Pete asked looking around as if to find a place for them.

"If I were to bet I'd say e-mail guy will tell us. Let's take them up to the room. I can just hear him apologizing to us for not including that information in the first email."

Back in the room they changed into swim suits and were preparing to leave for the pool when the laptop beeped again.

"Told you," Dave said.

"Bury them separately along the way, tomorrow."

"So, in the mean time we leave them under my mattress where I have already stowed them."

"Sounds good."

They swam, they ate, they swam, they slept. It had been a good plan.

The next morning, they were showered, dressed, breakfasted, and on their way by seven.

"So, about the burials," Dave began. "Along the side-roads, you think?"

"Sounds right. Just so I don't have to back that trailer

again.”

By nine both plates were resting comfortably under 18 inches of soil, fifty miles apart. Even so, Dave insisted they wipe them clean of fingerprints. Pete went along with it even though he didn't think it was necessary.

By ten Dave was ready to stop again.

“All that manual labor made me thirsty.”

“Drive through or inside?” Pete asked.

He was consciously trying to give his brother more say in the regular things.

“I figure it's easier to eat pie inside, don't you?”

Pete laughed.

“If we continue to follow this diet you've put us on we'll have gained twenty pounds by the time we reach Arkansas.”

“We'll bill ourselves as the Rollie Pollie Brothers – Rollie on Piano and Pollie on guitar or as they call it in the Ozarks – the gitfiddle.”

“They do?”

“I have no idea. I'm just filling time with nonsense so I don't have think about my real life just now.”

“Rollie Pollie it is then. I really miss playing my music, Dave. We need to do something about that.”

“I know. Me, too. Maybe we could find a park. Your piano really isn't heavy being all electronic.”

“We'll keep our eyes out for a likely spot.”

“Probably have to go into a town to find a park,” Dave said.

Pete pointed to a road sign.

“How about Dickson in ten miles right on highway 70?”

“Sounds good to me.”

They soon found themselves turning into a town of about 45,000. It was an old town from the looks of the buildings – the largest they had been in.

“Hey, look there. Music World. A store boasting, ‘Everything Music’.”

“That sounds like fun. Help me find a place to park this semi we're driving.”

“Additional parking in rear, according to that sign.”

They were soon parked at the back of the lot and entered the building through a rear door, marked, aptly

enough, 'Rear Door'.

They chuckled. It wasn't taking much to bring on the giggles. Free floating tension had a way of doing that. The inside of the store pretty well verified the motto – Everything Music. The piano section and the guitars were side by side along the west wall.

A clerk approached them.

"May we try instruments," Dave asked.

"Certainly. What's your interest?"

"Piano and gitfiddle – that is, guitar."

The man chuckled.

"Gitfiddle. Never did hear that one before."

Pete looked at Dave as if to say, 'So much for that idea, squirt'.

Dave selected an acoustic guitar from the display on the wall. Pete sat at the one grand piano in the store.

"You choose," Dave said.

"You feel up to *Concierto Clasico*?"

"Oh! Make the kid play the toughest one in his repertoire. Sure. Here's hoping your ten can keep up with my ten. Make old Rafel Adame proud, brother." [The composer]

Pete raised and lowered his head. They began. It was actually a difficult piece for each instrument – that's one thing they liked about it, a challenge. They had soon drawn a crowd – six became ten, became fifteen. The boys hadn't noticed, just pleased to be absorbed in the music again.

When they finished, there was applause – sustained applause with appreciative comments. It took them by surprise. At first, they were embarrassed. Several of the onlookers approached for handshakes and conversation – conversation the boys really didn't want or need. In the end they handled it well – the Duo of Deception – cousins, as it played out, on their way to a concert in Mississippi. They played until noon. By then the audience had grown to dozens as the word spread up and down Main Street. They knew what they were doing, they shouldn't be doing, but the continued.

"It's noon cuz," Dave said as he realized they had played the morning away.

Pete stood and Dave replaced the guitar.

“Have to be on our way. Thanks so much for letting us fool around.”

“It’s been our pleasure. Haven’t heard that quality of fooling around for –well, ever! Hope you stop on your way back from the concert.”

Several requested autographs. The boys obliged then left.

Outside, Pete asked first.

“So, who came out of your pencil?”

“Billy Smith. You?”

“John Williams.”

“You dog, using a famous musician’s name. Wish I’d have thought of that.”

“It was fun, wasn’t it” Pete said.

“Yeah. Really a lot of fun. Also, I forgot how much I enjoy applause. Probably selfish. Something for my . . .”

“I know, your ‘Think About List’.”

Before Pete could react, he whispered:

“Just keep walking to the van.”

“What’s up?”

“Red Beard at nine o’clock. Did you see him?”

“Yeah. Saw somebody. Just before he ducked around the corner. Wasn’t sure, though. How in the world could he still be on our tail?”

“More important – how do we proceed now?”

///

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Way too close for comfort, Universe!’

‘It looked like he was coming from our van so now he has our new plate numbers,’ Dave said.

“Do we get in and just drive off?” Pete asked. “Maybe we’d be safer staying right here.”

“No black Lincoln back here,” Dave said. “I have a suggestion. What if we drive around town a while to see if he follows us? That way we’ll still have the safety of being in a town while getting information we need.”

“Excellent. Get in.”

They returned to Main Street on which the music store sat and headed west for six blocks. Dave was in back watching out the rear windows.

“Anything?” Pete asked.

“No Lincoln. One other car has been on this street several blocks behind us the whole time, but it was out on the street when we turned onto it – I think. I say turn north – not our actual goal.”

Pete continued for one more block and made the turn. He continued four blocks.

“Nobody turned after us. Wait. There is somebody. It may be that car I mentioned. How about slowing down and see what it does – or pull over and park along the street.”

Pete slowed and parked, keeping the engine running. He watched in the rearview mirror as he donned his beard and glasses. He saw the car. It didn’t vary its speed and had soon passed them – a boy and girl sitting very close, arm in arm in the front seat. Probably not Red Beard.

“Let’s just sit here a few minutes and see what transpires,” Pete said.

“Okay.”

They sat. They waited. Several cars approached and several cars drove on past.

“Hand the city map back to me – one we picked up at the tourist table at the music store,” Dave said.

He laid it next to the map they had been using in the atlas.

“We can go west from town and hit country roads that

will eventually get us back to our highway 70. What do you think about that? He may be waiting for us back where we turned into the town and this way we'll be way west of him when we meet the road."

"Excellent. Instructions! Give!"

"Okay, left next block. Continue for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 more blocks."

He waited.

"Now, one back south and then right. It should put us near the city limits."

It did.

"Just follow this road. It loops north and then back south to route 70."

"Of course, if Red Beard also has a tracker on this van or the trailer all of this maneuvering won't have accomplished anything," Pete said.

"Oh, I don't know. Watching that couple in the red Chevy heated me up a little bit."

"I say again . . ."

"I know my odd brain. I wouldn't trade it for Einstein's."

"First," Pete said playing little brother, "I wouldn't want you to. Second, his brain has been dead since 1955 so it would be a really poor trade on your part."

"How did you know when he died?"

"I *do* know a few things, kid."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to imply you didn't. Just seemed like a tidbit way out of your range of interests."

"As I believe you have recently indicated, schools often force students to learn things that will never be of any consequence to them in life."

"And yet, that one was – you just impressed your little brother."

Pete nodded and smiled into the mirror so Dave could see it.

Dave turned his attention back out the rear window.

"No car within a half mile I'd say. That's as far as I can see."

"Then, come back up here anytime you feel good about doing that."

Dave made his way to the front, chatting all the way.

"We're only about 150 miles from the border with Arkansas. That means we have to get on Interstate I-155 to cross the Mississippi. Shall we stop for the night before or after the bridge?"

