

# **DEEP COVER: 1940**

**Two boys and their grandfather  
flee for their lives from Nazi Spies**

**Book One: The Jansen Family Detective Series**

**Tom Gnagey  
David Drake**

A dollop of history, a smattering of humor, a baffling mystery, a wild adventure, and a thought-provoking presentation of the philosophic conflicts which were tearing the world apart in the 1940s, so comparisons can be made with those manifest today.

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**Family of Man Press**



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Escape and a New Beginning**

2:00 a.m.

The night sky above the darkened, modest, two-story house, which had set for decades at the south edge of the city, still harbored rolling black clouds – remnants of the just hushed raging early Autumn storm. Wet pavement, streaked with oily veins of blues and greens, was dimly lit by amber streetlights, which struggled to be useful as they cast long, narrow, imprecise shadows through the heavy mist. Had it not been for occasional bursts of colorful, flashing lights from screaming, emergency vehicles, there would have been little indication a world existed beyond those four walls.

Flashlight in hand, the old man entered his grandsons' upstairs bedroom and gently shook them both awake.

“We must leave now. I have packed what we will take. Quiet. No lights. Our truck is ready in the garage.”

His reference was to their small, nondescript, extended cab

box truck, which he used to deliver his paintings to galleries and to take the three of them into the woods on weekend outings.

Although the two boys – ten and fifteen – were bewildered about what was taking place, they would not question the old man who had cared for them for most of their young lives. They hurried into their clothes – jeans and hooded sweatshirts. Sox for both. Boots for the older one and leather, tie-with-a-bow shoes for the younger. Tommy, ten, alarmed by the confusion and still not fully recovered from the distress of the storm, allowed quiet tears and found himself trembling. Samuel, fifteen, was determined *not* to allow such things. Reaching for their jackets, he maneuvered Tommy on ahead of him into the hall and closed the door behind them. He clasped his brother's hand and periodically squeezed it doing what he could to offer a sense of security through the fully baffling moments.

Meeting them at the top of the stairs, the old man put a finger to his lips and hitched his head. The boys followed him down the steps – instinctively avoiding that squeaky one – and through the back door into the attached garage. Without a word, they followed their grandfather's direction into the back seat of the double-long cab, where they were directed to kneel on the floor out of sight. Their lives had abruptly taken a bazaar and frightening turn. The old man covered them with a dark blanket, took his place behind the wheel, and started the engine. Lights off, wipers on, the truck began its journey through the open doors onto the narrow backstreet, turned south, and moved slowly away from the city on old State Route 10.

The boys, confused and afraid, allowed silent questions: How long would they be gone? Were they leaving home forever? Where were they going? Why were they going? Who would they miss the most? Derrick, for sure, a twelve-year-old neighbor who was unable to hear or speak, called deaf and dumb in those days. The two of them had been his only real friends. They felt as sad

for him as for themselves.

Half an hour later, confident that under cover of the on again/off again storm and its aftermath, they had left the city unnoticed, the old man turned his head and addressed the boys behind him.

“You may sit up on the seat, now. Sorry about the discomfort. We are safe. I apologize for the mystery and fright I understand you are encountering. A serious situation developed unexpectedly – rapidly. We must leave our home behind. I ask you to trust me. I will explain more fully, later. Just now, I need to concentrate on our journey.”

\* \* \*

### Night Three:

The first night in a new place was always the most difficult when you were a kid – at least that’s how it was for Tommy Waggoner in 1940. He had no problem with being characterized as a kid. In fact, he found ways of working it to his advantage. Cute. Chatty. A Grin that blossom easily and disheveled hair that was like a magnet to older lady’s fingers. As a result, lots of useful perks flowed his way.

His older brother, Samuel, was struggling to move beyond his role as a kid. His slender frame was heading toward six feet like his grandfather. His shoulders had broadened, but his features were not yet angular. He believed that to be handsome, they had to be angular. Evidence: any male movie star of the day (well, discount Lou Costello). A teen guy with a still roundish profile – nose, chin, forehead – could be cute but not handsome. At fifteen, the prospect of a handsome future was more than a little important to him – life and death essential might better characterize it. His younger brother kidded that if he weren’t careful, he would wear out the glass in his mirror. Samuel still mostly admired the fairer gender from some distance –

thoughtfully close enough to respond if spoken to but far enough away so he would not be expected to spark a conversation.

Earlier in the evening, to keep the fall chill at bay for the night, grampa had banked the fire in the fireplace in the big room on the third floor of the old mill, which had become their new place of residence. Checking on it at midnight, he found his grandsons – blankets loosely draped around their shoulders – had shed their sleeping bags and were sitting together, cross-legged, close to the warmth. From where he had paused at the doorway, it appeared to be a mostly quiet time between them.

“Sleep not coming tonight?” he asked, pulling his robe together and taking a seat in the nearby rocker – one of the few pieces of furniture yet set in place there on the top floor.

“I saw Tommy sitting here so I came to sit with him – figured it was the big brotherly thing to do on the first night in a new place, you know.”

Tommy and Ollie – grampa – traded winks, understanding it was a flimsy excuse. Samuel knew that as well and looked a bit sheepish for having floated it. None of them pursued it. Love was accepted as love however it was wrapped.

Grampa spoke while he looked around the large room – the stone fireplace, the roughhewn pine-board walls, the massive square beams high above.

“I’ve been listening to the creaking old building tonight,” he said. “I’ve always liked a building that spoke to me – like it’s telling me it’s here looking after me – warding off anything that might be distressing – taking good care of me.”

Tommy understood what he was doing.

“A better message than the one I’ve been hearing, grampa.” He put on his best monster voice and clawed at the air. “Don’t go to sleep, boy, or I’ll gobble you up and spit your remains into the mill stream.”

They managed smiles. The boy tended toward the overly

dramatic. Samuel planted the obligatory fist onto his younger brother's shoulder. Tommy noticed he had pulled the punch and recognized it with a nod. Samuel shrugged. The two of them understood. Nobody else needed to.

"Do I have time for a pipe, or are you two ready to return to your cocoons?"

The boys looked at each other.

"Time for a short one, I'd say," Samuel said.

Tommy nodded, looking from his brother to his grampa, believing the old gentleman had something on his mind.

With his arms bracing him to the rear, Samuel unfolded his legs stretching them out toward the fire. The sudden warmth meeting his bare feet felt friendly. They sat in silence for a few moments. Grampa packed his pipe, held a match to it, and sucked it to life. The blue smoke rose in a lazy, uncertain wisp, and the familiar aroma spread throughout the space. Tommy didn't particularly like the smell but knew he would miss it if it weren't there.

"There's always a period of loneliness after a move," Grampa said at last.

Tommy nodded, needing to acknowledge it, hoping such an agreement would make it feel legitimate. It didn't. He spoke. "Lots of miles between what we left in Chicago and down here in Arkansas – *Gilead* [gīl - ē - ād], you say this place is called?"

"Gilead. Right. Literally means place of rocks or something close to that – from the Bible."

"From what I've seen that seems accurate," Samuel said. "Red clay and red rock everywhere. Can't understand how anything grows. I always thought soil was black."

Tommy took a more personal direction.

"You said when the time was right, you'd tell us why we picked up and moved so fast, Grampa. Is the time right, yet?"

"I'm afraid not. All you need to know right now is that we

are going to be fine here. We must think of it as a grand adventure. I imagine the people will be at least some different from the ones we knew up north – a fascinating cultural opportunity for us to explore.”

Earlier in his life, Ollie had taught history and political science at a Jr. College, so he tended to say things in that manner.

“Different how?” Tommy pressed.

He seemed more concerned than Samuel, but then, Samuel was a boy who allowed few emotions to seep into public view. He did appear ready to listen, however.

“We will learn those things as we get acquainted. I expect their language pattern will be a bit different from what you’re used to. It will take some getting used to. They will likely think yours is odd and may make fun of it. Don’t get sucked into arguing the point with them – about that or *any* of our differences. I have reason to expect that religion may play a far more central role in their lives than you are used to. They may tend to defer to the Bible more regularly than to our Constitution. *This* is mostly for you, Tommy; early on, at least, do *not* confront them over such things.”

“Grampa! Me? Confront somebody?”

Three knowing chuckles.

“How big is this place – Gilead?” Samuel asked.

“Tiny compared to what we’re used to – something just over three hundred people, I was told.”

“There were more than that on our block back in Chicago.”

Grampa nodded waiting to see what else was of immediate concern.

“We going to run this old sawmill?” Samuel asked, that prospect seeming to raise his spirits for some reason.

“The realtor said it was a working mill. The local folks bring trees they’ve felled to be sawn into lumber. Probably not a thriving business. There is a long-time employee – Jake – I’m told. At the



outset at least, I hope he will remain and show us the ropes.”

“I love the smell of sawdust. Will there be sawdust?” Tommy asked.

“Unless you know about some ‘sawdustless’ way of making lumber.”

Grampa had a penchant for making up words to fit his needs. It had become a family propensity. When he retired, he had turned his lifelong hobby, painting, into a source of revenue. His favorite subjects were landscapes. He was by no means wealthy but well enough healed to maintain the family in Gilead for several years if that became necessary.

Presently, he broke the silence that had crept in among them.

“There is one more thing about which I must ask you to trust me. During our stay in these parts we will be known as the Anderson’s. Again, when the time is right, I will explain. Don’t be concerned. It is a more common name in these parts and should not erect the barrier that a clearly German name like Waggoner might in these trying times.”

The boys looked at each other and shrugged. They turned back to their grampa and nodded. Tommy had a comment.

“I have always thought *Waggoner* was a clumsy name to say – overpowering, even. It invades the world with unnecessary force and has no melodic air to it. Now, Anderson, eliminates all those things. I like it.”

Tommy seldom phrased his thoughts simply if there were a way in which to express them with flair. Between his ample mentality and his creativity, there was *much* flair in his life.

The boys’ grandmother and their parents died in a house fire when Tommy was four. The three of them had worked themselves into a fine family – any one of them would confirm that. The boys had attended a well-respected, coat and tie, day school and were both honor students – Tommy more easily so than his

brother. Tommy was still a relatively carefree youngster. Samuel had entered adolescence, so he silently – and not so silently – worried about and felt compelled to grumble about everything. Grampa had usually found the wisdom to help them navigate the ups and downs that life normally visited on young people. He understood that their current situation – having their lives turned upside down and shaken out – would certainly test those skills.

The mill sat in a valley alongside a robust, roiling creek that powered its gigantic waterwheel. Atop the hill to the north, sat Gilead.

The following morning, Ollie figured their first foray up the path into the village should be made together. He was concerned that he may have shared with the boys more than he really knew about the isolated little village. He offered one final caution.

“Remember, our ways aren’t necessarily right, and when they differ, theirs aren’t necessarily wrong.”

That wasn’t the first time the boys had heard that. The south side of Chicago was an unplanned, ethnic, hodgepodge, which sampled just about every edition of mankind one might imagine. Even so, they had experienced few problems because of it. That tended to happen when one approached ‘different’ folks with ‘how interesting’ rather than ‘how strange, or disgusting, or frightening’.

The incline was gentle, but the path had grown up in and around angular rock outcroppings and thick, ancient tree trunks, so its roundabout course doubled the distance. Even at that, it only took several minutes.

They paused at the top, where they were immediately confronted by the little community. Just beyond a wide, empty, flat, expanse covered with hardpacked gravel, were a half dozen small, rustic, storefronts facing them, side by side in a semicircle. They were joined out front by a raised, wooden, walkway complete with a single roof supported by square, wooden pillars. The scene

would have fit comfortably onto the set of a black and white western.

The focal point of the open area was the covered well near the center with a peaked, cedar shingled roof supported by two square wooden posts. That rose from a circular base laid up three feet in brown and tan stones with soft edges. Layer after layer of half-inch rope wound around the crank-driven shaft suggested it was deep – very deep. Ollie was impressed by the amount of labor that represented – digging a four or five-foot-wide hole, perhaps fifty feet deep, through red clay ridden with rock and roots and who knew what else.

Tommy spied the General Store and had visions of stick candy or lemon drops. Samuel scanned the area for girls. Oddly, they thought, there was nobody to be seen.

They crossed the open area to that store, entering together. The tall, well-padded and bushy-haired, fortyish proprietor removed a shotgun from beneath the counter and placed it on top. There was no specific threat suggested; in fact, he offered a smile and his hand as he spoke.

“Jesse Purdy. My store. You’re new to these parts.”

Ollie followed the man’s lead.

“Ollie Anderson. Yes, we are new to these parts. Bought the old mill down the hill. My grandsons, Tommy and Samuel.”

“Can’t be Samuel.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Gilead’s got a Samuel. Only one of a name allowed, lessin’ it’s a junior.”

Ollie looked at his grandson with a shrug. They conferred for a few moments in hushed, head to head, tones. Samuel turned toward the man and spoke.

“How about Evan? My middle name. You got an Evan?”

“We do now. Welcome to Gilead, Evan. Can I hep y’all further?”

Ollie answered.

“We need a few supplies. I have a list here. We’ll return for more as we settle in.”

He removed the list from his shirt pocket and offered it forward. Jesse waved it off.

“Just say what ya needs and I’ll fetch it. Don’t rush.”

Ollie read down his list according to the pace the man set. He dutifully moved about the store ‘fetching’ each item in order. He announced the cost of each as he went, and he did the running addition in his head.

“Seven dollars and eighty-five cents.”

“Tax?” Ollie asked.

“Not in Gilead.”

That clearly made no attempt to address the issue of a possible state sales tax, although it seemed to suggest some autonomy – legal or otherwise – up there on the hill.

Ollie looked at Tommy, indicating a check on the total. He nodded. He was the family’s go to math guy. Ollie offered a ten. Jesse carefully counted out the change – slowly but accurately, insisting Ollie agree to it.

“May we look around in here?” Tommy asked removing a lemon drop from the sack and offering one to his brother. “I’ve never been in a store quite like this before. I love it.”

“Lookin’s free.”

The man turned back to Ollie.