"You see advantages one way or the other?"

"This Tennessee cooking's been pretty good."

"*Before*, it will be then. Where?"

Dave worked both the atlas and the laptop.

"It's hard for me to imagine a world without the internet, Pete. How did people function? How did they find the information they needed?"

"I believe it was called *libraries* – thousands of books on most topics all under one roof. I assume you've hear of such places."

Dave smiled and nodded.

"I recently read something I just take for granted, but anybody over thirty is amazed about, I'm sure. Right here in my cell phone I have access to virtually all of mankind's accumulated knowledge – more information available from this tiny device than any library in the world ever possessed. That really is remarkable. I wonder how many of us kids really appreciate that."

"Two hundred and seventy-three."

"What?" Dave said fully puzzled by his brother's response.

"You asked an absurd question so I gave you an absurd answer."

"I see. Yes, no way of knowing the answer. So, I guess this device really doesn't contain *all* the answers then, does it?"

Pete shook his head and remained quiet.

Back to a place for us to stop. There is a good-sized city called Dyersburg close to the river."

"I'd rather find a small town, Dave. I'm coming to see that I've had about nineteen too many years of city life."

"Okay. Let's see here. At McLemoresville, we trade highway 70 for an unnumbered stretch of road that gets us on west to highway 104. That will eventually get us into Dyersburg and the Interstate to the bridge. Before that, at the end of that unmarked stretch of road is a town called Trenton,

about 5,000 people. Let's see what the old laptop has to say. . . . Home of the annual *Teapot Festival*, the *Nite Lite Theater* is the apparent seat of cultural activities – plays, music and such – and, get this a speed limit of 31 miles an hour all over town. Says it's the only town in the world with that. I guess we all need something to mark us as special."

"Sounds fine to me. You?"

"Sure. I've always had a teapot fetish."

"Right now, I have a Red Beard fetish," Pete said.

"*Fixation* would have been a more accurate term, but me, too, by whatever name."

Dave turned in his swivel seat to face Pete, so he would be able to easily look out the rear windows.

"Nothing at all behind us – vehicles, I mean. If he has us on GPS, we'll never shake him you know."

"Maybe we should consider changing vehicle, then."

"I'm thinking if we did that we'd lose the protection of email guy or whoever seems to be looking after us. For all we know that 'gizmo', as my big brother calls it, may be attached inside the bottom of the gas tank. I doubt we'd find it no matter how long we searched."

Well before supper time they entered the town. Dave saw from the website there were three very nice hotels, but there was also a nice looking newer, motel just to the right of them. They were comfortable in motels so pulled in and entered the office.

"Got a nice room on the back for two young gentlemen ready to decorate your swimming pool for the fairer gender later this evening?"

That had been Dave, of course.

The pretty young clerk took a moment to look them over, then slid a floor plan across the counter and pointed to a room in the center rear overlooking the pool.

"How about this one? Right at the stairway."

The boys looked at each other and nodded.

"We'll take it," Dave said. "Finished with the tough negotiations, I'll turn the details over to my older brother – Pete, by the way. I'm Dave. He's 21, single if that matters and comes with excellent recommendations."

Acting a bit embarrassed by his brother's 'sales pitch',

Pete took out his wallet and provided his driver's license. He and the clerk exchanged a glance that suggested they *each* understood life with a younger sibling. He paid with cash – \$150 for a night seemed expensive, but he didn't let on.

"License plate number?"

Somewhat humorously, Pete turned to Dave who rattled it off.

"I see you're pulling a trailer. You can park under the trees in the back, west of the pool. Gets muddy there in the rain but none in the forecast. Plenty of room. If I can do anything for you, just ring 100 on the house phone."

Dave walked around the building to the rear while Pete parked. The second-floor room entrances were all from a balcony. Dave met Pete at the van and they picked up their backpacks, which they had been using like luggage.

"We'd have the pool to ourselves now, the way it looks," Pete said.

"Who wants it to ourselves? Girls. Remember girls. The way I recall they are soft and filled out in all the right places."

"About that remark to the clerk, Dave."

"She was pretty, wasn't she? Too old for me so I paved the way for you. You're welcome."

Whatever had been on Pete's mind about it was never stated. He did have something else on his mind and as Dave opened the door to their room he began.

"I think it's good to have the van behind the building out of sight. That Red Beard guy freaks me out."

'Okay, if that's how you want it, you can have the clerk and I'll take Red Beard, but the first time I get whiskers in my mouth I'm outa here."

Pete laughed. Dave tested the beds deciding there was no important difference so Pete could have his choice. He took the one furthest from the door leaving the one by the window for Dave.

"I hope I didn't embarrass you down at the counter, Pete. Not sure why I put on my match making hat. It's just that I'm sure this whole journey thing is putting quite a dent in your love life."

"My love life is not for you to be concerned about. And,

yes she was very pretty. You are developing good taste.”

“Always up for a little coaching, you know.”

“You have made that abundantly clear. Food, swim, nap?”

“It’s still early,” Dave said. “If we eat now we can probably work in a small repast before bed. Why don’t you call down to the desk and get directions to a good café?”

“You’re sneaky, but under the circumstances I think I will. How long has it been since you kissed a girl, little brother?”

Dave thought for just a moment:

“Six weeks, three days, and about four hours. I see what you’re doing – you’re turning my efforts on your behalf back on me. No fair. I have needs, too, you know.”

Pete made the call. The conversation continued for some time. Dave became interested and sat on his bed across from his brother to listen. One side of a conversation is always somewhat obscure, but he was very good at putting one and one together (although sometimes he got 11.). Pete hung up.

“So?” he asked moving to sit beside his brother on his bed and looking up into his face.

“So, it seems there is a small Italian Restaurant up the street run by her Uncle, Salvatore Guccioni. She says that her family and guests always eat free. In case we want to be guests, she and her fifteen-year-old sister would be happy to accompany us.”

“Yes! You did say, yes, right? I really couldn’t tell. It sounded more like you were offering to buy her mother’s pink bathrobe – I guess I missed some things.”

“I did say, yes. Dress is casual – but something above what we usually wear. She suggested six o’clock and I agreed. We’re to meet them there. We’ll need to get clothes out of the trailer – from our former life. Her name is Cynthia and her sister’s is Beth. Any additional information we will need to cunningly extract after six this evening. And, one other thing of interest, her father is the police chief here.”

“So, we have to be on our best behavior, but we’re always on our best behavior – well mostly. Do you think she will be lots taller than me? Do you think I can act fifteen? Do

you think I can make it appear like this *isn't* my first date? I got to shower. We need deodorant. Let's go get our clothes. This could take some time."

Pete chuckled.

"We are just having dinner at a nice restaurant with two new acquaintances. Neither of us will be getting engaged or married or having children this evening. I doubt if there will be a time or place for kissing so don't get your hopes up. You just have to settle in and enjoy the company of two pretty girls."

"Easy for you to say. You've settled in with lots of girls. This will be my first settling."

"One thing at a time. Clothes, showers, deodorant, dress and walk to our place of rendezvous. Actually, we have lots of time to kill first. Want to swim?"

Dave went to the window and looked down on the pool."

"Nobody there yet. Maybe we should swim some laps."

"Good idea. A half hour in the pool and then all those other things."

They changed and took the stairs down to the pool. The air had cooled a good deal.

"Cooler," Pete said. "Maybe a storm coming in?"

Dave surveyed the sky.

"Cynthia said not. Still some ways away if it is. Hope it doesn't spoil my, I mean, our plans."

"Maybe we'll finally have use for that large umbrella somebody packed in the trailer for us."

They swam laps for ten minutes. It felt good. They treaded water in the deep end and talked.