“Where was it ya said y’all was from?”

“I didn’t, I suppose. How rude of me. Came down from Illinois – quite a way north of here. We love what we’ve seen of your state so far – rolling, green, friendly.”

Jesse didn’t seem particularly impressed and chose not to pursue it. Ollie tried again to extend the conversation.

“Do you have a school here? My grandsons are in fifth and tenth grades.”

“Strom don’t allow schoolin’ past fourth grade.”

“Strom?”

“He’s the leader here in Gilead.”

“Like the mayor?”

“Like the *leader*.”

“Elected?”

“Jist been the leader for, like, ever, I suppose. He’s a reverend.”

Ollie had to wonder: a theocracy in the backwoods of Arkansas? That just might present challenging considerations. It sparked another, suddenly important, question.

“I wasn’t told whether or not our mill is within the town limits of Gilead.”

“Nope. Town stops at the top a the path. Means you’re not allowed up here after sunset – nobody but us Gileads is allowed.”

“I appreciate knowing that. Would not want to create problems between us.”

Jesse cocked his head and spoke. His tone was inquisitive.

“You talk *real* funny. Sure you’re Americans?”

“I assure you we are Americans. People from up north tend to speak in a different way – sound different I guess I should put it.”

Jesse looked skeptical. Ollie didn’t have to guess; Strom would know all about them before they hit the trail for home.

“Are we allowed to look around town – we have no intention of intruding where we are not welcome.”

Jessie’s face plainly suggested, ‘There’s that talk again.’

“Sure. That’s ok. We like you to spend your money here. You’ll find us just like any other little town.”

Ollie doubted that. *My*, how Ollie doubted that!

Tommy spoke.

“You got kids here? Haven’t seen anybody but you.”

“Lots a kids. Sort a skittish a strangers. Gettin’ close to

splittin' time.”

“Splittin' time?” Ollie asked.

“When we hit 400, a hundred folks have to move away and set up a new settlement. Strom’s way a keeping us a quiet, little, Christian, community. He says cities is riddled with servants a the Devil, so he keeps it small.”

Four hundred, a city? Had they fallen into a pocket of time?

“Can I play with them – the kids, not the devils?” Tommy asked.

The humor clearly escaped the man.

“Up to them. Strom ain’t big on foreigners.”

Ollie thought it was an odd give and then take statement: if the kids wanted to play, they could, but the leader frowned on it, as if that might be a warning not to try. Ollie was quickly coming to see that ‘quaint’ seemed to miss the point of Gilead. Odd, weird, even just a bit frightening, perhaps, might work better. They would tread lightly until certain things became clearer. Just how that might come about, Ollie had no good idea – cordially and gently, he hoped.

They left the store onto the wooden walk and surveyed the area from their new perspective – more stores and town to their right and the beautiful view across rolling, still mostly green hills in the distance. By then, there *were* children – peeking out from behind barrels, the trunks of trees, the sides of buildings, and other sheltered spots. Clearly, visitors were not common there in Gilead – oddities, which called for some degree of caution – more accurately, cautious inquisitiveness, it would seem. Upon first impression, it appeared the children may have felt out and out threatened by them – expecting unfriendly encounters. How sad.

Without asking, Tommy approached a barrel setting some twenty feet away, down the walk to their right. A well-tanned young face maintained its position peeping out from one side.

“Hey, kid. My name’s Tommy. What’s yours? I’d like to be

your friend.”

He stopped at five feet. The boy didn't respond, nor did he run away. He continued watching Tommy from what he clearly felt was his place of safety. Tommy took that as a good sign. He sat down on the edge of the raised walk draping his feet onto the gravel. He ran his mouth about nothing in particular for several minutes, occasionally offering a nod and smile in the boy's direction. Presently, he stood and pointed to the well.

“What can you tell me about the well. I'm kind of thirsty. How about you?”

He walked toward it – slowly, yet with purpose. The boy followed to one side and at what he considered was a safe distance behind. Tommy stopped at the little rock structure, kicking at its base as if looking over a used car. He leaned in, looking down inside the opening. Dark, humid, cool.

The boy slowed but continued, circling around until he was standing on the other side, just opposite. The crank was on his side and he began lowering the bucket. Tommy figured that was a friendly act. Again, he smiled and nodded at the boy. The generally unresponsive boy watched Tommy out of the top of his eyes. There was a splash. After allowing a moment for it to fill, he began cranking it up. The weight of the bucket and the water it contained, plus the mere weight of all that rope, presented a struggle for him. In what appeared to be a well-practiced move, he hopped up onto the edge of the low rock wall and began working the crank between his legs at his knees – apparently, better leverage.

“Can I help?” Tommy asked easing himself around to the other side.

The boy did not respond but, again, neither did he run. Tommy reached up for the handle. The boy moved his hands to the inside, allowing room. He offered a quick smile as they tried a few rounds together. He hopped down, which made the two-man

task far easier. When the bucket arrived, he inserted a long peg into the axle, which secured it. He took the dipper from where it hung on one of the posts and handed it to Tommy.

“Thank you.”

Tommy took a longer drink than necessary, smiled, and handed it back. It was good water – cold. The boy motioned for Evan/Samuel and Ollie to join them. They did, and each drank. A round of thank yous seemed to break the barrier and the boy introduced himself.

“I’m Zeek.”

He helped himself to a drink – just a sip – less because he was thirsty, it seemed, and more to participate in the group ritual – a bonding of a sort.

Tommy introduced the others. Zeek followed that lead.

“I got five sisters. Sure wish I had a brother. Girls are the worst.”

With that, Zeek and Tommy had established common ground.

Gradually, others emerged from the shadows – mostly young children. A girl about Evan’s age moved out through the open door of the dry goods store and stood, back against the wall. Furtive glances confirmed she was clearly interested in him. He was clearly interested in her. Neither made a move toward the other. Zeek noticed the interchange, such as it was.

“That’s Jo, my oldest sis.”

“Joe?” Tommy asked to clarify for his brother.

“Josephine. Never called her that, myself. She likes boys. She’s sweet on Matthew. They make eyes back and forth. He has three brothers and they take care of each other if you know what I mean.”

That had been a not so subtle, friendly warning directed at Evan to keep hands off.

A boy – young man – lean, tall, fifteen or sixteen, long, wavy



light brown hair – approached them from the livery stable.

“That’s Joel,” Zeek said. “You’ll like him. A good guy. Gonna marry Amy Sue at Christmas time. Everybody here gets married at Christmas time – Strom says.”

Evan turned, directing his attention to Joel and extended his hand.

“I’m Evan – new to the area – live in the sawmill down the hill. Hope you’ll stop by when you have time.”

“I’m Joel. You like to hunt and fish?”

“I enjoy fishing. Don’t have the heart to kill a land-based animal.”

Joel grinned and shrugged. The grin clearly offered friendship. The shrug was less obvious – perhaps suggesting he had not fully understood the words. Whatever, it had not seemed to represent any lasting concern.

The little town was sending mixed messages. After a bit of initial reluctance, the kids seemed to be open and friendly and began going about their business of being kids. The storeowner had telegraphed indications that outsiders weren’t welcome – well, their money was welcome, so that allowed at least some provision for them. Trust would be hard to come by as evidenced by the shotgun. Earlier, Ollie had wondered, but by then, he had no doubt – the gun was loaded, and the man wouldn’t have hesitated to use it had he suspected evil intent.

Ollie had hoped they would be welcomed with open arms, for the boy’s sake. The lack of a school could easily be handled. The boys enjoyed pursuing knowledge along their own paths, anyway. Books could be ordered. There remained several issues. Ollie moved with his questions toward Samuel – Evan – and, more importantly, to his new acquaintance, Joel.

“What about mail service out here?” he asked.

“Twice a week. Ol’ Mange brings it out from the Crossing in his pickup. The general store has stamps and a scales and

charts so you can mail things right there. Pretty convenient.”

“Yes, convenient, indeed.”

It was hardly reminiscent of the hustle and bustle of the five-story, square city block of post office they were used to.

Leaving aside the origin of the man’s name, *Mange*, Ollie continued.

“What about telephone service? We didn’t find a phone at the Mill.”

“Miss Raggs has a phone – about three miles east. She’s good about letting people use it. We leave her a dime. That’s as far as the phone lines come. Strom says it would cost a couple hundred dollars just to have the lines brought out here. Got nobody to call nohow.”

The young man anticipated Ollie’s next question and added one to grow on.

“We can get a half dozen radio stations up here on top of the hill. Don’t know if you can get ‘em down at the mill or not – maybe on the top floor. It’s a tall building. Electric service is dependable, but you need to have lanterns ready in case.”

It had been another of Gilead’s, ‘of course, except when’, proclamations.

Ollie welcomed the opportunity for the boys to become comfortable with new acquaintances and made no move to rush them back down the hill. Whether they would become friends was another matter. He had to wonder why *adults* had not come to greet *him*. The Strom character was intriguing beyond belief. It seemed meeting him would be an occasion for another visit.

They were back at the mill by lunch time. The boys chattered back and forth across the table while they slurped their ways through bowls of tomato soup and laid up jaw busting sandwiches – cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, luncheon meat, green olives for the boys, black for Ollie – all between pieces of long-cold toast slathered in mayonnaise. There were more questions

and, 'I wonder if's,' than an exchange of information, but that was fine. It first took the right questions to uncover the right information.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Settling In

There was a knock on the door – the third-floor door that opened into the entry at the top of the long, open, outside stairway – twenty-nine steps by Tommy’s count. Tommy was the first one there, hoping it might have been Zeek come to get better acquainted. A man in his forties wearing a red and black checkered hunter’s cap – ear flaps, flopping – stood there with an armload of fireplace wood.

“I’m Jake. Worked here for the previous owner. Cared for the place this past year. The sky tells me it will be chilly come evenin’. You’ll need wood.”

“Jake. I’m Tommy and this is my brother, Samuel / Evan.”

They had yet to work out the name thing among them when away from Gilead.

Evan offered his arms and Jake spilled half his load into them.

“Please come in,” he said. “Tommy’s the talker. I’m the go to guy.”

The man smiled.

Having heard the exchange, Ollie arrived from the kitchen

drying his hands on a dishtowel.

“Jake! I’m Ollie. It seems you’ve met my grandsons. So glad you came by. My hope is you will stay on. I once *did* cut a six-foot 2 X 2 into three, two-foot sections. That is my experience in the sawmill business.”

It received a smile and nod.

“I was hoping for that, Sir. Thank you.”

“No sirs around here, Jake. I’ve been wondering if you live-in or have another place. We only arrived yesterday and haven’t yet taken time to look around.”

They moved to the fireplace in the main room where Tommy and his grampa began transferring the wood from the others’ arms and stacking it against the wall beside fireplace.

“Always stayed in the backroom on the first floor. I can find another place.”

“No. No. Not what I was getting at. We are pleased to have you here in the building. The realtor indicated your salary. Will it be satisfactory to increase that by ten percent since you will have to train up the three of us?”

“Not necessary.”

“Not your decision. We have some soup left from lunch if you haven’t eaten.”

“Thank you. That will be nice. Very kind.”

Tommy spoke.

“You will find we are very kind people.”

“And,” Evan jumped in, “you will find Tommy’s mouth has a way of just saying whatever floats across his mind.”

Tommy shrugged and the others chuckled.

Samuel fixed a bowl in the kitchen and brought it to the table where Jake and his grampa were sitting. Tommy followed with the box of Saltines. The boys took seats.

“Coming into the busy season,” Jake said. “Once the trees shed, there’s a rush – so the cut timber can dry and heal over the

winter and be ready for the construction needs come spring. We have a large drying room to the front of the first floor. You may have noticed the large, louvered, vents.”

Ollie nodded.

“What’s on the second floor?” Tommy asked.

“Rats, mostly. An occasional possum family.”

Jake grinned. There were more smiles. Tommy hoped he was kidding. He was not keen on sharing his bed with rats. The mere thought caused him to put on a shiver.

Jake offered a more serious response.

“Years ago, that floor was the community center for Gilead – parties, socials, and dances – things like that. All that changed after Strom took over and shrunk the city limits. That’s the story at least. Before my time.”

He didn’t elaborate beyond that. Ollie moved the conversation toward things that had been on his mind.

“Do you consider yourself a Gileadian or however they refer to themselves?”

“Oh, no sir, I mean, Ollie. I come from *Becker’s Crossing* – usually just called the *Crossing* – about fifteen miles on west along the stream. No love lost between the two communities. The Crossing has things Strom – he’s the leader here – would give his eye teeth to get – a real post office, an auto garage with a gas pump, a saw bones – that’s a doc in case the term is unfamiliar. Got a telephone switchboard of their very own – probably half the houses have phones; even a bank of sorts. Six blocks of our Main Street is paved in cement. Lots of comforts Gilead don’t have.”

“How large is the Crossing?” Samuel asked.

“About six hundred, give or take. A good supply of available, young misses if that was part of your question.”

Samuel shrugged and wondered why everybody seemed convinced all he had on his mind was girls. In an ‘ah ha’ moment, he answered his own question. Like grampa often said, you had

to ask the proper question before you could receive the proper answer.

Ollie continued.

“Tell us about our neighbors up the hill.”

“The folks from Gilead? Call themselves, Gileads, by the way. They are really good folks who Strom keeps tryin’ to make think they gotta be even better. Some believe in him all the way. Many have learned to tolerate him. A few are inclined to go with a younger man named Eb – Ebenezer. Strom sees him as a rabble rouser. Most like him but think some of his ideas lean too far toward bein’ a liberal – lettin’ women vote and take jobs outside the home, and such. You’ll learn that *Liberal’s* a dirty word anywhere in these parts – not just in Gilead. Strom says, ‘If it ain’t in my Bible, it ain’t in my town’.”

Ollie couldn’t let that one go.

“And here I thought the New Testament was based on the life and teachings of a notorious young liberal rabble rouser who the local authorities feared so they worked to silence. Perhaps I will keep such thoughts to myself.”

It garnered raised eyebrows, a faint smile, and fleeting eye contact. Ollie had learned what he had set out to learn.

“How did the town become ‘his’?” Tommy asked. “Strom’s.”

“Doubt if anybody could tell you. Just one a those things that happens down through the years. He’s old as dirt. His bark is a lot worse than his bite although he does hold power and barks often. I s’pose you know that sayin’. In the old days, he was the pastor. Still is, I guess, even though there’s a circuit riding Pastor Willoughby who stops by twice a month and holds services – weather permittin’. The old church ain’t big enough nomore, so they use the common area at the top of the path. Strom requires attendance. Most folks humor him and attend. I suppose they would, Strom or not. Like I said, they’s a group a good folks.”

He finished, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and



wiped the back of his hand with a napkin. ‘Inefficient,’ Tommy thought, ‘though, in the end, effective.’

“Delicious soup. Thank you. I seen you got furniture and boxes in your truck. How about Evan here and me unload it. I guess you’ve found the rope and weights elevator.”

“We have. Tommy may have already worn it out,” Samuel said.

Tommy grinned and shrugged. When all else failed, Tommy always went with a grin and a shrug. Only seldom had it not come through for him.

“I can operate the elevator,” he offered.

“A lad your size can carry boxes as well,” Jake said, ruffling the boy’s hair and winking at Ollie.

A *good* ruffle was more pleasant when administered by *good* smelling old ladies, but what was, was. He took the ‘being able to handle boxes’ comment as a compliment – a challenge.

Ollie helped as well, of course, and by three o’clock the deed had been completed. Later, Ollie and the boys would attack the task of arranging things. Jake left.

“Jake seems to be a congenial sort,” Ollie said. “I think he will fit in just fine.”

“Probably more like us fitting in with him,” Samuel said.

It had been an astute observation from the seldom observant older brother. Tommy and his grampa looked at each other, shared raised eyebrows and offered each other a single, overstated, nod. The exchange escaped Samuel.

“Did you notice his speech pattern?” Tommy asked.

“English, you mean?” Samuel came back knowing good and well he had missed his brother’s point. He often missed his brother’s points. *Everybody* often missed his brother’s points!

“Englishes, is what I mean.”

“I don’t follow.”

“He slipped in and out between the local dialect and a more

educated, upper mid-western, version of the language.”

“I guess he did,” Ollie said. “I hadn’t caught that. Good ear, Tommy.”

“And my nose and lips are pretty fine as well.”

Chuckles.

Tommy could be counted on to delight in the things he believed were humorous. He didn’t require verification from the others. They had learned to just wait until it passed.

“Perhaps he has a story,” Ollie said. “I’m sure we’ll learn about it eventually.”

Five of the six rooms on the third floor had fireplaces. The boys chose a room that backed against the one their grandfather had selected. They spread side to side across the center of the floor and shared a common flue. Samuel wondered if sound would travel back and forth through it. Later, Tommy would search them for a secret passage.

The large main room across the front – soon designated, living room – had the largest fireplace. The one in the kitchen – the room just to the east – was smaller and sat at counter height. In years past, it had plainly served as the oven and stove. Relatively new appliances had been added – they bore the look of the mid-thirties with their shiny, speckled green enameled, surfaces. They would be quite functional for the three of them. The room in the north west corner had wonderful light and Ollie called dibs on that one for his studio. The smaller room at the top of the back stairs in the north east corner would be used for storage. They had brought so few things, there had been only a few empty crates and boxes to stow.

The boys’ room had floor to ceiling windows as did the living room. Tommy saw them as a wonderful source of light. Evan, a bit of a neat-freak, saw them as needing washing – hours and hours of washing.

Jake returned with another load of wood. They distributed

it to the bedrooms.

“May I see your room?” Tommy asked.

“That’s not polite, Tommy,” Samuel offered. “It’s his private place.”

“I’ll be happy for you to see my place. Come with me now if you want.”

Tommy looked at his grandfather for permission – a habit he had necessarily grown up with in the city. He got the nod that he expected. He had the idea things like that were going to ease up out there in the country once what’s what was established.

The room was at the rear of the first floor behind the huge drying room. It combined Jake’s living space in front and his shop to the rear separated by a six-foot high partial wall. Tommy loved tools and Jake showed himself to be a patient man where it came to naming the less familiar ones and demonstrating their use. Tommy had visions of returning often to construct wonderful things. He thanked the man and returned upstairs.

During supper, they discussed the problem about Samuel’s name. After talking through the possibilities, Samuel rendered his decision.

“Here at the mill, I will be my regular self – Samuel. When I am in the village or with any friends that I may make there, I will be Evan.”

It was settled. Tommy doubted if his brother could manage such complicated bookkeeping, but he left it alone. ‘Knucklings’, as he referred to them, were predictable and not among his favorite things in life.

While they did dishes, which was a longstanding, three-way happy-time, ritual during which tasks rotated nightly – wash, dry, and put away – Ollie offered something that had been on his mind.

“You two have been away from your studies for three days, now.”

He made no demands – just left it at the observation.

“We don’t have study tables,” Tommy said fishing for an excuse to prolong the inevitable. He believed that was one of his best things – prolonging the inevitable.

“Abraham Lincoln studied on the floor in front of a fireplace,” his grampa came back – again with no requirement attached.

For some unexplained reason, that exchange seemed to deserve knuckles and that punch was NOT pulled. They spent the evening with their schoolbooks. They would lay out a more specific plan later.

There were a few sticks of furniture that had been left in the mill – a long kitchen table, a few chairs, which they had been using, three single beds, and not much else. Samuel suggested his mattress had been original equipment in Winsor Castle back when it was completed in eleventh century England.

Ollie added study tables and mattresses to his growing list: sofa and chair for the living room, nightstands and table lamps for bedrooms, real plates, cups and such, throw rugs, clothes appropriate to their new setting and the basic kitchen supplies. There would be a major shopping trip in their immediate future.

It had been a more tiring day than they realized, and the boys were ready for bed at 9:30. With the light off, they lay on their backs in the dark watching the light from the fireplace flames flicker uncertainly across the walls and ceiling. It was a new experience that fascinated them – well, it *fascinated* Tommy and *entertained* Samuel.

“I think we’ll make it okay here,” Samuel said, thoughtfully. It represented both his sincere personal determination and an offer of reassurance for his brother.

“Sure is different.”

“Different but not bad – you heard grampa.”

Tommy nodded into the darkness.

Moments passed. Tommy spoke.

“I wonder why we’re here; you wonder that?”

“Yeah. I do. Grampa said he’d tell us when the right time came. We just have to trust him.”

“You don’t think he’s in trouble, do you?”

“I have to believe some sort of trouble is involved – not necessarily that he’s *in* it. You see what I mean?”

“Again, Tommy nodded. Evan couldn’t see, so repeated himself.

“You see what I mean?”

“Oh. Yeah. I see. Like a mystery.”

“Yeah. Like a mystery – but one that will turn out just fine.”

“Trouble and grampa just don’t seem to go together,” Tommy said after giving his brother’s words more careful thought.

“I know. Like he said, he’d tell us in due time.”

“No, he said when the time was right.”

It was Samuel’s turn to smile into the darkness. Tommy was a stickler for details and his plus-size brain conspired with him to keep everybody on his toes. He took comfort in knowing exactly how things were or were about to be or, most challenging for those around him, how things *should* be.

They turned onto their sides and let quiet thoughts ready them for sleep. Tommy’s drifted toward Jake’s wonderful shop and the time machine he was determined to construct; Evan’s toward Josephine – the beautiful girl who had made her entrance onto that stage, her lovely skin, the halo above her head, her sparkling eyes, who stood there in the sun’s special spotlight beside the door at the store of satin and lace, in the magical, Biblical village, of Gilead. Each was satisfied with the turn his head had taken. Sleep was easily upon them.

The following morning found Tommy alongside Samuel in his brother’s bed. Neither recalled the transfer. Neither had any particular feelings about it. Just one of those things that happened from time to time – a bad dream maybe, lonely feelings perhaps,

possibly an unexpected chill. There was no mention of it.

After breakfast, Joel, from up the hill, stopped by and asked 'Evan' to go fishing. He knew a good hole a half mile on downstream from the mill. He even brought a can of worms and an extra pole. Few things in backwoods Arkansas could be more friendly between guys than sharing your can of worms. Grampa gave him the nod.

Ollie had decided to climb the path again and make an effort to meet Strom – or in lieu of that, determine if such a thing were possible for a lowly outsider like himself.

Tommy decided to remain at the mill. It was his intention to become familiar with every nook and cranny of the building before the others returned. Being on the top floor, he began his adventure there. It was generally disappointing – six rooms sparsely furnished with leave-behinds and the few things his grampa had brought along. Each room had a natural gas heater for deep winter warmth. Jake had explained there was a natural gas well on their property. In addition to the heaters, it also fired the kitchen stove and the water heater – apparently a rarity there in rural Arkansas.

The property boasted a drilled well and pump house, another rarity in those parts.

There was a wooden crate under his grampa's bed – twelve inches by fifteen inches by twenty-four inches. He was certain it had not come with them on the truck. He really wanted to open it and discover the contents. He decided against that – it wasn't his to mess with. The urge, however, would remain like a fiery itch on that part of his upper back that had to remain unserved because he could never quite reach it.

He proceeded down to the second floor. For all the room, it was unused – one huge open space with several 10 X 10 upright support posts spread at twelve-foot intervals along the length of the center. Perhaps he would claim it as a place to roller skate or

ride his bike. The high beams offered potential adventures akin to the best climbing trees. In bad weather he could see himself pitching a tent and having a reasonably good campout in front of one of the four fireplaces. Maybe he'd just move down there away from Samuel. Probably not. He could count on one hand the number of times in his life he had slept further than three yards away from him.

The first floor was the business end of the mill. There was the large saw and the table onto which logs were secured. It rolled along tracks and moved the logs through the circular blade. It clearly used several sizes of blades. None was installed, but on the wall hung six – one no more than ten inches in diameter, and the largest, four feet if an inch. It would take time to learn about running it. Grampa had already made it off limits to both him and Samuel unless he or Jake was with them.

Tommy fell to his knees and scooped up hands full of fresh sawdust letting it trickle through his fingers. He wondered about that – *fresh* sawdust at a mill that had set unused for most of a year. At least that was how he remembered his grampa describing it during the journey down from the north. Another mystery.

A portion of the adjacent outside wall folded back for easy access to the saw. There was a ramp for the trucks and a block and tackle on a swinging arm to assist in lifting and positioning the logs. Much of the first floor was taken up by the drying room with dozens of open, floor to ceiling, shelves on which the freshly cut wood lay to give up its moisture. The area was mostly empty. There were two large exhaust fans in the east wall and vents all around to allow air to be drawn inside. Rather ingenious, he thought. It might be a good place to sleep on those still, hot summer nights Arkansas was known for.

The mechanism that intrigued him the most was the complex arrangement of wooden, disk and peg gears, driven by the waterwheel below. It could be engaged to power the fans as

well as the saw. Probably other things, too. If his observation was accurate, there was a massive electric generator powered by the wheel. Just how it was used he had no clue. Perhaps it had lit the building before electric lines had been strung into that area. Perhaps it was back-up. Perhaps it lit the second floor so the rats and possums could throw inter-cultural, get to know each other mixers. That had been worth more than a simple chuckle.

In the north west corner of the floor – opposite Jake’s place and the shop – he found a door with a large iron ring used to lift one side. Being Tommy, he raised it – no small task for a boy his size. The area beneath was dark and dank and cool – a basement or crawl space of some kind. Without a flashlight or lantern there was no reason to enter. He would return another time with the proper equipment. Perhaps it led to a tunnel, which led to a cave, which housed a gold mine guarded by a scarlet-colored, three-headed dragon. More likely, a ladder that led down to the water wheel.

It was nearly eleven. Back upstairs, he found himself torn between whipping up a batch of sandwiches and a pot of chili for lunch or returning to that wooden crate under grampa’s bed. Perhaps, he could attend to both.

There was ham salad in the refrigerator and a head of lettuce. He rowed up ten slices of bread, draped each with a large lettuce leaf, and spread on a good-sized dollop of ham salad. He topped each with a second slice of bread and, voila – enough to feed the three of them plus Joel if he stayed for lunch. He transferred them onto a tray, covered them in wax paper wrap, and put the tray in the refrigerator.

He emptied four cans of chili into a large pan, turned the burner on low and popped the lid in place. He couldn’t understand why the other two complained about having to make meals. It was a snap and it proved an opportunity to show off his fantastic dance steps in the process.



Although he had no way of knowing when his people would return, he allowed his curiosity to convince him that he had time for a quick peek inside the mysterious crate.

He knelt beside the bed, lifted back the quilt, and pulled the crate toward him. It was heavy and took some effort and back-and-forthing. Rather than being nailed shut, like he expected, one side was hinged. There was a cabinet handle on the other side – a door. He opened it without hesitating.

“A radio!”

It was a shortwave radio with dials, knobs, a microphone, a telegraph key, a speaker, an antenna that could be extended to multiple lengths, and a wire box enclosing and protecting a dozen large vacuum tubes plugged into a metal base. There was a battery as well as an electrical cord. A small, spiral, notebook hung on a hook. It contained phone numbers and what was certainly a code – he had a *Captain Midnight* decoder ring so felt expert regarding such things.

His initial curiosity satisfied, he closed it and pushed it back under the bed to what he hoped was its original spot. He pulled down the quilt and smoothed it out the way he had found it. He had his answer, but it had spawned a dozen questions.

He wouldn't confront his grampa about it – not at that time, anyway. Would he tell Samuel? Not until he had given the matter some serious thinking. The main questions, of course, were why would his grampa suddenly have acquired a short-wave radio and for what purpose, and why would he choose to keep it secret from them? Of one thing he was quite sure; it looked exactly like the radios used by the Nazi spies in the Saturday afternoon movies at the Plaza Theater. They always had names like Schultz and Koch and Waggoner.

“Oh, my!”