"We need to be more conscientious about exercising, Pete. At home, we had the pool, the gym, the tennis court. Thing's won't be as handy anymore."

"You're right. We've biked and hiked and swam, though."

"I know. I didn't mean we hadn't; just that we need to make sure we continue. I'm impatient for my body to develop like yours – broad shoulders and muscles."

"I predict by next year at this time you'll be well on your way. I had my last growth spurt when I was fourteen."

“I was watching you change a while ago.”

“If I’d have known that interested you, I’d have added stripper music and given you a show.”

They chuckled.

“You know that wasn’t where I was going. I noticed your belt buckle and it reminded of the year we couldn’t think of anything to get each other for Christmas. We each asked mom for help and she suggested music themed belt buckles. I must have gone to a dozen stores before I found just the right one.”

“How nice of you to go to that much trouble. I asked my piano teacher and he steered me toward a place he thought would have what I was looking for – Steinman’s on 44th Avenue.”

“That’s where I ended up getting yours. Small world or something. I love mine. Been through a half dozen belts with it.”

“And all of this comes to mind because . . . ?”

“Because I was thinking of all the stuff we no longer have, but we still have the buckles and they are classy and will make good conversation starters in case words begin to fail us tonight at dinner.”

“Seriously, Dave? Have words *ever* failed you? As I recall you were making suggestions to the doctor while you were being born.”

Big brother’s smile was met with a grin and shrug.

By five forty-five they were walking up the street to find the *Guccioni’s Italian Restauranté*. Taking advantage of the drop in temperature, Pete chose dark blue slacks, a tan dress shirt open at the collar, and a light blue blazer. Dave went with brown slacks and a blue pullover sweater over a dark blue dress shirt also open at the collar. They rescued black leather loafers from a crushed shoe box in the trailer and, of course, wore their prized belt buckles.

“By the way, little brother, you owe me big time.”

“I don’t doubt it, but why, specifically.”

“I don’t sniff just any guy’s armpits for him.”

Smiles.

“Yeah. Thanks. I guess I just sniffed my nose out. After a while I couldn’t smell anything anymore.”

“A word of advice?”

“Sure. What?”

“Wash the pits well with soap. Slide the *Mitchum* up and down three times. You will be good to go – no concerns.”

“I guess I am a little over concerned about making a good impression tonight. I usually relax once I get into a new situation.”

“You might begin easing into it by unclenching your fists. I see the girls on the sidewalk ahead. That must be our destination.”

“Gee. They’re wearing dresses. I like girls in dresses. I’ll bet they smell good, too.”

Pete chuckled again as they approached their soon to be new friends.

“Beth, this is Pete and his brother Dave. Boys, my sister, Beth.”

They exchanged hellos and agreed everybody looked great.

Inside, they were soon seated by Salvatore himself.

“I know you’ll love our uncle’s food. Save room for dessert – cannolis stuffed with whipped, vanilla marshmallow cream and dripping in chocolate and raspberry syrup.”

“I say let’s start with that and work our way backwards.”

It had been Dave. It received laughs all around. His fists relaxed.

The meal was delicious, as advertised.

They had long since finished dining. Talk came easily. Cynthia and Pete had sipped more coffee than either really wanted and Beth and Dave the same with sodas. Dave had mentioned the buckles, which had led to a discussion of their musical interests, which by eight o’clock led to the boys being convinced by Salvatore to play for the patrons. Dave borrowed an acoustic guitar from a member of the small, in house, band and Pete made himself comfortable at the upright piano. Dave sat on the edge of the small, low stage just below Pete.

“Shall we play Doc’s game?” Pete whispered down to Dave.

Their music instructor ended most lessons by calling out names of songs and having them improvise. Over the

years, they had developed quite a repertoire.

Pete announced the rules of the game – patrons called out a song that had been popular during the past fifty years – no heavy metal, rap or hip hop.

“We play tunes not noise,” Dave went on to explain.

He wasn’t particularly open minded where it came to music.

A sea of quiet chuckles drifted across the room. A few of the older patrons clapped, suggesting their bias to the old standards.

Many old favorites were suggested and the boys managed a rollicking rendition of each one. From time to time after playing one chorus of a song, Pete would announce, ‘Now, this is how Beethoven might have written it, or let’s see what Brahms would have done to that’ or how about Elvis Presley. Dave wiggled his hips like the best of them. Their audience loved it. They played for half an hour and could have remained for much longer. At one point somebody asked for, *The Irish Washerwoman*, probably thinking they wouldn’t know it. They did. Dave took the opportunity to dance a pretty good high stepping Irish Jig. It brought the house down.

They returned to the table. The girls stood and each administered a gentle kiss to their fella’s cheek. Pete took out his wallet and laid down a tip he thought was appropriate. Their waitress arrived, picked up the bills and stuffed them back into his jacket pocket.

Cynthia explained.

“Boys, please meet our mama.”

Dave – by then the well-relaxed Dave-the-ham – bowed deeply to her, reached out and took her hand, administering a gentle kiss. She blushed and curtsied as if she had been the less popular step sister rehearsing for that moment all her life.

By *that* point mama would have signed the papers on the spot giving permission so Beth could marry the lad. Cynthia had her own ideas, as well.

Back outside it had grown dark.

“The city park’s just a block east,” Cynthia announced taking Pete’s hand.

Beth followed big sister’s lead.

“A park sounds nice, right Pete?” Dave said not waiting

on big brother who had been through such things before.

“Sure.”

Dave thought of all the responses a guy could make when being asked to take a beautiful girl to a dark park, ‘sure’, hardly made the top 50.

They sat on benches. Dave arranged it so the couples were well apart, and away from the several lights scattered throughout the area.

They talked privately for some time – that allowed for some arms around shoulders, some fingers through the hair, some serious looking into each other’s eyes, and some kissing – light, pleasant, just right between new friends.

In the end they walked the girls home – three more blocks – received one more memorable kiss – less the light between new friends variety and more the prolonged, hold each other tightly and breath hard, kind.

The boys said good night, which really meant good-bye. They returned to the motel. They checked the van and trailer and went up to the balcony where they settled into the lawn chairs just outside their door. The pool lights were off by then and the nearly full moon’s reflection played across the gentle motion of the dark water.

“One thing I love about being away from the city,” Dave began, “is the night sky. Out here you can see a billion stars. In the city it’s too light to see them. Back there the world seemed all cramped up at night. Out here it seems to extend forever. Which, I guess, it does – more or less.”

Pete turned to him and smiled.

“Who but my best friend would end a lovely soliloquy about the night sky with, ‘more or less’?”

“I’m your best friend?”

“Of course, you are. I missed out on so much all those years when I failed to engage you as a friend.”

“In your defense, I doubt if you had much in common with the fastest butt in the city. I’m so much younger. Thanks, you know. You’re mine, too, of course. We probably appreciate each other more now because we didn’t have this before.”

Pete nodded, not thinking more words were necessary.

Dave turned more toward Pete.

“So, girls, hugging, kissing, really kissing. I absolutely will never forget this evening.”

“I’m sure you won’t. I’m glad it was nice for you.”

“I’ll accept ‘nice’, but it was really more like stupendous. I liked the . . . I don’t know what to call it . . . the gentleness of it all I guess. I enjoyed just talking with her in whispers. I liked holding her hands in mine. I liked it when she stroked my arm and touched my face. I had never considered that a girl’s lips were soft. I had never conceived alone time with a girl would be like that. It dashes many of my more spirited fantasies, but that’s good because now I have the real experience to look back on. I don’t suppose we’ll ever see them again.”