What he felt was well beyond uneasy. That quickly morphed into flat out, heart pumping, fear and uncertainty. A few

tears appeared. He had no idea why. Upon hearing someone begin climbing the stairs, he jumped up and rushed to dry his cheeks on his shirt. What was that about curiosity killing the overly inquisitive ten-year-old boy – or something like that?

The door opened.

“Hey, grampa!”

He did his best to ooze nonchalance. Seldom was that a good thing, his grampa had learned.

“Hey, yourself.”

They shared a hug. They always shared hugs upon coming and going. Tommy’s usually lasted four seconds, Samuel’s two. That one lasted six, adding to grampa’s suspicion something was up. He didn’t mention it.

“Did you get to meet the old Strom guy?”

“No, but I spent time with his son, Eric. A nice young man; also, a staunch defender of his father and his rules. They seem harsh to an outsider, but those living here understand if you follow them, you’ll have a pretty good life. Basically, Strom just doesn’t allow current day social trends or 20<sup>th</sup> Century ideas to erode what he believes are the fundamental truths that help men be their best. I’ll go into it in more detail, later. Is that chili I smell?”

“Sure is – Mrs. Hormel and I have things under control. Sandwiches, too. Enough if Joel wants to stay for lunch.”

“You don’t seem to be confident their fishing trip will be successful.”

Tommy went for the shrug not wanting to put down his big brother before he knew it was warranted.

“As I descended the path, I saw them making their way back along the creek. Lots of pushing and shoving so I assumed they were having a good time. Couldn’t see what they might be bringing with them. Nice of you to think of him – Joel – for lunch.”

“That presents a humorous image, grampa: Joel on a spit over an open fire – ‘having him for lunch’. Get it?”

“Oh, yes, and I do see some humor in it – morbid, sick and questionable, but humorous.”

What better assessment could a ten-year-old boy ask for?

Soon, there was raucous laughter approaching the building – teen boys were clearly on their way. Grampa hoped it represented the beginning of a good friendship for Samuel. It was what Oliver felt the most guilt over – having removed his grandsons from their life-long friends.

The single set of feet two-stepping it up the steps signaled there would only be three for lunch.

“Hey, men,” Samuel said upon entry. “I smell chili. Hope there’s a gallon. I’m starved.”

“You are always starved, big brother and if it were cricket stew you’d still hope for a gallon. Have a good time with the new kid?”

“A great time. Joel’s a really neat guy – lots of fun. I get the idea he isn’t allowed to have much fun up in Gilead. A religious something or other once you reach a certain age, best as I can figure. I let him keep everything we caught.”

His grin and words gave up the actual story. Tommy and grampa understood. A clever attempt at covering up the unfruitful outing. That really had not been the purpose, anyway.

They moved into the kitchen where they filled bowls, plates and glasses and returned to the table. Samuel held forth for some time – partly about the stream and woods and fishing but mostly about Joel and what he had learned about the people.

“I’ll fill you in more later,” he said reaching for his third sandwich.

Tommy wondered if anybody was ever going to get around to tell him what they had learned about the people in Gilead.

He didn’t dwell on that. There was a big something else that had suddenly taken center stage. He wasn’t used to keeping secrets – well, not huge ones like that. He wasn’t used to not

having willing ears and advice he could call on to help him cope with such things. It was a new kind of separateness – loneliness. He had observed recently that when he was into something he shouldn't have been, loneliness always crept in upon him – like a built-in caution or punishment or something. He had been reading about it – recently dubbed the super-ego – known as the conscience to the less well-read peasants of the world.

“You’ve been quiet this noon,” his grampa said. “You feeling alright?”

Tommy straightened up and unrolled his grin.

“I just decided not to compete with brother motormouth. I’ll take my turn once he shuts up and returns to his private fantasies about smooching up Josephine.”

“OUCH!”

*Somebody* got kicked under the table.

### CHAPTER THREE Sartorial Splendor?

“How about a road trip this afternoon to *Becker’s Crossing* in search of some things to complete and spruce up our new home?”

“I’m up for it,” Tommy said.

“Sure, me too.”

“Of course, we had really planned to spend the rest of the day slaving over our schoolbooks,” Tommy added – puppy dog eyes, pout, tilted head.

“Great. Bring the books along.”

They seldom got the best of their grampa. They each took one just in case he might have been serious. They were soon underway. In Illinois, most roads ran straight as arrows across the level prairies and met at clean, right angles. It soon became clear that in northwest Arkansas there were no such things as straight roads. Appropriately, Tommy believed, the road to the Crossings, crossed and re-crossed the creek three times. It took him five minutes to stop chuckling. It took thirty minutes to cover the fifteen miles in the truck.

Jake had given Ollie the names of stores they would need

to visit to hasten the ordeal of shopping. Although a small town, it serviced a large rural area so had more businesses than they had expected.

“A movie theater,” Tommy said, pointing. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

Samuel pointed to the sign suggesting it was only open on Saturdays – four showings, nine, twelve, three and seven. It also reminded patrons that to find out what would be showing next, one should ‘ring up’ Mable, the telephone operator. Apparently, she served multiple functions.

After two hours of a no nonsense, male-style, shopping blitz, they had filled the truck from Ollie’s list and found a number of books at *Sally’s Secondhand* store. Tommy’s take was that most of her merchandise was at least *Seventhhand*. He thought it was hilarious. The others let him enjoy it. He did. Sammy had to wonder just how any fifth-grade teacher coped with a room full of ten-year-olds. Somehow, he had forgotten.

They dropped off the books at the truck and Oliver pointed across the street – *Mary’s Cafe*. Ollie liked the idea that people were willing to put their names on their businesses – it was like taking responsibility for the quality of their products or services up front.

“No kids around,” Tommy observed.

“They probably have a school here,” Samuel suggested.

Tommy nodded, accepting the suggestion without offering his usual list of possible exceptions.

They crossed the street – paved in cement just like Jake had promised.

“So, supper or treats?” Samuel asked, not really caring, just setting his head for what to expect.

“How about this time we make it hamburgers with all the trimmings *and* dessert?”

It had not really been a question but set things on course.

Inside, they were presented with a long narrow room, white walls with red trim. Along one side was a counter and eight, time-worn, stools – the grill behind it. Along the other sat six, small, four-chair, tables decked out in red and white gingham. Around the room, near the ceiling, ran a shelf, which held dozens of toy vehicles – cars, trucks, tractors, trains. Once the order was placed, Tommy roamed the room looking at them. He could identify many by name and model and, often, year. As has been indicated, the boy entered the world with an exceptional brain and a thirst for packing it ‘plumb’ full – a new word for Tommy from the local vocabulary.

Smalltalk consumed their time as they enjoyed what they agreed were excellent fixin’s – another new term for them. The boys hadn’t known a double cheeseburger even existed and the idea of unlimited French fries and free Coke refills was mind-boggling. Sammy would happily live there.

“Even A-1 grease, I’d say,” Tommy added slicking up his plate with the last bit of bun.

They topped things off with Mary’s own *Mixed Bary* pie – straight from the handwritten menu. Samuel added ice cream, Tommy took it plain, Ollie set aside the top crust.

Sammy rated the place as Triple A and voiced the hope they would be back often.

Back at the truck, Samuel offered a concern.

“See that husky man in the green shirt sitting by the monument in the park?”

It had mostly been directed at his grampa.

“I’ve noticed. Where are you going with it?”

“I’d say he’s been following us. Come to think of it, that might have been his car that followed us from the Mill.”

“I suppose other people have a right to use the road and sit in the park,” Ollie came back.

“I guess. Just seems funny he showed up near all the

stores we've visited and doesn't have a package to show for it."

"And what was it you had to show for your outing to Joel's fishing hole?"

"Okay. Point made and taken. That is really a hideous shade of green he's wearing."

"It's already been a big day for you, hasn't it?" Ollie said, smiling.

"I don't get it."

"Well, fisherman, shopper, private detective, food critic, and now reviewer of sartorial splendor."

A shrug.

Chuckles.

Samuel guessed that 'sartorial' had something to do with clothes.

Tommy had to admit that Samuel also had a pretty fine shrug – a genetic, Waggoner shrug, perhaps.

The mere thought of that last name returned Tommy to a state of uneasiness, which was compounded by his grampa's baffling requirement that while in Arkansas, they reject it and go by the name, Anderson. The old gentleman's explanation notwithstanding, something was up, and it just couldn't be a good 'up', whatever it might be.

Tommy's thoughts returned to the radio and a related matter that kept eating at him. Their grampa had taught them that keeping secrets, unwisely, was akin to lying and was the first step down the path to predictable calamity. Life for the youngest Waggoner/Anderson was suddenly out of whack – and Tommy consistently strove for 'quality whack'.

The purchases to outfit their new life had set the dividing line between the old days and the new days. The finality of the realization fell upon them with some degree of sadness. The return trip reeked of silence. The boys pretended to read. Without having spoken about it, the brothers understood there would need



to be a serious talk between them in the very near future.

They unloaded the purchases and set them in place. Just like that, the big empty third floor all came together – home.

“Who’d a thought?” Tommy said walking from room to room and touching each thing that was theirs. “All of a sudden it feels right.”

Samuel nodded. In his opinion, his new mattress was far and away the best purchase – the only one other than, perhaps, the raspberry swirl ice cream that really mattered.

Grampa sighed and smiled, relieved at his grandsons’ reactions. He couldn’t ask for finer young men to share his life, and above all else he wanted it to be grand for them.

“Can we go exploring, grampa – note the implied comma before *grampa*, get it, and what it would mean without it?”

It induced hysterical, tummy holding, laughter on Tommy’s part.

After the moment required to, ‘get it’, the other’s chuckled, verifying his contention that he was the king of comedy within the family.

Ollie and Samuel had to wonder if, when they chuckled with the lad like that, that he understood they were actually reacting to *his* reaction rather than the ‘humor’. Regardless, it brought them great pleasure.

“Back to my question about exploration; I’m asking because we really haven’t got to get to know the lay of the land around here yet.”

Ollie looked at his watch.

“Seems reasonable. Try to get home by six, okay? And stay together.”

It had been one of grampa’s expectations/questions. It really meant, ‘if you are not back by six, I will begin to worry’. They would not want that.

It had all been an excuse, anyway. They needed to talk

privately. They moved on down the slope to the well-worn path that followed the creek – *Blue Creek*, Samuel had learned from Joel. Their mill was known locally as the *Blue Creek Mill*. Tommy knelt and moved his hand through the water.

“Too cold for a swim,” he reported.

They found a large stone outcropping on which to perch. It remained warm from a day in the sun. It overlooked the stream and allowed an open path for them to see through to the horizon on to the west. They sat facing east, however, avoiding the sun in their eyes and allowing the waning warmth to engage their backs. The water offered up its soothing, splashy, sounds. Samuel had shed his shirt, believing he needed to get a tan and catch up with Joel. During their time together, his new friend had commented on it – was that pasty look common in Chicago?’ It hadn’t been mean; just a legitimate question about the mysterious, far off *Land of Chicago* and its people.

Tommy couldn’t be bothered by such things, especially in the coolness of the breeze that followed the deepening shadow down the hill that afternoon. He had not yet been ‘inflicted’ with the need to do dumb stuff just to look slick [cool]. By his calculation, that was still some three years away.

Perceptive young Tommy had such things figured out. It didn’t mean he understood them; just that some things in life – reasonable or not – followed clearly inevitable paths – many of them harboring the sole purpose of destroying childhood.

Tommy began by baring his concerns.

“So, have you come up with any better idea about what’s going on with grampa?”

“Not really. Whatever it is, it involves us, too. This, Anderson thing is just one of a long list. I’m sure it has to do with keeping us all safe.”

“But safe from what?”

“I have no idea. We know Chicago is filled with bad guys,

but I can't imagine how grampa could have got mixed up with them."

"I know – and that should have been 'gotten', not 'got'. A guy doesn't secretly run away from a *city* though – he runs away from *somebody*."

Samuel caught his brother's glance and nodded. Tommy often had a way of delivering the most reasonable bottom line, and Samuel had no difficulty acknowledging it.

"What I can't understand is why he won't tell us," Samuel said.

"Has to be that *knowing something* has the potential for harming us or putting us in further danger, don't you think?"

"Interesting. Makes sense. Leaves us with the same question, though – what?"

"What or why – slightly different."

Again, Samuel nodded. He slapped across his chest at his sides as if hugging himself for warmth."

"Doofus! Put your shirt on. No girls here to impress. You can lay by the window on the floor inside the mill and work on your tan there at home. Huh! I just referred to it as home. That has to be a good thing, doesn't it?"

Samuel offered that tentative nod one offered when not in wholehearted agreement but not wanting to offend the speaker.

It was not a question. It was a flat-out conclusion.

Putting on an air of reluctance, Samuel crawled back into his pullover as if merely acquiescing to his brother's suggestion. My, it felt good, though!

"Interesting how cool it gets down here the minute you find yourself in the shade," he offered partly as an excuse and partly as fact.

"I'll look into that with a thermometer later," Tommy offered fully sincere in his intent. "It *is* interesting, though. Back to the mystery. I have another piece of the puzzle I think I need to share

with you.”

“Oh? Something new? What?”

Samuel seemed surprised and pivoted so he was looking directly at Tommy as they sat there, legs crossed, ‘Indian style’. He had been prepared to rehash old stuff but hadn’t expected new stuff.

“Okay. Here goes. While you and grampa were gone this morning, I was looking around inside the building.”

“Snooping, you mean.”

“I prefer, exploring. Did Lewis and Clark go snooping. No. They went exploring. Anyway, I spotted an unfamiliar crate under grampa’s bed.”

“Unfamiliar?”

“One I’m sure we didn’t bring along with us. About so big. Unpainted except for some white, stenciled markings that I didn’t attempt to remember. Wish I had. That poses obvious questions – how did it get here, for one?”

“Anyway, I pulled it out and opened it up – has a door on the front. It wasn’t locked, just fastened closed with a cabinet fastener on the inside.”

“Door?”

“Hinged along the left side. Handle on the other. The way things were arranged inside it was plain which was up, and which was down.”

“Ok. What *things* were arranged?”

“The components of a radio – a shortwave radio – like spies use.”

“Sounds like a tale from a ten-year-old’s imagination.”

“You will change that tune once you see it. You’ve seen the radios in the spy movies. It’s like them. Could have fallen right off the screen at the Plaza during the showing of, “*Watson Rousts the Nazis*”. You remember that one?”

Samuel nodded and shrugged, continuing as if he hadn’t

earlier offered his skepticism about it all.

“Shortwave?”

“Yeah. Lots of big tubes – powerful I’m thinking – maybe a dozen – all of them a lot bigger than in our radio. A big speaker and headphones and a half-dozen dials. A telegraph key, a tuner and an extendible antenna – it probably pulls out to six or eight feet for really long-distance operation. A six-volt storage battery – like a car battery – for portability, and an electrical cord for sustained use. The whole thing is heavy – more than thirty-five pounds with the battery. I could slide it but I’m sure I couldn’t lift it.”

“That *would* be a mystery. Anything else?”

Before responding, Tommy offered himself a satisfying, quick, smile. Once again, through his unfailing powers of persuasion, his brother had become a believer.

“Yeah. A small spiral notebook – one of those three by five-inch jobbers with a black cover. It had handwritten stuff in it – printed, actually – carefully printed. On the inside of the cover was like a Captain Midnight code – a substitution code – A = F, D = W, and like that. Not very sophisticated for spies, I have to admit that.”

“What do you think it means?”

“Can’t be sure, but it is really suspicious to find a Nazi spy’s shortwave radio under our grampa *Waggoner’s* bed.”

“What makes you think it’s Nazi?”

“Two things: at the top of the code were the words, *Code Vier* – *vier* means *four* in German. ‘Code’ is the same as in English. Then there are the movies, like I said.”

“You can’t believe grampa is a spy?”

Tommy folded his arms across his chest and didn’t answer. Presently, Samuel broke the uncomfortable silence.

“I’ll tell you this, little brother, if none of this is true, at least you’ll have yourself one great spy mystery to get published someday.”

Tommy grinned. He'd take a compliment from Samuel anyway it came.

"So, what should we do? Tell grampa?" Samuel asked.

"It's under *his* bed. Don't you suppose he knows it's there?"

"Yeah. A dumb remark. What then?"

"Don't know. I'm thinking we could put a hair on the door of the radio and later if we find it's gone, we'll know that it's been used."

"Okay, but I'm not sure what *that* will tell us."

"That it's been used, dumb head."

"But what does that *really* tell us? Maybe the rats come up at night and call their relatives in Miami."

Tommy smiled at the humor. Truth be told, he wished he'd have been the one who delivered that line.

"We told grampa we'd trust him on this," Samuel said.

"We told him we'd trust him about the move and the new last name. I didn't hear anything about a shortwave, Nazi, radio."

"You are nitpicking, little bro. Can't pick and choose what to trust and what not to trust."

"I suppose. I've been accused of that before. Where do *you* think we should go with it?"

"Let's sit on it a while. He wouldn't have the radio if it wasn't in some way necessary, do you think?"

"I've never questioned *that*. Do, you really don't suppose there is any chance grampa is a Nazi spy."

"Of course not," Samuel said. "That's crazy. You got any evidence?"

"Sort of. For one thing, I know he has been sending more letters to Germany the past few months and a couple that came to the house bore German stamps – *Deutschland Uber Alles* – plain as day. That's like their motto – Germany Over All."

"There could be lots of reasons for the letters. Maybe a relative died or something. You are a born worrier, little bro."

“Better *that*, I suppose, than a born *loser*.”

It had been a meaningless, loose, connection, offered for whatever humor it might possess, but Samuel followed up, seriously.

“You are definitely *not* a born loser. Didn’t mean to imply that, if I did. Neither is grampa and believe me, Nazi’s *are* losers. A few kids back at school felt me out about it – they had a club. Scary. Everybody in school knew they were losers. Should be a law against them and their goose stepping, stiff arming, worshiping at the feet of the swastika.”

“Surprisingly well stated, Big Brother, even if I must destroy the concept. You are talking about taking away their right to free speech. Take that from *them*, and we have no right to demand *ours*.”

“This is no time to be sensible. If we get into the war, I might have to go over there and fight in it. Can’t you just see me shooting somebody!”

“I had not considered that. How scary. Maybe *that’s* why grampa brought us here – so the government won’t be able to find you.”

“You do have a way of weaving interesting, if foolish, fantasies. I’m sure it is some other reason, but I have no idea what.”

“What do we know?” Tommy asked, setting things up for a methodical think through. Grampa is German – he was born there. His relatives fought for the Germans in the World War [WWII]. He suddenly uproots us from our life-long home – well, almost life-long. We end up here on the edge of nowhere. A radio beats us here in a wooden crate. He makes a big secret of it all. We have to change our last name. I’ll even add in that suspicious man in the green shirt – and, I agree, it was an atrocious shade. What else?”

“One thing about it tells me he has been planning ahead for

something like this for a long time,” Samuel said.

“Really? What’s that?”

“The checks he wrote today had the name Oliver Anderson with *the mill’s* address on them. It was a Chicago bank. It wasn’t just on any middle of the night momentary whim that he pulled us out of the city. If not specifically planned, at least he was well prepared for the possibility it might have to happen.”

“Wow. Well put, again. Eerie, if not more than a little mysterious/strange/peculiar/scary/frightening. It sounds like you’re accepting the things I said.”

“Mostly, I suppose. I hold onto the basic fact, however.”

“And that is?”

“That none of this sounds like the grampa we’ve known all our lives.”

Tommy nodded. They sat in silence for some time turning to watch the sun dissolve below the hilly horizon.

“We better get home,” Samuel said at last.

They slipped off the big rock and headed back up the trail toward the Mill.

Tommy, following Samuel, spoke, softly.

“Don’t look, but something is moving parallel with us about twenty yards to our right – back in the thicket. Size of a man, I’m thinking.”

“Okay. Let’s just gradually pick up our pace,” Samuel said. “The mill is no more than a hundred yards from here.”

Those pesky tears dampened Tommy’s face again. His plan had been for them to stop doing that when he turned ten. He would have a talk with himself later. Samuel’s heart pounded. They both began breathing hard for no obvious reason. Tommy believed it could have been Mr. Greenshirt, since it was impossible to make out the form in any detail – green camouflage in among the evergreen bushes.

They charged up the final ten yards to the north door and



locked themselves inside. They watched out the window for several minutes but saw nobody. They took the elevator upstairs and allowed themselves a minute to calm down before entering the hall.

“Right on time. Thank you, boys. This, *everything being new thing*, is hard on all three of us.”

“For what it’s worth, grampa, we are not planning to get lost, drown, or fall off a cliff, so take solace in that. Of course, Samuel may end up getting married.”

The remark had been Tommy’s.

The knuckles had been Samuel’s.

“Thought we’d just graze for supper,” Ollie said. “Milk and juice in the refrigerator. Chips, makings for sandwiches, that gallon of ice cream we purchased at the Crossings, and a strawberry-rhubarb pie a girl and her big sister brought by while you were gone.”

“Josephine?” Samuel asked, perking up beyond reason.

“That’s what they led me to believe.”

“I didn’t know Josephine had a big sister.”

“Josephine *was* the big sister. It was my impression that young Carol Jean brought it mainly for Tommy.”

“Ah! Loverboy, Tom. Those hormones kicking in early?”

Tommy chased him around the room spewing the most vile, terrible, insults he could think of – “Stop that, or else!”

At ten, a guy committed to civility, had few options.

Ollie made no move to intervene, fully enjoying the horse play. Tommy was in over his head but that just came with being the younger one. In life everybody was always over his head in one way or another. It would provide useful lessons.

“Soup kitchen closes in fifteen minutes if either of you wants to partake,” Ollie announced.

Still miffed, Tommy gave in first. Their grampa enjoyed watching them put away the food and noted the younger one had

upped his intake considerably the past month or so. A growth spurt was clearly in progress. That would soon require new clothes. He'd keep watch. In due course, he brought the Strawberry Swirl to the table with three bowls, a scoop, two spoons and saltines. Tommy ate ice cream with crackers instead of a spoon. He liked the salt and sweet together."

"Saving the pie for later on tonight," Samuel observed. "Good plan, grampa. Did Josephine ask about me?"

"With her eyes, I suppose. She peered around the room and such."

"Did she seem disappointed I wasn't here."

"In my experience, Son, it is not a male's lot to know the mind of a woman?"

Grampa wasn't about to get involved in trying to read the thoughts of a teenage female.

"So, you think I'm safe from Carol Jean?" Tommy asked taking his clue from things his grampa had said.

So much for the early hormone theory.

Ignoring his brother's question, Sammy went on.

"Can I go into town – Gilead – tomorrow?"

"I suppose. I caution you about getting involved in a romantic triangle, son. We have no idea how they might deal with such things down here. I just imagine quickly, directly, and without sparing any compassion for the interloper."

"I'll be fine. I've dealt with guys, before."

Ollie raised his eyebrows and offered a long sigh. He understood that some necessary lessons in life had to be more painful than others.

The details seemed to go over Tommy's head. Just as well, the other two thought.

The following morning found Samuel in his boxers in front of the dresser mirror, all quite upbeat – humming, shadow boxing, all those things that indicated life was good for a fifteen-year-old

boy.

“That’s the third time you’ve combed your hair this morning, big brother and you’re not even dressed yet. You’re going to wear it out – the way grampa did, I presume. What’s the deal?”

“In the first place, it’s *my* deal and in the second, it’s not *your* deal.”

Tommy raised his hands in front of him, palms out.

“Okay. Okay. Your business. I get it. May I just reiterate grampa’s caution.”

“Re-what?”

“*Reinforce* – how’s that?”

“Worry warts – the two of you – worry warts.”

The boys dressed. Grampa had flap jacks ready. Conversation flowed primarily between Tommy and his grampa. Samuel was fully focused on eating, plainly eager to get on his way.

“What time shall I be home?” he asked, wiping his mouth on his napkin and standing.”

“How about eleven.”

Samuel nodded.

“He means eleven this *morning*,” Sammy. “Have somebody call us if I need to come up with a wheelbarrow, collect your parts and bring them home.”

It was Tommy’s helpful offer. Apparently, the conversation had *not* gone over his head and he wouldn’t let a little thing like them not having a phone get in the way of wonderful joke.

Samuel took his dishes to the kitchen and left.

He hurried up the path slowing at the top, putting on his best casual look. He took his time crossing the open area to the general store thinking he would purchase an apple and then sit out front eating it while he assessed what was what – Tommy’s surprisingly appropriate phrase.

One *what* seemed to be Josephine and the second *what*

seemed to be her boyfriend – Matthew.

Unlike before, there were people going about their business – in and out of stores, kids playing chase around the well, old men chatting on benches, a few men picking up their horses from the livery, apparently having plans to be elsewhere for the day. There were few vehicles in Gilead.

At the point where Samuel/Even had nothing left but the stem and the overworked core, a young man approached him from up the street that led to the houses. Samuel remained seated and set the apple leavings aside. The boy sat down beside him – two yards or so to his right, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. No friendly hand was offered for a shake. He gave Evan a quick sideways glance and returned to staring at the ground.

Samuel nodded.

The boy spoke.

“My name is Matthew Adams – Josephine Carter’s intended. Just thought you’d want to have that information.”

“Thank you. You have a most attractive girlfriend.”

“She’s my fiancé not my girlfriend.”

“I see. You are engaged, then.”

“Well, not officially.”

“No ring?”

The question clearly had no meaning for Matthew. Like grampa had said, traditions were likely different down there.

“Where I come from until a girl publicly agrees to marry a guy, she’s available to play the field – talk with other guys.”

“Not here. She’s mine.”

His initial, more or less, cordial tone began to waver. It hadn’t really seemed genuine from the outset. He turned his head and looked Evan in the eyes. Evan spoke his question.

“Has she agreed to that?”

“Not in so many words, but everybody in Gilead has knowed since we was kids we was gonna get married.”

Matthew stood up. Samuel stood up. Samuel thought the conversation – tripping along on a logical basis as it had – was going well, so he continued.

“I see. Okay, then. I’m glad we’ve had this talk, Matthew. I will be interested in hearing what Josephine has to say about these things. If her story is like yours, then, of course, I’ll back off. If not, we will see how things develop. Can you tell me where I might find her?”

Later, Samuel would regret he had uttered that final thought out loud.

As the great, teen boy, fist fights of history went, that one would not be in contention. A left and a right and a left and a right and Samuel found himself looking up from the ground wondering why he was smelling dirt, why the sky was swirling, why Matthew suddenly looked so tall and thin and why there were two of him.”

When his head began to clear, it was her face he saw looking down into his. He would not remember the words she was saying or even that she had cleaned his bruised and bleeding face with water from the well. For some hours, he wouldn’t even remember the painful encounter.

Joel and Zeek assisted him and his rubber legs down the hill. Tommy, binoculars in hand, had been waiting from the vantage point of the top step at the mill, assuming the worst would happen. Apparently, it had. As the three boys came into sight, he called through the open door to his grampa in the living room.

“Prepare for incoming, grampa – bleeding, hurting, blood-spitting, stupid, incoming. Are you absolutely sure there is no way to force my hormones to cease and desist? I’ll forfeit my allowance. Heck, I’ll start giving *you* an allowance!”

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### Ouch!

During the following several weeks, Samuel recovered to make a fool of himself another day. Ollie and Jake spent time with the saw. Jake gave him high marks after he had wreaked solo havoc on two good sized tree trunks producing a variety of dimensional cuts. Tommy had been correct; the sawdust smelled wonderful. It was a toss-up between oak and pine; grampa favored oak – Tommy, pine. He considered packing his grampa’s pipe to see if he could improve on the aroma. Carol Jean was proving to be a persistent thorn in the youngster’s side. In her attempt to win his heart, she even presented him with a frog in a Mason jar – holes punched in the brass-colored, metal lid – *such* fervor.