“I suppose not, but that wasn’t the point of the evening – to make forever bonds. Boys and girls can just enjoy each other in the ways boys and girls can enjoy each other. It is all the things you just said. Mistaking enjoying one another’s company for love or commitment is probably the biggest mistake that we guys make. We are such hormone driven creatures that it’s really easy to mistake pleasure for love. Love comes from many wonderful sources, but not hormones and mere physical attraction. What we guys experience is often called lust or desire. It’s mostly physical. Love is more mental and emotional and heart driven. I’m just saying all of those things we had this evening are wonder-filled, but we have to make sure we keep them sorted out properly.”

“So, each time a guy is with a girl it is like a practice session for when true love comes along later with our one, special person.”

“Stated rather bluntly, but that’s basically what I’m saying.”

“Well, I learned one very good lesson tonight, then, Pete.”

“And what’s that?”

“That I really, really, enjoy those practice sessions.”

They exchanged knowing smiles.

“I’m going to turn in, Pete. I’m tired.”

“I’ll be in shortly. Sleep well. Love you.”

“Love you.”

Dave awoke at 2:00 a.m. Pete wasn’t in his bed. In fact the bed hadn’t been slept in. His first thought was that he

and Cynthia had arranged more private time well away their younger siblings. His second thought was that if that had been the case, his brother would have told him. He wouldn't have just left that way. He was more responsible than that. He opened the door and peeked out thinking he probably had just fallen asleep in his chair. He wasn't there either.

Dave returned inside and quickly pulled on his clothes. Although they hadn't made it a practice he called Pete's new cellphone. It rang and rang. Pete did not pick up. He was sure he had taken it to the restaurant so it should have still been on him. They were both diligent about carrying a phone in case of emergencies. This seemed like an emergency. Apparently carrying a phone wasn't a sure solution.

"What to do? What to do? What to do?" he said out loud as he tied his tennies.

He went out onto the balcony again, pulling on his jacket. He looked as far as he could see in every direction – not far beyond the well-lit parking area in the darkness. He was suddenly really scared, bordering on terrified. He hurried down the stairs and ran across to where the van was parked although he wasn't sure why. He tried the driver side door. It was unlocked. Pete never left it unlocked, in fact he remembered waiting while he had done that after it was parked. He opened the door and searched the front seat with his eyes. He took the large flashlight from the glove compartment.

"What should I be looking for? I'm not supposed to contact email guy, but he's the only friendly thing I have going."

He got in and sat sideways on Pete's seat, his legs extended through the open door. He continued to look around the area outside. Something in the dirt right under the door caught his attention. He got out and knelt to examine it. There were fresh marks of some kind in the dirt.

"Looks like marks that could have been made with the toe of a shoe, maybe. A circle with a W attached at the bottom. That is all enclosed in another circle. There is a diagonal line across the larger one – from top right to lower left. Is it a message from Pete? If it is, what could it be? I'm great at spinning possibilities. Just take your time, Dave. It's

a crude representation of something – something that has probably been important to us. Just the bare essentials due to limited time. Clearly it means something – it intends to convey a message. Think. Think.”

He closed his eyes and held the image for some time.

“Circle, the letter ‘O’, round, sphere, ball, whole note . . . Nothing. W, W, W, what could W stand for? More nothing. Start at the outside. Big circle. Double circle. Circle with a diagonal line. Ah! Maybe like the signs that mean ‘No Something’ or ‘Not Something’ like superimposed over a picture of a car meaning ‘No Parking’ or over a gun meaning ‘No Weapons’. If that part’s correct it is ‘No’ or ‘Not’ of whatever that inside picture represents.

“Now, what do circles often represent in crude drawings? The sun, the body of a person or an animal, a ball, the top of a tree, an open mouth an eye. Nothing? What about the ‘W’? It could stand for ‘west’, ‘wardrobe’, ‘window’ – I don’t know. Maybe it’s not a W – two ‘Vs’ side by side – very vindictive, vast volume, vicious vermin. Maybe it’s an ‘M’ sitting on *top* of the circle and I’ve been looking at it upside down.

“Come on brain! Don’t fail me now.”

He grew silent and stood, taking several steps back away from it. He hoped the new perspective might change the configuration into something meaningful.

“Just maybe – the inner circle is a face or head and then the ‘W’ could be a beard. Got it, or *maybe* got it. What’s the only face with a beard that has been a part of our life – Red Beard. He’s saying Red Beard took him.

“No. The big circle and line represent ‘Not’. Hmm. Oh! ‘Not Red Beard’. A strange message. Why? Well, we have three possible pursuers – Red Beard, the FBI and email guy – Oh, and ‘Skinny Into the Night Guy’ as a long shot. He’s saying he didn’t know who it was, but he did know it wasn’t Red Beard. That narrows it down for me. Good going Pete. I have no idea how that really helps.

“Hmm. Maybe it does. The FBI wouldn’t just pick him up. They’d get both of us, so *not* the FBI. Pete figured I’d figure that out. That leaves the other two. Again, I have no reason to think Email Guy – whose been helping us – would

kidnap either or both of us – certainly not only one of us. That only leaves Skinny Guy.”

He walked around the immediate area searching the ground for any additional clues. There had been one, there might be more.

“There we go! Narrow tire tracks – from a car. They could have been here for a week. Or. No they couldn’t. They cross over the tracks from the van – on top of them means they came later than we did. And more. Looks like that vehicle headed in behind the van and then later backed out and drove off up onto the black top parking lot.

“What do narrow tire tracks mean? There are four of them; I can tell by the pattern they made backing up. Probably a small car like an old VW bug. Even if all this is correct, I’m not sure I’m any closer to finding Pete than I was before. Okay, time to be terrified again. I need a plan, but I have nothing more to go on. Beth’s dad is a resource – the police – but I’m not at all comfortable disclosing things to anybody – the law or not – not yet, at least – not until I understand this better.

“I wonder if anything is missing from the van. I didn’t really search it.”

He re-entered the van and began a systematic search. A few minutes later he discovered two interesting things; none of the money boxes were gone, but the second laptop was gone. Dave had set it up the first day, but they had never used it. Perhaps the bad guy figured it would have useful information on it. But, useful about or for what?

He closed the door and sat in his seat to think. The atlas had been slipped down between the two front seats. At first he thought nothing of it. He removed it for no reason other than to remove it. He was glad he had. It was not opened to Tennessee where it had been all day, but to New York – where they began their journey. It was another message from Pete. New York most likely meant the rival mob – the one that killed their parents.

“So, if it is Skinny Guy, like I think I’ve determined, and if the abduction relates to the other mob – like the atlas seems to indicate – then Skinny Guy is most likely from that mob. Should I go ahead and contact the FBI – turn myself in, so to

speaking, in order to gain their help in finding Pete? My brother made it clear that the primary reason they would be after us would be to kill us and clean up the loose ends. If that were the reason, then why not take me as well. Things seem to be falling into place although not neatly and none of it gives me a clue where to look for Pete.”

Dave changed positions, pulling his feet back close against his seat, making ready to swivel so he could survey the rear again. The heel of his left foot hit something. It moved. He leaned down to investigate. It was Pete’s cellphone.

“His cellphone has no business being there. It was in his inner blazer pocket. Therefore, it was placed there, most likely by Pete while the bad guys were searching the van for something – the laptop, maybe.”

Dave worked with it for several minutes. Finally:

“Hey. A text message that was never sent. To me. Hmm. Another cryptic message. The @ sign followed by 59 & 14, then the @ again and finally 11am [@59&14@11am]. It’s 2:30 now. Something is going to happen somewhere in eight and a half hours.”

He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand as if to jiggle his brain into discovering the answer. He looked up at the motel.