Samuel and Joel became close. Tommy and Zeek became close. Ollie and Strom had several short get-togethers. If they weren’t careful, they might become cordial. Mr. Greenshirt had not resurfaced. The boys let the issues surrounding the radio alone. Tommy did, however, determine that the hair he had arranged remained in place. They continued with their studies, using the books from their former school and several they had picked up

while at the Crossings. Life, though not Eden, perhaps, *had* definitely taken a good turn for all of them.

Grampa was relieved. Samuel nursed his ego and was generally content to go with the flow. Tommy grinned his way along, remained on high alert for braids and glasses, and remained marginally skeptical about the prospect of living out his youth among a group of folks who based their lives on myth and opinion and seemed fearful of facts *and* leery of the purveyors of those facts – the facts that discomforted them in relation to their blindly held beliefs.

\* \* \*

Tommy was aware of it. He didn't mention it to his grampa. He didn't confront his brother about it. Samuel had been leaving the Mill at one a.m. and returning at three. Tommy figured stupid was as stupid did and suspected Josephine was involved. He hoped the Matt kid didn't find out or he believed his brother's very survival might be at stake. It had become a worrisome concern.

After a month, those nightly excursions stopped. Tommy was relieved and returned to his former, mostly upbeat, self. Samuel, on the other hand, was blue/down/depressed. He stuck close to home, moped around, and sighed a lot. Teen angst! Never a good thing for anybody within two houses in any direction of the youngster. Grampa tended to write it off to the age and spent time painting – few pinks and yellows – lots of blacks and browns.

Early one morning, two months from the day they had arrived, Joel showed up with information about recent goings on in Gilead and had a message for Ollie from Strom. With some initial hesitancy, he joined them at the table and proceeded to match Samuel/Evan bite for bite, as he shared their breakfast of flapjacks, ham, and eggs – milk, coffee, juice, toast, grits and hash browns. Grampa understood about feeding growing boys. It brought back happy memories for him. It flat-out baffled Tommy –



perhaps teen boys developed several stomachs like cows. He figured that would be a mooving experience and giggled himself onto the floor.

Joel addressed Ollie.

“Strom would like to see you about what he calls an urgent matter.”

He turned to Samuel/Evan.

“Did you hear about Matthew?”

“Haven’t had the opportunity to hear anything from up there recently.”

“Strom ordered him caned for what he did to you.”

“Caned? I don’t understand the term.”

“Beat on his rear quarters with a cane. Terribly painful. Shreds your pants and puts gashes into the skin. Reserved for the worst offenses. Got six swats – four is typical. He passed out after four and had to be revived to take the rest. Was in bed for three days recovering.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yeah. I’m sure Matthew can verify *that*.”

“You don’t seem to have any concern for him.”

“Matthew is a horrible human being. In Gilead people get what they deserve. Most of us have a real good life, because we earn it – deserve it; all our needs are met, and we are safe and comfortable. We each have our jobs to do, so we feel productive and a necessary part of the community. Matthew is like a rotten apple – spoils everything he touches. Strom’s been lenient with him since the day he was borned – we all seen that. He’s Strom’s nephew. His deal with you crossed the line. Gileads is good and peaceful people. If Matthew don’t rein himself in, he’ll get expelled from the town. That’s almost as bad a gettin’ expelled from the church.”

“Wow! I had no idea. I don’t know how to respond. My family doesn’t believe in corporal punishment.”

“Corporal punishment?”

“Punishment by administering physical pain.”

“Huh. That’s odd. Why would anybody behave if they didn’t know they’d be hurt if they didn’t?”

The question would have been best if characterized as rhetorical and let alone. Tommy couldn’t do that.

“You saying if it weren’t for the threat of punishment, you’d go on a crime spree?”

“Of course not.”

“Yes, you just *did* say that.”

“Hmm. I guess I did – sort a. It’s how I’ve been taught things worked.”

“Seems like an unnecessary sort of control for you – and for most of you Gileads from what I have seen.”

“That’s big stuff. Attacks the way we live. Wish you hadn’t said it.”

“You mean you wish I had let you remain ignorant about the facts?”

“Hmm. You’re confusing me.”

Ollie sensed Tommy’s comments had done damage. He tried to ease things, figuring they had already passed the point of patching them.

“Set punishment aside, Joel. Why do you think people should follow the rules and behave themselves?”

The boy gave it serious consideration for a long moment, then nodded and responded.

“If the rules are good ones, then following them makes life good for everybody. Not following them makes life bad for everybody. I guess that’s why – so everybody can have a good life.”

“We are with you in that. Therefore, we see no need to hurt each other within our family. We just all agree to follow our good and helpful rules for everybody’s benefit. They are not my rules;

they are all of our rules. When one of needs help staying within them, we offer help and suggestions and alternatives.”

Joel nodded, tentatively, clearly still confused. He carried away lots more than a full tummy (or, perhaps, five according to one perspective); new things to consider. Ollie’s family believed that was good and helpful as one sorted out life’s options so a person could grow and evolve. The people of Gilead did not – options were confusing. Straying, even in one’s imagination, was to be avoided for fear the old, established ways, might be discarded or at least distorted. The tradeoff seemed to be stagnation for enlightenment.

Grampa had been correct – the ways of these people were considerably different – both on the surface and deep down. Grampa would tolerate them. Samuel would do his best to ignore them. Tommy would allow them to fester inside him for just so long – then he would just have to confront them.

“Thanks for breakfast. I guess I better go,” Joel said. “Strom don’t allow conversations like this.”

He stood. Samuel stood. They walked together to the door and remained for some time talking just outside on the landing at the top of the stairs. Teen boys needed to talk with each other; Ollie understood that. It had not been Ollie’s intention for them to attack the community’s way of life. Tommy had just done what Tommy did – see what he figured was a philosophical or social fallacy and try to correct it. That had to be helpful, right? He would not be chastised for it – at home at least. There would, however, be a discussion about responsibility and tolerance and personal rights, even though his grampa understood he was on shaky ground when appearing to allow truth to be clouded by unverified lore and opinion.

Not wishing to aggravate the philosophic dilemma for Joel, Ollie waited a half hour before making the trip up the path, solo, to see Strom.

“Won’t be a pleasant meetin’,” Strom began.

They took seats on facing benches in front of Strom’s house.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I thought we had been getting on very well.”

“Not about that.”

He set Ollie’s contention of progress aside without agreeing or denying it. Ollie was intrigued.

“A knife has been stolen. Here in Gilead, things are not stolen – ever.”

“I’m sorry to hear about the theft. Are you requesting my help?”

“In a way, I suppose. One of our young men has accused your grandson, Evan, of stealing it.”

“And . . .”

“And, I intend to get to the bottom of it.”

“First, we will cooperate. Second, Evan never stole anything in his life. It is not our way. We work to improve the human condition, not damage it.”

“So you had led me to believe.”

“What leads you to the conclusion my grandson is the culprit?”

“The boy, here, said he witnessed the theft.”

“He witnessed it but just let it continue. Does that sound like the boy in question?”

Strom moved uncomfortably.

“Like him or not, he is a Gilead and I must believe him until shown otherwise.”

“That seems reasonable. What do you want me to do?”

“Allow a search of the Mill.”

“I can’t allow that. I *will* allow a search of Evan’s room with no forewarning.”

Strom looked away for a long moment.

“Since I have no authority on your property, I will take that offer – for the time being.”

“There will be no, ‘for the time being’ to it, Strom. One search with a representative from Gilead and me present. The end.”

He nodded.

“I will need to know Evan’s accuser, first.”

“I am his accuser.”

“Not good enough. It is not *your* integrity that is at stake here – it is the boy’s – the one who brought it up.”

He looked away again. Ollie was clearly holding all the cards.

“It was Matthew.”

“The boy who attacked Evan without provocation?”

“He has been punished for that. What he did was unforgivable. It was against our ways.”

“I should hope so. I understand he is your nephew.”

“That will not influence my investigation.”

“I believe you. You are a man of honor – that much I have learned during our several chats.”

Strom raised his head and looked Ollie in his eyes. He nodded and offered a weak smile – sort of. Ollie matched it with a nod.

“Ephron.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Ephron is a respected citizen of Gilead. No relative of Matthew. I propose he be my witness to the search – perform the search.”

“I will take your word for his impartiality – fairness.”

Ollie had learned that Strom was too proud to ask for clarification of unfamiliar words, but that he appreciated when it was offered.

“I suggest we undertake this search immediately,” Ollie

said.

“That seems wise.”

“I need a full description of the knife prior to the search – so Evan can’t be accused of stealing his own or his younger brother’s.”

Strom motioned to a boy sitting on the ground some distance away, whittling. He jumped to his feet and moved close. They spoke in low tones. Presently, he entered the house and, after a few moments, returned with a sheet of paper. Strom examined it, nodded, and handed it to Ollie.

“The advertisement from the paper – the one Matthew used to order it. Has a picture of the knife. You may keep it with you during the search.”

“Thank you. I assure you Evan has no such knife.”

“We will see.”

“Yes. We *will* see.”

Strom spoke to the boy again.

“Have Ephron come here, please.”

The boy trotted away. The two men sat in silence – an awkwardness suddenly arising between them. Before, it had been something more akin to tolerable contention but never awkward. The boy returned.

“He’s comin’.”

An unremarkable looking man in his forties, introduced as, Ephron, followed, shortly. He wore a closely trimmed beard, longish brown hair, and clothing in common with the other men. Strom explained the situation. He agreed to help as requested. Ollie understood a request from Strom was really a requirement.

Ollie stood and offered his hand to Strom who accepted it with some reluctance – no, more with *surprise* than reluctance. Ephron followed Ollie down the path. Neither felt comfortable conversing.

Tommy ran to meet them.

“Where is Evan?” his grampa asked.

“Up in our room reading. I was doing homework with a pair of sparrows on the top step until I saw you coming down the path. Who’s he?”

“Let’s go upstairs and I can make the introductions and explain a situation to you both at the same time.”

Tommy took point and led the way up the steps. Ephron followed him and Ollie brought up the rear. Inside the boys’ bedroom, Ollie spoke.

“These are my grandsons – Evan, we call him Samuel, and Tommy.”

“They call me, *Tommy*.”

He didn’t realize there was a serious matter at hand.

“Boys. This is Ephron from Gilead. Strom asked him to come and assist in an investigation. It seems Matthew has accused you, Samuel, of stealing his pocketknife. I have a picture of it here.”

He produced the newspaper clipping.

“I have agreed to let Ephron search this one room in the mill to see if the knife turns up. Do I hear any objections?”

The boys glanced at each other, offered twin shrugs, and shook their heads.

“Then I will ask the two of you to leave Ephron and me here to undertake the search. I assume neither of you knows anything about it that might hasten things.”

Again, shrugs. Again, they shook their heads showing dismay at the accusation. They understood it had not come from their grampa.

Ten minutes passed while the man conducted a very thorough, though gentle, search. As he was removing several books from the bookcase above Samuel’s study table, a knife tumbled to the floor. It was the knife pictured in the clipping.

Ollie called the boys back into the room and held it out.

“Can either of you offer an explanation?”

“Spontaneous generation?” Tommy said, still not understanding the seriousness of the situation.

Samuel did and responded seriously.

“I know it wasn’t there Sunday, because that afternoon I arranged those books, left to right, according to how I planned to read them. One thing I notice looking at them now; the third and fourth books are reversed – out of the order I arranged them in. You can check my reading list there on my table. It shows the same order I just indicated.”

“Any possible explanation for that?” his grampa asked, putting his finger to his lips and pointing at Tommy to remain quiet.

With no hesitation, Samuel offered his answer.

“Somebody rearranged the books. So, I assume that happened when that somebody planted the knife.”

He took his own knife out of his pocket and held it out for Ephron to examine.

“This is mine. Grampa gave it to me last Christmas. As you can see it is a much better piece of work than one you found. Why would I steal a piece of junk like that when I have this one?”

Ephron made no attempt at an answer. He turned to Ollie.

“All I know to do is go back and tell Strom what has taken place here. I will be fair in my recounting.”

“I have no doubt that you will be fair. Except for Matthew, the complainant in this matter, everybody in Gilead has been honest with us. Here, take the knife. At least you can return it to Matthew. I will put Samuel’s word up against his any day of the week. I have the feeling the people up there who know both of them will also.”

“Thank you for your cooperation. I’ll go back and talk with Strom.”

“Tommy, please show him out – without further comment.”

He closed his mouth, which was clearly prepared to offer a



World class rebuttal. That done, they gathered at the table.

“Despicable, nefarious, clandestine foul play – that’s what it is,” Tommy said.

The others had to smile. There youthful, flesh and blood thesaurus was clearly infuriated as he always was at perceived injustice.

“Any suspicion someone has been here when we weren’t?” Ollie asked.

Again, the boys looked at each other and shook their heads. In a huge surprise to Samuel and Ollie, Tommy offered his ideas (sarcasm).

“I suggest we reconstruct the timeline from the moment Samuel realigned his books on the shelf. That was at four p.m. on Sunday. I was in our room with him. We were listening to the radio – *Ed Nesbit’s Pennsylvanians* – it had just begun. I watched Samuel arranging the books and made fun of him for being so compulsive about it, right Samuel.”

“Right. I imagine the bruise to your right shoulder is proof of that.”

Tommy gripped the shoulder, feigned great pain, and continued.

“It is now nine o’clock a.m. on Wednesday. I will construct a chart working backwards, hour by hour, to four p.m. last Sunday. Then, we will enter where each of us was during every hour. We will know the bad guy had to have done his deed during a time none of us was at home – or at least within sight of our room.

“Then, we find out where Matthew was – he has to be the bad guy – during those same times. If nobody can vouch for where he was *during* any of those same times, we got him.”

Ollie nodded and spoke.

“We probably don’t have him for sure, but it will be an ingenious and useful structure to use – it will give us points of reference. Either of you have any trustworthy contacts up the hill

who could conduct the research on Matthew for us – his hour by hour whereabouts?”

“I’m sure Zeek will help – he is definitely not a fan of Matthew. I’m even willing to enlist the help of ‘Frog Girl’ for a good cause like this. She is the nosiest busybody I’ve ever known. If something is there to know, she and her girlfriends will know about it. It pains me to say so, but I just imagine she could fill in *my* part of the timeline with no help from me. I feel like I have no privacy whatsoever anymore. I see her horned rim glasses staring at me in my dreams.”

“Sounds like a good plan to get us started,” grampa said. “I have no idea how Strom plans to follow up on all this.”

He directed his next suggestion at Samuel

“I think you better stay away from Gilead until it is settled and, please, make sure you are with one of us at all times.”

Samuel nodded. Ollie continued.

“What about your friend, Joel? Can we count on him for help?”

“I’m sure we can – and Josephine. I have to admit I’ve seen her a few times since the altercation with Matthew. We agreed to be friends – our basic beliefs are too different to be more than that.”

“An altercation is a *word* fight,” Tommy began. “The way I’ve heard it, words played no part in you getting your head parted.”

“Thank you, little brother, for the correction. That really bolstered my self-concept.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t thinking – well, I was thinking, of course, but inappropriately, I suppose. I’ll just shut up, now.”

Smiles.

“I was being serious, guys.”

“We know and thank you for your deliberative assessment,” Samuel said. “Is deliberative a word?”

“You know it is,” Sammy. “Sometimes you just play dumb to make it seem you’re not capable. I hate that. You’d let your intelligence shrivel away into that of a mushroom’s if I didn’t keep pushing you.”

“Thank you, then. You heard that, grampa. I have my very own fungus fighter.”

“Ugh!”

Tommy made two more copies of the timeline and handed them over to the others. They each went to work reconstructing their lives. It was interesting to them how the less meaningful details had faded.

They blocked in the hours they had been asleep figuring the bad guy would not have had the audacity to visit them then. Anyway, the doors would have been locked – could he have had a key? They agreed on mealtimes and times they were there together. They established times nobody was upstairs at the mill or in position to see anyone approach the stairs. An hour later the completed charts were impressive. They compared them and made a few crucial adjustments among them.

At last, Tommy spoke.

“I think it’s time for me to go up the hill and make like *The Shadow* (an invisible, radio mystery, hero) – and go over things with my contacts. I suppose I’ll have to reveal what’s going on.”

“Find Joel and ask him to come and see me,” Sammy said. “Like grampa said, I don’t dare put in an appearance up there.”

Tommy’s friends were eager to help. Carol Jean – Frog Girl – made herself leader of the team. Tommy believed that was not all bad and offered no objection. She was forceful, persistent, had a mind of her own, and was well organized. (Hmm. Does that sound like somebody else?) Plus, he figured her inexplicable affection for him ensured a conscientious job. The others willingly followed her lead. Tommy provided her with a blank copy of the timeline. She accepted it, offering a compliment about its potential

usefulness, in fact.

'If she just weren't a girl,' he thought, then spit repeatedly to rid himself of the aftermath of such an idea.

Joel arrived at the mill on the trot. Tommy had painted his brother as being in a life and death predicament.

He would enlist the help of Josephine. They decided to keep it quiet among the other teens, not wanting to chance letting it get back to Matthew.

At six, the three Andersons of the mill were roasting hot dogs at the fireplace and enjoying potato salad, slaw and a variety of leftover goodies for dessert. They discussed progress and were pleased with how things seemed to be going. Still, there remained an underpinning of concern – the unpredictability of all-powerful, Strom.

That night, before climbing in under his covers, Tommy made sure the doors were locked. There was a second exit on the north side out of the storage room to the back stairs.

None of them slept particularly well that night, although what their overactive heads had to toss at them was generally positive – just not done quietly enough to allow sleep.

Samuel lay wondering about Joel and Josephine and how they were going about their investigation. Tommy developed a systematic plan for his young colleagues, knowing full-well it was Carol Jean's that would be implemented, instead. Obsessed as he had become about Mr. Greenshirt, he floated a theory that he had taken the knife from Matthew and planted it behind the books to drive a wedge between them and the people of Gilead. Ollie had several concerns: receiving accurate information that would pin things down, wondering if the children could really keep it quiet just among themselves, and, of primary concern, how soon and in what manner Strom would decide to proceed.

He assumed that short of a trial there would at least be a meeting of all the principles – Matthew, Samuel, Ephron, Strom

and him; perhaps Tommy, if his testimony about when Samuel arranged his bookshelf would be seen as relevant. He doubted if any form of legitimate law enforcement or judicial process would be a part of it. Strom clearly ran things on the top of the hill. Ollie surmised such agencies had long ago ceded their authority to him.

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## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Confrontation!**

At noon on Friday, a delegation arrived from up the hill. It was not the delegation Ollie was expecting.

“You guys need to come and see this,” Tommy said as he looked out the window at the top of the stairs.

He named them off.

“Zeek, Carol Jean, Joel and Josephine.”

The boys opened the door and hurried down the steps to greet them. Ollie followed at a more grandfatherly pace. He arrived in time for the good stuff. Carol Jean was speaking.

“We’ve traced Matthew’s whereabouts back to six o’clock Monday morning. Most of that time, he was up in Gilead. He was out of sight from six Sunday evening to six Monday morning. That’s a long time – probably at home asleep – just can’t verify it – we’ll keep up the investigation, but it’s the best we have so far. We thought you should have what we have – to keep you up to date.”

“Thanks. Not sure what else to say,” Evan/Samuel said.

“Really,” Tommy said, “it’s almost like having nothing at all.”

“Tommy!” his brother said. “How ungrateful. These kids have worked hard.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to infer they hadn’t or denigrate the information. I merely meant it leaves a huge gap. Do you have any information about whether or not his unaccounted-for time was a planned time away from the town – something anybody else knew about beforehand?”

“A good question,” Josephine said. “We don’t have that information because we didn’t think to try and find out. We can get to work on that. We better get back. Four kids don’t just disappear from Gilead at the same time without sounding an alarm.”

She took a moment to look into Evan’s face, then turned and left with the others.

Upstairs, they lay their timelines on the table beside the one just delivered and made comparisons.

“We were all asleep from nine Sunday evening until six Monday morning,” Tommy noted pointing from chart to chart. That would leave him the six, seven and eight o’clock hours on Sunday evening to have planted the knife”

“Where were each of us during those hours?” Samuel asked.

“Six to six-fifteen we were all in the kitchen doing dishes together,” Tommy noted. “You will remember my hilarious joke about when the 18-year-old boy owl eloped with the 13-year-old robin and that great line about when he was accused of ‘robin’ the cradle he said he didn’t give a hoot. Then I went down to the creek to visit my frog ‘til bout seven.”

“Grampa and I were reading by the fireplace in the living room,” Samuel said, pointing at their charts.

“Okay. Seven to eight,” Ollie said. “I was in my bedroom finishing up some odds and ends left over from the week before. I was back out in the living room by seven-thirty.



“Sammy and I were bringing in the laundry we’d hung on the line in the north lawn. We stayed down there on the side porch and folded it.”

“I folded it, Tommy, while you whittled. You always find some way of getting out of folding laundry.”

Tommy shrugged.

“I am perfecting my skill by thoughtfully observing my esteemed mentor. The point is, we were both there, not upstairs where we could watch our room and the stairs. Hey. We may have found the open time – seven to seven-thirty Sunday evening.”

“One possibility,” Ollie said. “Mark it! Let’s also look at the eight to nine o’clock hour.”

“For the first twenty minutes or so, we were at the table having pie and ice cream,” Samuel said. “That puts all of us right there in the living room. Nobody could have entered our room during that period.”

Tommy referred to the charts.

“Then grampa took the dishes into the kitchen to rinse them off and set them to dry – how long, grampa?”

“No more than five minutes – maybe less. No, that would not be right, because I took time to water the three plants on the windowsill. One of them leaked and I had to sop up the mess with the mop – so, say twelve to fifteen minutes. Then I went out to the rocker by the fireplace in the living room. So, I was gone until about eight thirty or thirty-five.

“After dessert at the table, I went into the bathroom to take a shower,” Samuel said. “Of course, Runt Boy, here, followed me in to have a chat like he always does. He had interesting stuff, really, how, for a million years or so, all this land was once a huge, land-locked sea filled with shellfish. It’s why there is all the limestone in the area.”

“That took another twenty minutes,” Tommy said. “Me, I’m in and out in five minutes. Showers are a major waste of time.”

“Just wait until your teen boy juices kick in and ten minutes after a shower, you’re back to stinking like you’d been chopping wood for three hours.”

“I will gladly wait. None of that offers information we need. That takes us up to about eight forty-five. Seems the living room was empty from eight twenty to eight thirty-five – fifteen minutes.”

“After Sammy’s shower, from eight forty to nine or so, I was removing the ashes from the living room fireplace and resetting it for the night, right grampa?”

“That’s right. Then you left for your room. I stayed in the rocker and read until about ten.”

“I stayed in our room and read until ten,” Samuel said. “Tommy was in there on his bed writing the whole hour. You came in about ten to say goodnight.”

“And I checked and locked the front door and turned out the lights in the living room on my way to my room,” Grampa said.

“Maybe an oh-oh, in there,” Tommy said. “When we brought the laundry up, we used the back stairs. I don’t remember locking that door behind us, do you, Sammy?”

“Actually, I don’t.”

“I didn’t check it, Ollie said, “since we so seldom use it. My oversight, boys.”

“How might that have given the bad guy an advantage?” Samuel asked.

Tommy offered his answer clearly assembling it on the fly.

“He could have entered through that door and have remained in the third-floor storeroom to monitor our coming and going and found a time that left our room unattended. He could have slipped down the hall, entered, hid the knife and exited the mill all in a matter of one or two minutes.”

“How could he have known about the set-up of the rooms?” Samuel asked.

“Many ways,” Ollie said. “One, just peeking into the rooms

when he arrived, he would have been to pick yours out. He could have had friends who lived here when he was younger. He could have found out from Zeek or Joel – they have both been up here. Could have spent time up here during the year it was empty – before we bought it.”

“Before YOU bought it, actually, grampa. Sammy and I had nothing to do with that, remember.”

“I stand corrected – what did you call him earlier, Samuel – Runt Boy?”

“Double teaming is not fair, guys. Anyway, technically ‘runt’ refers to the smallest of a litter and I came into the world as a litter of one.”

Samuel turned to his grampa.

“Can you imagine how much simpler our lives would be without him?”

“I can but think of all the wonderful things we would be missing out on. He brings us lessons of life every single day.”

Grampa pulled Runt Boy, that is, Tommy, close and planted a kiss on the top of his head. Tommy ate it up. In jest, he offered himself to Samuel for a repeat. Samuel deferred to another time.

“So, let’s see what we have here,” Ollie went on. “During those three hours, Matthew’s whereabouts are not known, and there seem to be two matching times when he could have entered your room – between seven and seven thirty and between eight-twenty and eight thirty-five. Am I right?”

The boys nodded.

“Like you said, grampa, that’s not much of a case. Nothing substantial to place him here.”

“The knife,” Tommy said.

“But, if one assumes that I had stolen it earlier, none of this matters,” Samuel came back.

“It opens up room for doubt about your participation and

offers opportunity for Matthew's participation," Ollie said. "We can make a case that Matthew had reason to be out to get you – the girl and the punishment he received. I feel certain that we can establish that nobody up on the hill who knows you would believe you are a thief."

"Those things sound good," Samuel said.

"On the other hand," Tommy, always the little ray of sunshine, began, "Matthew cleaned your clock, big brother, so people will tend to think you might hold a grudge – want to get back at *him*. Most people would believe that would be how a normal person would react. One way to accomplish that would be to steal some possession of his that's dear to him."

"We need to find out the exact time he said he saw me stealing it."

"The kids are on that. We'll have it shortly, I imagine," Tommy offered.

"Unfortunately, you and I, Tommy, will likely have been the only witnesses to *Samuel's* whereabouts at that time – whenever it was. A brother and grandfather will not make credible witnesses."

"Hmm!"

"Hmm!"

"Hmm!"

Tommy broke the hummmming.

"We have good information – reliable information about Matthew's whereabouts. If the time Matthew suggests he saw you take it is at a time we can show he – meaning Matthew – was seen elsewhere, that part of his accusation falls apart, and since we know he didn't see you, I feel good about that possibility – probability/likelihood/certainty."

"Points well taken," Ollie said. "I guess at *this* point we just wait. Since he got the knife back, Strom may just let it go."

Tommy rolled his eyes. He could not leave *that* alone.

“You can’t believe that, grampa. Strom! Leave a theft just go. ‘Thou shalt not steal,’ remember from his good book – the good book around which he has organized the entire way of life in Gilead for sixty years.”

“You have a way of being a real downer, you know, Little brother.”

“I’d call it providing realistic background perspective, which enhances and enriches all of our lives and provides clarification that just may save your sorry tail.”

“And, he’s probably right,” Samuel. “Men like Strom tend to be focused with a singular approach and often favor not letting facts get in the way of their belief about things.”

“So, what am I to do?” Samuel asked.

“We will wait. I figure the problem is in Strom’s court. Just make sure you don’t get close to Gilead.”

“Oh, you can count on that. He – Strom – really doesn’t have jurisdiction down here, right, grampa.”

“That’s the way it has been explained to me – by Strom, himself, for one. Zealots, like him, often believe *their* concept of truth countermands all other lawful considerations. It will depend on how personally he is taking this – how much of himself he has invested in it. He ordered the punishment of his nephew. Even if he believes what he did was justified, he still may harbor some sense of guilt about it. Guilt is a powerful and typically irrational motivator. Many super-religious folks are riddled with the most destructive sort of guilt. It is the basic control mechanism of many of the major religions. A man’s psyche is seldom content to just quietly allow guilt to eat away at him for long. He acts out – destroys something – or acts in – destroys himself, his wellbeing or sanity.”