“Does it have rooms numbered 59 and 14? No. How about 159 or 259 or 114 or 214. It had all four. Which two of the four rooms? Why two rooms? Maybe the numbers mean something else entirely. I really doubt if he’d provide incomplete room numbers. I’m reaching too far. Stay closer to reality, Dave. Take a step back. Nobody could have possibly known we were coming here to this motel. We didn’t even know until it popped up in front of us. So, what could have transpired after we arrived? The GPS possibility looms its ugly head again. It seems that maybe our van is littered with the gizmos from who knows who all. That doesn’t move my search for Pete forward, however.

“What else goes by numbers? These days, everything. Even apples have numbered stickers on them in produce departments. It was clearly something Pete overheard and thought was important enough to pass on. Either he didn’t

have a chance to send the message or he was content to just leave it unsent, thinking I would find it. Here, now, it makes sense as a clue. Receiving it in the middle of the night would have made no sense – there would have been no meaningful context like I have after all of this. I'm doing good thinking, here. Nice work, Brain!"

He drew a blank for several, uncomfortably long moments.

"Geez! Where are the ferries with smart dust when I need them? That would make a great kids' story. No time for such thoughts. Maybe he left some other clue on or around Pete's chair upstairs."

He jogged back to the stairs and up to the balcony.

"I'm not being at all cautious. If they took Pete, they probably should be looking for me, too."

He knelt down in the shadow of the overhanging roof. It was dark. He felt safer. He used his keychain light to search the cement floor below the chair, the brick wall behind the chair, the underside and back of the chair.

"Nothing, well, nothing of use to me. Let's try for a reenactment. They would have approached Pete either from the east or west up here on the balcony – maybe from both directions if there was more than one – or from the stairs right here in front of the door to our room. I say 'they' but it may have been only one. If it had been three or more converging on him I think he'd have noticed and ducked inside. Unless he had fallen asleep or had a gun to his head. If he could have warned me he would have. I remember he had taken off his blazer and I had stripped from the waist up when we first sat down. I took my sweater and shirt in with me when I left. His jacket was hanging over the back of his chair. Don't see how any of that helps, except the jacket went with him. Why? The phone was in it. It was cool. I remember sitting there wishing I'd left my shirt on. Truthfully, that was part of the reason I went inside. If Pete picked up his jacket, why. Maybe because it was cool. Maybe some other reason. Most likely the phone, I'm thinking. Hmm? If the bad guys took it that was probably just to not leave evidence of where he had been. Not sure why that would be important so I'll stick with the idea Pete took it along.

“Maybe he had something else in a pocket he intended or intends to leave – like a trail. I think he took a napkin from the restaurant. They have the name on them, in fact, the name is on everything, sweetener, napkins; the silverware is even monogrammed, SIR – *Salvatore’s Italian Restauranté*.

“I doubt if he could leave a trail from inside a vehicle. There could be more than one vehicle – another one could have been parked elsewhere. No signs of another one’s tracks close to the van. I think my best bet is decoding that text message.”

He returned to the room and removed a yellow pad from his backpack. He removed his jacket, took a seat at the round table with the lamp and began spinning possibilities. [59&14@11am].

“I will assume the ‘@’ signs have the usual meaning – ‘at’ – and the ‘&’ sign – the ampersand – also has the usual meaning – ‘and’. Looks like two parts to the message, one following each ‘at’ sign. So, at 59 & 14 something or other is going to take place at 11 a.m. It feels like the numbers represent the place. If that’s right, there isn’t anything left to tell me what will be going on. That probably means Pete figured I could figure that out and considering his abduction I have to believe it has something to do with that. So, at location 59 & 14, at 11 a.m., something important related to him is going to take place. Actually, that would mean I just need the location – the rest of it will apparently play out at eleven if I can just be there. Hmm?”

“Numbers. Location. Elevation. Latitude and longitude – no, that’s impossible from the data. Maybe miles from or in between some place or places.”

“I feel so useless just being here with no plan. I always have a plan – usually a half dozen going at once. I wonder if the van was bugged to pick up our conversations. That could also explain how somebody found us here and new our route as I told Pete which new road to take. Actually, it could explain many things along the way. Why didn’t we think of that? We might have been able to locate voice bugs. Jeeze! Well, there will be no conversation in the van in the near future if I will just stop talking to myself.”

He paced. He lay on his back on his bed. He lay on his

back on Pete's bed, although since Pete never actually used it he had to wonder if calling it Pete's bed was proper. Dumb thoughts like that crowded out his useful thoughts.

He got up, turned off the lights and went to the window. He pulled back the curtains and sat on the edge of his bed looking out. He began thinking out loud again.

"They had been in the pool about thirty minutes and out with the girls for a bit longer than four hours. That could have given somebody plenty of time to search the van, the trailer and the room if they were just after something. Clearly that was not the case. They took Pete, so, clearly, they were after Pete. Maybe Pete and something else. Why didn't they take me as well?"

The answer to that seemed important and he didn't have a clue. Back at their house, Dave had seen everything down in the entryway that Pete had seen, so he would be as involved as a witness as his brother.

Could it be that his brother had been involved in some terrible thing and had made enemies? Had he actually participated in their father's activities and somebody really was just after him for something he had done. It seemed fully impossible to Dave. Maybe somebody thought Pete was responsible for something his dad had ordered done – a case of mistaken identity. That made more sense, but still . . .

Down below a black SUV moved across the parking lot from east to west. It stopped near the van. One man got out and walked around it using a small flashlight held up at shoulder height like Dave had seen cops do on TV. The man stopped behind the van and then behind the trailer seeming to take note of the two license plates. He looked in the front windows of the van, but didn't try the door. Dave couldn't remember if he had locked the doors or not. He remembered taking out his key chain to light the chair, but not to lock the van door. He always remembered things. What was going on?

Dave stood and took several pictures with his phone. He continued to watch, experiencing whatever feeling it was that held the spot several notches above terror – he could find no word for it. The man reentered the SUV and it drove off.

"That was odd. Wish I could have seen the plates.

Maybe I can.”

He set the laptop on the table and sat down. He sent the pictures to himself and opened them on the laptop. He searched for the graphics program he had found early on but never had reason to use.

“There it is. Open it. Open a page. Copy and download the pictures. Find, enhance and enlarge – there. Go for it lady.”

Just why suddenly his laptop appeared female he didn’t know. It was a wonderful device and more than ever, after that evening with Beth, he was convinced females were indeed wonderful devices. He had to stop thinking such irrelevant thoughts. Back to the screen.

“Larger. Larger. Larger. Refresh to clarify image, and . . . there we have . . . federal plates. The FBI is closing in. Why did finding the van and trailer not propel them to action? Perhaps they didn’t have the new plate numbers. Perhaps the color of the van was wrong. Perhaps they didn’t know about the addition of the trailer. Perhaps their plan, all along was, just to give me a heart attack!

“Okay, now. That is new information. The FBI is on the job close by. How they located us I have no idea – well, of course I do – bugs, the GPS gizmos, secret agent, Tinker Bell – all possibilities seem to be open.”

He went back and stood at the window. Unbelievably, he thought, there came a black Lincoln. What was it with black vehicles, he wondered? The car slowed and stopped at the van. Nobody got out. Several minutes passed and the big car didn’t move. Then, the driver’s side door eased open. A large barrel chested man with a red beard got out and examined each plate. He was back at his car within just minutes. Before entering, he looked up directly at the boy’s room. Dave pulled the curtains closed, but he had been taken by surprise and couldn’t assure himself he hadn’t been seen. He was well back into the dark of the room, so he doubted that he had been seen. What had been seen, of course, were the curtains closing, suggesting somebody had been watching. The big man got in the car and also drove away slowly, around the west side toward the front.

“I wonder if all of them are in cahoots with each other –

triple teaming us. They may be having a powwow out front.”

The balcony completely encircled the building so Dave left the room and made his way to the front corner on the east end. He peeked around all quite cautiously. The cars he was looking for were nowhere in sight. There was one other interesting vehicle sitting there, its engine running – a Trenton police car. The officer was still inside behind the wheel looking over the building. He was talking on his radio.

“This is way too close for comfort, Universe.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Really, Dave? 90 Miles an Hour!

Dave whispered to himself.

“Bad stuff everywhere. I’m leaving.”

He gathered their belongings, stuffed them into the two backpacks and opened the door. He stepped outside. As he was closing the door behind him the house telephone rang. He ignored it and hurried on down the stairs and ran across the lot to the van. He shoved the backpacks in ahead of him and climbed in the driver’s side.

“Well, ‘*on-line driving course*’, it looks like we are about to see what you’re worth.”

He turned the key. He adjusted the mirrors, and pulled away, experiencing just a few jumps and jolts before he got the hang of it. He had left the headlights off and paused as he approached the front edge of the building. Looking left along the front wall he noted the police car’s engine had been shutoff and the officer was no longer inside. Perhaps the phone call had been from him or made for him by the night clerk.

The route they had laid out continued straight west through the town on highway 104. He entered the street, turned west, and pulled on the lights. At the next intersection there was a sign pointing left. It was weathered and Dave could only make out that arrow and ‘*County Road blank*’. He took it, keeping to a slow and even pace. He didn’t meet any cars. After five blocks, he was out of the city limits. He picked up the pace just a bit wanting to make sure he really did have good control of the vehicle and could make it respond appropriately.

A large sign read, County Conservation Area. He slowed to a stop. It was wooded and according to the diagram on the sign it appeared to have a circular – horseshoe shaped – road running through it – a place to enter just to his right and an exit he could see thirty yards further down the road. There were no lights. He turned in and drove to the rear where the road began to curve left. There was a large grassy area on the right side of the road in front of a woods or forest. He pulled onto it and drove to a spot as close to the surrounding trees as

he could manage. He parked with the van heading out toward the road.

“I seem to have the place to myself.”

He turned off the lights and then the engine. He sighed and unexpectedly found tears flowing down his cheeks.

“Well, those were unforeseen,” he said wiping at them with the backs of his hands.

“No time for unwanted, invisible, liquid.

He moved the backpacks into the rear and then followed them. He sat the large flashlight on a box and directed it toward the back at a downward angle. He figured it would allow very little light to show out front. The laptop was in his backpack and he soon had it up and running. He was glad Pete had suggested they charge it while in the room. He had eight hours of service and could use the car’s electrical system from up front if necessary. It was how it had been powered during all those miles while on the road up to then.

Dave had an idea he needed to check out. He found and pulled up a map which contained all the highways and roads in the eastern third of the state. Slowly and deliberately, he ran his finger back and forth across it, not wanting to miss a single square centimeter. It was larger and more detailed than the one in the atlas.

He was two thirds of the way down the state.

“Fifty-Nine. There’s highway 59 running south east from Covington over near the river. Now trace it south and what do we find. Fourteen! There’s the intersection of 59 & 14. It looks to be out in the middle of nowhere. An ideal spot for doing no good if no good was what somebody wanted to do. So, I am working on the premise that Pete will be there with the bad guy or guys and it is where something is going to happen. From where I am now it’s about fifty miles on the backest of back roads. I wonder if they are already there.

“Okay, universe, here’s the first step in my plan. If at any point you think I’m making an error, feel free to let me know – a lightning bolt, an eclipse of moon or later the sun – just any little thing like that. My first step will be to get down to that general vicinity. My second step will be to think of my second step. I can do that on the road. Here we go.”

Several things were working in Dave’s favor concerning

his driving. On the back road, he could drive slowly and with no traffic, there would be no one to think it was out of place. Second, he really seemed to have a natural feel for the process. Third was his built-in self-confidence, which had apparently been a part of him since those earliest, 'I hate diapers days'.

He made his way south west to the tiny town of Alamo. There, he made a hitch to the west before again turning mostly south to Brownsville. The narrow, blacktop, highway made a lazy loop west and then south until it crossed 179, which was only a mile or so away from the intersection he was seeking. At 179 he pulled to the side of the road to think.

"Not knowing what there is at the intersection, I need to find out *what* there *is* at that intersection. It's a public thoroughfare so I can just cross 59 and continue on past it south on 14 for a while. That way I can get the lay of the land. I wonder if I should unhook the trailer. It would give me better maneuvering and probably more speed, although Pete said this huge engine would be all we'd ever need and then some. Okay, we stay together and who's kidding who – I'm struggling to just keep it all on my side of the road – contemplating any sort of fancy maneuvering is a pure fantasy."

Once again, he pulled back onto the road. He was correct; the intersection was just about a mile further on. If there was a stop sign he hadn't noticed it and just kept driving. The large open space – many acres – was to his left – the east. It was mostly tall grass with large piles of dirt all covered in shorter grass. About twenty yards off the road was a small, aluminum, camping trailer. There was a dirt lane leading to it – the two worn tire paths variety with grass between them. The trailer was heading out toward the road with its hitch resting on a cement bloc standing on end – obviously a strictly temporary arrangement.

"I need to investigate that. There's no vehicle anywhere near it. My bet is that it is not occupied at the moment."

He pulled off half a mile past it on 14 and returned on foot, laying down a fast pace. He was soon there. He bent low and remained mostly covered by the grass and bushes as he crossed the wide area. At the trailer he moved to its side

and looked in a window. It was covered with dark paper or cardboard. He walked around to the other side and looked in from there. The full moon set an angle with the window and he could see a large part of the interior. Nobody, although there were two brown sacks filled with food. He could make out one end of a loaf of bread rising above the edge. There were two eight packs of water bottles also sitting on the counter.

“Preparations for inhabitants,” he said. “Question is for here or for a road trip?”

He walked to the rear where he found a Tennessee license plate held in place by a frame from the Triple-A Auto Leasing Agency in Memphis. Memphis was no more than another twenty-five miles south, south west near the river. He looked at the tires; they were in good shape. The windows were as well – they were closed and locked from the inside. There looked to be bunk beds in front, a stove, sink, short counter, and fridge under the window on the left as he faced it from the front, the entrance door was in the middle of the side to his right, and a couch – probably made into a bed – along the rear. It was strictly for camping, cozy style.

A plan began to come together in his mind. He returned to the van and with some difficulty pulled a U-turn on the narrow road. He headed back north. Three miles north of the intersection he again pulled off the road and stopped. He unhitched the trailer lowering the end of the hitch to the ground. He taped a small note the rear door: “Car had a flat. Rolling on the donut. Be back this afternoon to pick up trailer. He signed it, J. Edgar Hoover; that was the name of a famous Director of the FBI. He wasn’t sure what he hoped to accomplish by that, but it was worth a chuckle in what had been a chuckle-less four hours since he discovered Pete was missing. It was going on six and the sky was just beginning to brighten in the east.

Between highways 59 and 179, which both ran generally east and west, was a good stand of trees directly across from the trailer. Dave backed the van in among them making sure he had easy and unimpeded access to 59 and thereby to the dirt lane just on the other side. There had been method in his madness about parking the trailer alongside the

road just to the north. He assumed Pete would be brought south by car and if he could see out the window he would see the trailer. With it there, Pete would know Dave had deciphered his coded message and was up to something. He would get prepared – such as he could.

“And now we wait,” he said, ready to leave at a moment’s notice.

He managed to rummage through the refrigerator and commandeer the makings for a ham sandwich and what was left of half a gallon of milk. He turned on the radio, something they really hadn’t used much. He figured that was mostly because he had so reliably filled the airways with his chatter. The thought was worth a smile if not a chuckle. As the time neared he grew more alert and turned it off.

“Now, eleven o’clock could have been just a rough estimate, so I need to be on my toes, well actually, on my butt I suppose.”

That didn’t ever garner a smile.

He moved back into the driver’s seat.

At 10:45 an older model VW Bug appeared at the intersection – Dave had nailed it. He could make out three figures inside it – two in front and one in back. If Pete were in there, he’d either be the one in back – most likely he thought – or in the passenger seat up front.

The car slowed and turned into the path leading to the trailer.

“Yes!” Dave said pulling air.

It circled around and came up behind the trailer – on the far side, away from the road – as if making a half-hearted attempt at hiding.

“They are doing everything right from my standpoint. Let’s watch now.”

Dave had been correct about other things as well. The driver opened the passenger side door, leaned the seat forward and the third person got out. It was Pete! The two of them marched him to the trailer. His hands were behind him – tied or cuffed Dave figured. He saw Pete looking around as if he were expecting something. That was good – alert!

“He must have seen the trailer.”

The three of them went into the trailer and closed the

door. With the sun having been on it for the better part of five hours it would be hot inside.

Dave started the engine and slowly pulled out onto the road. He moved past the lane, paused, and then began backing down the lane toward the trailer.

“Never done this backing thing, but I watched Pete. Seems to be a piece of cake. Like riding a bike only in reverse. Can’t understand why he needed a half dozen cuss words to accomplish it at the creek.”

Dave understood that nothing about his plan was sensible, safe or assured him of anything but probable failure. He continued and backed in under the trailer hitch. Earlier he had determined that it was a ball and socket affair just like the one used for their trailer. He had practiced the next essential move when he separated their trailer from the van back up the road. The cup on the trailer’s hitch had to be lowered onto the ball on the back of the van; then a lever beside the ball had to be pulled up to lock the connection in place.

He positioned the van perfectly, more out of luck than skill – well, clearly, he had some natural talent. He got out, leaving the door open. Staying up against the van, he crept back to the hitch. He would pull the cement block away with both hands, which would lower it several inches onto the ball. The occupants would certainly notice that. He would then pull the lever with his right hand. From that point it would be a race to the car before anybody exited the trailer.

All of that worked just the way it had to. Dave was amazed. Once on the highway he turned northwest and within a few miles took a wicked right, which put him on a four-lane highway heading north. Shots were fired from the front window in the trailer. Like his brother had said, the window glass in the van was bullet proof. He pressed the foot feed. Fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety! He held it steady.

At that point there were just three parts of his plan left. First, not to kill all five of them; second to keep the kidnapers from jumping out and third, to get the attention of a state trooper.

That took nearly twenty minutes before the telltale lights brightened his rearview mirror. Dave couldn’t believe it took so long. He had his final step well in mind. He ignored the

flashing light and siren so the trooper had to pull up beside him signaling him to pull over. Dave pressed a note he had printed in large, bold letters against his side window:

BAD GUYS IN TRAILER HOLDING A MAN AT GUNPOINT.

The trooper nodded and worked his palm up and down signaling Dave to slow. Then the signal became pointing ahead as if once slowed a bit he should keep going. The final gesture from the trooper was putting his phone to his ear. Dave figured he understood – he was calling in reinforcements. Dave slowed to 60. The trooper pulled on ahead, out of sight of the men in the trailer.

Ten minutes and ten miles later the trooper swerved back into the lane to their left and motioned Dave to stop. Dave had never in his whole life been so happy to just stop.

A swarm of police cars appeared from all directions. Once stopped, Dave just sat there determined not to cry. He didn't. He figured he should stay in the van in case there was more gun fire. He watched the proceedings in the rearview mirror. Pete emerged first, followed by a man with a hand gun to his brother's head. The second man followed with two hand guns.

Two shots rang out. The two men fell to the pavement. THEN, Dave figured it was time to get out. He ran back to Pete and administered a gut busting hug. The familiar trooper hurried to them. As Pete was untied, Dave gave the brief version of the escape.

"I imagine it was a for-ransom kidnapping," Dave went on. "Unfortunately, we are way too rich for our own good."

Pete frowned at Dave, then his face brightened. The boy was still trying to get them out of it without revealing who they were. Pete offered his driver's license for data collection. Dave offered his phone number from the burner phone that would be soon be disposed of.

"I suppose I'm under arrest for speeding and underage driving without a license," he offered to the trooper.

"Under the circumstances, I suppose those technicalities can be over looked. Since the bad guys, as your referred to them, are dead, there will probably be no trial so your future assistance will be minimal."

Another trooper walked up and spoke with the first.

"You won't believe this, but I ran the prints of the deceased and they are both known henchmen of a notorious mob in New York City."

"That seems strange," Pete said.

"More and more the mobs are going for kidnapping of high stakes victims. It's been going on everywhere else in the world for decades. Seems it's finally arrived here. Your parent's names."

"They are deceased. I am David's legal guardian."

Dave ducked inside the van and got the envelope with all their information. The trooper looked it over and took pictures of what he needed.

"The fact there is a mob association may require further contact with you. Those connections are usually difficult to substantiate enough to please a judge, however."

"You know how to contact us," Pete said.

"Peter, are you sure you don't need to be checked out by medical staff."

Peter winked at Dave.

"I guess that depends on whether or not the nurses are really pretty."

It got the chuckles he was going for. Fifteen minutes later they were rolling along up the Interstate in the van – minus the camping trailer.

"Well, what do you think?" Dave asked.

"I think, thanks to your lead, we are safe again. I'm wishing for another set of license plates, however."

"My *lead*?"

"Yeah. Bringing up that ransom kidnapping thing to the troopers. I was ready to throw in the towel and tell all. I figured we had had it – that we'd been found out – that the jig was up – that our goose was cooked."

"You may have just set the record for stringing the most clichés together in one breath, and, technically, that would have '*geese were cooked*'."

Pete chuckled and ruffled Dave's hair.

"So, our destination is still the same?" Dave asked.

"I don't see why not. We didn't give up any indication about it. The troopers don't know about our trailer so that

plate should work in our favor if they actually try to find us on the highway. We need to decide what to do if that burner phone ever rings.”

“What burner phone is that? Oh, you mean the one that – oops – just fell out the window.”

“Why, yes. That was the one. What a shame little brother. However, will they ever find you now?”

They exchanged smiles and grew silent. Presently, Pete spoke.

“Thanks.”

“No, *thank* you, Pete.”

“Thank me for what?”

“Finally giving me the chance to drive.”

“*Like a maniac!* I was sure our minutes were numbered!”

Dave smiled.

“I did pretty well before the chase scene.”

“I have no doubt, but back to the serious side of things, I really mean it, thanks.”

“That didn’t have to be said, you know.”

Pete nodded.

“You got all my messages and even figured them out.”

“Looking back on them I think they were exceptional – concise, with all the necessary information – we’ll almost all. Next time I suggest you add ‘route’ or even just ‘Rt’ in front of highway numbers.”

“I will tuck that away for next time, brother. NEXT TIME!!!!”

“Wondered when you’d catch that.”

Another period of silence followed.

“Did you get any idea why they took you?”

“Just heard bits and pieces, but it seemed clear I was to be offered for ransom to dad’s organization. If that failed I was to be killed. I’d have been killed either way. I’d be too big a risk for whoever’s in charge of dad’s group now – the heir apparent thing I’m thinking would have lots of clout – so you can bet he’d get rid of me.”

Dave shuddered where he sat.

“Yeah!” Pete said, having noticed it. “You need to get us back to our trailer.”

“Take the next off ramp to the right. I’ll get our bearings and find us on the map.”

It took most of an hour navigating the narrow county and township roads.

Finally:

“Now, we’re close. Should be just ahead to the right.”

“I assume you parked it there as a heads up for me.”

“Exactly.”

“Nice play.”

There it was, right where Dave had left it. That part was good. The rest of what they saw was not.

* * *

“Count ‘em, big brother – two black SUVs, one Trenton Police car, and two long black Lincolns.”

“A convention of all our antagonists, I’m betting, Pete said. “How lucky can a pair of brothers on the run get? No turning back, now, Dave.”

“Ballerina time you say,” Dave said. “We need to be on our toes like we’ve never before been on our toes before.”

A man in a black suit approached as they got out of the van.

“J. Edgar and brother, I assume,” he said offering a smile and his hand for shakes. “Seriously, you are Marco and Frankie of course.”

“And, seriously, you are the FBI, we assume,” Dave said as he offered his own hand.

“Astute young man.”

“Most assuredly. My mother fed me astute pills every morning for most of my life.”

Pete intervened.

“My brother can continue this kind of verbal sparring all day – just to alert you.”

“So, what’s the deal?” Dave asked looking over the other four.

“Actually, we just met not an hour ago. Come on over and we’ll try to get it all sorted out.”

“Are we in trouble?” Dave asked. “If we are, we take the fifth.”

The man smiled not truly knowing if the boy were being serious or going for a joke. Dave wasn’t really sure, either.

“This is my partner – the black suite and belt badge may give him away. This is Chief Koeppe, from Trenton. We understand his daughters can’t stop talking about you two and that his wife is packed and ready to elope with the young one. The gentleman in the beard works for a law firm who had been employed by your father to look after you for the next several years in case anything untoward occurred. The man under the crew-cut is his assistant in charge of all things internet as we have been given to understand.”

“Who’s responsible for the GPS gizmos?” Dave asked.

Humorously, all of them except the police chief raised their hands.

“You understand the extra weight of all those things reduced our gas mileage by ten percent,” Dave went on. “We *will* prepare bills.”

Smiles.

“How did you guys know when. . . Marco . . . was taken?” Dave went on. “If you were you close enough to be watching us you are really good. We were always on the lookout for prying eyes.”

Red Beard stepped forward.

“It seems that your mother had GPS devices placed inside your favorite belt buckles some years ago so the family could keep track of you, in case you were ever abducted. I was tracking you through them. When I noticed Marco’s was moving rapidly away from the motel and Dave’s blip remained stationary, I became concerned. I took the Chief into my confidence.”

The first FBI agent smiled and spoke.

“We have had the van ‘bugged’ for over a year – just waiting, in case. We had a long-term investigation of your father underway and figured if the van was to be his means of getaway, we needed to be able to track it.”

Dave continued his inquisition.

“We’re sure there is at least one more GPS on the truck – from the bad guys. We referred to one of them as Skinny Guy and weren’t really sure who they were – why they were interested in us. Apparently, the rival gang.”

“May I ask why you were following us, since clearly we were not our father trying to escape?” Pete asked the agent.

“After the hit – excuse the crude term – we became concerned about your safety. Your van’s GPS signal told the agency you were on the move almost immediately. A tail was put on you partly to protect you and partly for our own selfish reason – to catch either members of your dad’s organization who wanted to do away with their competition for leadership, or members of the rival mob who might be after you to tie up loose family ends.”

“Then who bugged our backpacks?” Dave asked, hands on his hips, projecting a genuinely puzzled look.

The others looked at each other and concern grew on all their faces.

Several moments later Dave broke into a smile.

“Just kidding, guys. I just wondered how it would feel to have all of you under my power, if for just a moment. It was absolutely fantastic if anybody cares.”

“I have one more question,” Pete said. “Who put the noose on the mirror of the van and why?”

At first nobody responded. Then Red Beard offered a possibility.

“A noose is the symbol the opposing mob uses to let somebody know they are on their hit list – an advance warning – part of the ‘honor among thieves’ thing, I assume. I also assume it was that Skinny Guy you spoke of and also, that he thought you knew about that.”

“We knew nothing about Dad’s ‘business’ – he insisted on that,” Pete said offering a reason for their ignorance about the noose.

“I’m pretty sure Skinny Guy was the second man out of the trailer at the shooting we were just a part of,” Dave said.

He turned toward the agent: “I assume you know about that – pics from drones, a black op helicopter with an invisibility shield, a mobile satellite!”

“We were aware of that as it was coming down. *How* we knew, is our business. Here’s an idea for you, though. After you graduate from college, you should apply to become an agent. You clearly have the head for it.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed. Like me, you guys are all *also* incredibly handsome.”

He struck a pose; head tilted up and hand over his

heart

“Like I said gentlemen, he *never* stops!”

There were nods all around.

“So, how do we proceed from here?” Pete asked becoming serious.

The FBI agent responded.

“We have discussed it and believe there is no reason for all of us to remain involved.”

Red Beard spoke.

“Since the FBI is the expert in establishing new identities and relocation of people, we have agreed that they should take over. I will leave contact information for you in case you find yourselves needing or wanting ‘family’ information. By the way, transferring that high-powered GPS device from your license plate to that cross country trucker was brilliant. I’d followed him halfway across Iowa before our internet guy here pointed out the discrepancy with the ones on your belt buckles.”

The agent continued.

“We assume you have a destination in mind, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Pete said. “It may not turn out to be our final one, but we *are* on our way to a specific place.”

“Then you should go ahead with your plan. We will email you the details of just how we will continue to be involved and how you can contact us.”

“You have our *secret email*?” Dave said more than a little resentment showing in his tone.

“Son, the FBI has the size of your jock strap,” meaning, of course, they knew everything they needed to know and more.

“Just a point of order, here,” Dave said. “You don’t spy on us while we are having intimate moments with girls, right?”

“Only if she’s a North Korean spy, son.”

It was worth chuckles and a final round of handshakes.

Dave directed Pete with his hands as he backed the van toward the hitch on the trailer.

“I did this all by myself, remember – and with no do overs,” Dave said, his impish smile blossoming in its full splendor. He automatically reached for his shoulder as if to

protect it.

A few minutes later they were on their way north to catch their highway west.

"I suppose we don't need to keep to the back roads anymore, Dave."

"Probably not, but I've enjoyed them; grass, trees, streams, sky and sun – like you said, so different from our life back in the city."

"The back roads it will be then."

"One good statistic about that place in Arkansas I may have failed to relate to you, Pete. Their website says there are four females to every three males in town. I assume some of that excess will be our age and in need of our attention."

"Even more reason to scope it out," Pete said. "Sounds like you're ready to find your Mountain Home."

Dave nodded, acknowledging the play on words.

"I am. The circumstances that forced our trip were horrific, you know, but, in most ways, it has been fascinating and valuable beyond all imagination. And, our time together has been wonderful – *incalculably superb*, in fact."

His words drew a look and smile from Pete.

Dave grew philosophical: "Just imagine, ten days ago neither one of us could have imagined we would soon be *two brothers on the run*, headlong into what at times would become a *terrifying journey*. I hate we *had* to have it. I love that we *got* to have it. You understand?"

"Yes, I do, little brother, whimsical sibling, masterful partner, delightful motor mouth, brilliant brainiac, wise comrade, studious philosopher, quick wit, best friend, budding Romeo, future agent, and of course, the former, fastest butt in the city. See, I can carry on adnausium just like you can.

"Recently, you have had an excellent teacher. Surely he deserves some of the credit."

The shared a long, in the face, smile.

"I love you, Marco/Peter."

"I love you, Frankie/David."

Their journey through life, of course, would continue, and it would be wonderful – *incalculably superb*, in fact.

The end