“Sounds like you’ve been reading Sigmund Freud, again, grampa,” Tommy said. [Freud was the father of psychoanalysis – a comprehensive theory of personality.]

“You read who you want to read, and I will read who I want to read. In the end, great minds often arrive at similar versions of the truth.”

“I love these discussions, grampa. I’ll mark my copy of Jung (pronounced *Young*) [Carl Jung, another psychoanalyst who differed on some points with Freud] and pass it along to you.”

Samuel rolled his eyes.

“*Freud Jung* – sounds like some exotic Chinese breakfast dish.”

Tommy was off to examine Jung. (No comma will save *that* one.) Grampa believed that if those two great psychiatric minds – Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung – had ever shared a conversation with Tommy, they would both have been reduced to blithering Jell-O.

Several days passed before Ollie heard from Strom. As was his habit, he had dispatched a boy with a message.

“Strom wants to see you. He says ten this morning will be good.”

The lad turned and quickly made his way down the stairs, across the lawn, and up the path. He had obviously been instructed not to dawdle for fear the ‘mill people’ might engage him in some sort of subversive conversation.

“Do I go along?” Samuel asked.

“No. I will first see what’s on his mind. If he wants to set up some sort of hearing about the problem, I will need some assurances first.”

Ollie entered the common area at the top of the path at 9:59 and crossed to the street that led to Strom’s house just back from the row of businesses. The old man motioned, and Ollie took a seat as he began speaking.

“You’re doing well, I hope, Strom.”

“I want to get down to the business of your grandson stealing my nephew’s knife.”

“You are coming to this discussion with an open mind, I see.”

Strom dismissed Ollie’s gentle sarcasm.

“Here is what we will do. Bring the boy here at one o’clock today and I will review the evidence and pronounce the punishment.”

“Wait a minute, Strom. You have already made up your mind he is guilty, so why look at the evidence? And, by the way, what evidence do you have that Matthew is telling the truth? I have a pile of evidence that he is not.”

Strom flashed an angry look into Ollie’s face.

“I determine what evidence is relevant, not you.”

Ollie stood.

“In that case there will be no get-together relative to it. You have not even seen our evidence – evidence, which, by the way, many of the youngsters of Gilead have come together to gather in my grandson’s defense. Apparently, Matthew’s reputation leaves a *great* deal to be desired. I assume your count of his friends confirms that.”

The old man moved uncomfortably.

“What is *your* proposal?” he asked.

“I propose that you get to ask questions of Evan and several witnesses that have relevant testimony, and I get to question Matthew and any witnesses he may have. Also, that I will be able to present *all* the evidence that has been gathered in Evan’s defense.”

“That is not how things are done here. I make such decisions.”

“Then I suggest *that* is the decision you must make, or we go our separate ways. I like the folks I’ve met up here, but I really prefer to shop over at Becker’s Crossing. I can easily agree to never darken your door again.”

Tommy would have appreciated his grandfather’s attempt

at bribery – well, forceful influence.

The old man remained silent for some time. Ollie moved to leave.

“Wait. We can do it that way.”

“I also need your assurance that you will not attempt to retain Evan here after the discussion.”

“Agreed.”

“Fine. One o’clock, then. Oh, one more thing. It must be held in public – anybody, any age, who wishes to attend may attend.”

“You have strange ways, Anderson. Alright, I guess.”

Ollie returned to the mill and laid out the news.

“You going to take our shotgun along just in case?” Tommy asked/suggested/hoped.”

“No. Strom gave me his word he will follow our agreement. I have no reason to suspect his word is not good.”

“Couldn’t we just ignore the whole thing,” Samuel said. “I could happily live out my life without ever setting a foot in Gilead again.”

“It’s better to clear the air – your reputation – don’t you think?”

“I suppose. I just don’t trust him.”

“But you’ve never met him.”

“That probably makes it easier for me not to trust him.”

Sheepish grin!

Ollie and Samuel waited at the bottom of the path for ‘Tommy the dawdler’ to catch up and join them. Then, they began the climb at a few minutes before one. Jake tagged along some twenty yards behind. Ollie didn’t understand, but he didn’t object. He figured he knew the people and situations better than he, and it might, in fact, be a good thing to have him with them.

The common area was empty. That was unusual, but Ollie didn’t see it as a threat. They crossed to Strom’s house. Several



of the men from the town were there as was Matthew who stood back a bit his arms folded across his chest. He was chewing gum and had earlier littered the area with the pink wrappers openly illustrating his character or lack thereof. Strom began speaking immediately.

“Matthew says he saw Evan take his knife and his knife was found in Evan’s bedroom. That is the case.”

Ollie removed a sheet from the file folder he was carrying – the timeline of Matthew’s comings and goings.

“Exactly what time was it that Matthew saw Evan take the knife?”

Strom pointed at Matthew for a response.

“Like I said before, it was about two thirty that afternoon.”

Ollie ran his finger down the chart and removed a second sheet.

“I have here the statement of Jerry Crane that he was with you at that time, Matthew, and had been for two hours. He says Evan did not appear to either of you during that time. I also have a statement from Joel Archer who says he was with Evan at the mill during that same period. Clearly, Evan could not have stolen the knife at the time Matthew says he did.”

Matthew kicked at the dust and spat. Jerry made his way forward and stood beside Ollie.

“It is true, Matthew. You know it.”

Ollie spoke.

“With the help of the youngsters of Gilead, we have been able to construct a timeline, which accounts, almost minute by minute, for where Matthew was during the period from Sunday at four p.m. to Wednesday at nine a.m. the hours of relevance in this matter. Among the observations are two short periods during that time when no one knew where Matthew was. Those two times coincide with times during which Evan’s bedroom and access to it were not in view by any one of us who lives at the Mill.

“It is my contention that during one of those times, Matthew entered the mill and planted the knife behind the books on Evan’s shelf, inadvertently rearranging the books in the process. I must ask him to account for those times.”

Ollie handed a slip of paper to Strom. They contained the time periods.

“This is just dumb,” Matthew said, and he turned to leave.

Strom recalled him somewhat harshly then turned back to Ollie. By then, word was out, and many youngsters had worked their ways into the group of adults that had gathered.

Strom spoke.

“Matthew is a Gilead. Unless you can prove his presence in that bedroom, I am obliged to take his word.”

“Since you have brought it up, let’s speak about *his word*,” Ollie said.

He turned to the onlookers.

“I have two questions for those of you 17 and under. How many of you believe *Matthew* has demonstrated during his life here that his word is good – dependable – truthful? Raise your right hand.”

Nobody raised a hand.

“Now, the second question. It is a two-parter. Will those young people who believe they know Evan well enough to judge his character step to the front, here.”

Thirteen moved through the gathering to the front. They ranged in age from about eight to sixteen.

“Thank you. Now, part two. How many of you thirteen young Gileads, believe that *Evan’s* word is honest and truthful – that you would always believe what he tells you?”

Thirteen hands shot up without hesitation. Ollie turned back to Strom.

“So much for your contention about Matthew’s word versus Evan’s.”

“Children are not permitted to take part in proceedings such as this.”

“Then I will ask for those adults in this gathering who believe they know Evan well enough to make a judgement about his character to step forward.”

Nine stepped forward – more than Ollie had expected. One of them was Jesse – the owner of the general store. Ollie was pleased at that.

“I ask you the same question, understanding that a young man’s good reputation seems to be in your hands – the hands of people whose integrity I have come to know and value.”

Nine hands were raised – not as quickly but none really hesitantly. Ollie, again, turned to Strom.

“Nobody here will agree that the position Matthew presented can support my grandson’s guilt.”

“But you have produced no evidence that Matthew was ever in the mill let alone in that room.”

Tommy stepped forward – that may or may not have been a good thing. Ollie’s heart skipped a beat. Samuel closed his eyes. The boy began speaking directly to Matthew.

“I have noticed that you are often chewing gum. I believe it is your own brand, so to speak.”

“Yeah. I’m the only one who has it. I order it out of a catalog from Springfield, Missouri. Twenty-four packs at a time. So what? You Jealous?”

“No. Not jealous.

“Do you share it with the other kids who live here?”

“No. I pay for it. It’s mine. Let them get their own.”

Ollie believed that pretty well summed up the boy’s character. He relaxed a bit, fascinated by Tommy’s doings.

Tommy turned toward Strom. He took a seat on the ground in front of him and removed his (Tommy’s) boot. Then, he removed a sock and then a second sock all from his left foot. He

turned the final sock inside out and a gum wrapper fell to the ground – a pink wrapper. He stood and handed it to Strom.

“By Matthew’s own words, he verifies that he is the only one who has this special gum. As you will understand, there is no way I could have picked up one of his wrappers and secured it inside my boot and inside two socks since I arrived here this afternoon. On my honor, I swear, I found this wrapper on the floor of the storage room on the third floor of the mill next to our room. Clearly, he was waiting there for his opportunity to enter our bedroom and, as he has demonstrated his slovenly habit here, discarded the wrapper on the floor.”

Strom stood; his rage had been building. That had been clear. It boiled over.

“I am the only authority here that determines guilt or innocence. It has been so for more than sixty years. I say Evan is guilty and require five stripes with the cane. Punishment shall commence at once.”

Two of the men who had been there with Strom from the beginning moved toward Evan. Jake emerged from the gathering and placed himself in front of the boy spreading his arms out from his sides. As if it had been practiced, the youngsters crowded in behind Jake and formed a human barrier to keep the men away. Upon observing their children’s response, several of the adults joined them. Strom had lost the day – and very likely much more.

Jake urged the ‘Anderson’ men toward the path. The small mass of humanity moved with them as a barrier. Strom’s two men had given up early on. The four of them were soon back at the mill.

“Thank you, Jake,” were Samuel’s first words.

“Yes, thank you,” came Ollie’s addition, offering his hand.

“There’s something screwy about you, Jake.”

It came from perennially skeptical Tommy. He continued.

“I don’t believe you are who you say you are.”

“You don’t think you can’t trust me?”

“I haven’t got it figured yet. When I do, you’ll hear from me. Anyway, like they said, thank you a bunch for your help up there today.”

Hands were, again, offered all around.

Upstairs, Samuel administered a big brother sized embrace to Tommy.

“Why didn’t you tell us you had that wrapper?”

“It didn’t all come together until we were ready to leave for the meeting. I had seen the wrapper earlier but had let it be knowing when you saw it you would take care of it – that’s been our deal for most of a decade. You two were already on your way down the stairs. I figured I’d hold it back as extra ammo in case things started to tank for you. I knew I had to establish that it hadn’t come from Gilead. It took me a minute to get it arranged in my sock. Zeek had mentioned Matthew’s special gum in the pink wrapper once when he was venting about what a lousy human being he was – never sharing it with others, for one thing. Actually, I had never seen it – or the wrapper. I just put one and one together on a hunch. As soon as we arrived up there, I knew I had him.”

“By any measure other than Strom’s, we had him ten ways to Sunday,” Ollie said. “I still have a hard time believing that man would act the way he did – completely abandoning his beliefs and trampling on his integrity in order to save face right there in front of all the people who had apparently respected him for so long.”

“I’m going with the guilt stuff you spoke of earlier,” Tommy said. “Not sure what it might be about, but I’d vote for something related to Matthew that’s been boiling for a whole lot longer than the recent paddling.”

He turned to his brother.

“I’ve been considering the problem in case Strom captures you and tries to administer the caning. I believe with a piece of

untanned leather – that’s hilarious – caning, untanned, get it – and a half dozen fitting sessions, I could fashion a pretty good, form-fitting, butt protector for you.”

“Your offer is noted, but I will attend to the protection of my own butt – and there will definitely *not* be any fitting sessions.”

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **The Time Had Come**

Samuel was in bed ready to turn off the light and go to sleep when Tommy entered their room, talking.

“Our grampa is very sneaky and I need to tell you about it.”

“That will be one sneaky person telling about another sneaky person, then.”

He offered the intrusive imp a grin and turned onto his side, supporting his head in his hand, preparing to be regaled by whatever delusion was about to be freed from the boy’s overactive head. Tommy sat on the edge of his bed facing Samuel, ready to deliver his report.

“You remember about that radio I found under grampa’s bed.”

“Of course. I hope you haven’t been messing with it and got us involved in this new World War.”

“No. Just keeping a healthy eye on it.”

“Oh, oh. What happened?”

“Well, you know that hair thing I spoke about. I did that – put one at the top of the radio’s door, so it would fall off if it were opened. I have checked back several times.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.”

“Well, smarty. Today, I did a closer inspection. Guess what I found out.”

“It fell off.”

“No. And *that’s* the problem.”

“You lost me – years ago, actually, but go on.”

Tommy was able to flash a quick, weak smile to acknowledge the humor.

“I checked again this afternoon while grampa was gone for his walk. You know what I found?”

“I suspected that this present, late-night, conversation was for the purpose of telling me what you found.”

“Please be serious.”

“Okay. Let’s see. You found a note telling you to keep the heck out of his room? How am I supposed to guess?”

“He glued the hair I left, to the frame. Did you hear me. He glued the hair to the frame. You know what that means?”

“That he found the hair and now knows that you know more than he wants you to know.”

“I’ll give you that, but don’t you see; it means he’s been using the radio and didn’t want us to know.”

“Maybe. Maybe just checking it to make sure it’s in working order in case he ever needs it.”

“You have no useful imagination whatsoever, big brother. Now, what we need to find out is who he’s been contacting.”

“Maybe somebody *else* has been contacting *him* – like at two a.m. while most sensible boys are asleep. Goodnight.”

Tommy took hold of his shoulder in an effort to prevent him from turning away.

“Can’t you see I’m worried and afraid? Usually when I’m worried and afraid you have helpful things to say.”

“How about this, then; get ready for bed and you can sleep here with me tonight?”



“A good start, for sure.”

He set to the task but kept talking.

“What are we going to do about it?”

“I for one am going to sleep on it. We have to trust grampa on this. He probably has somebody back in Chicago who he’s keeping in contact with about whatever problem there was there. His way of keeping us safe here – keeping in the loop about whatever it was – is.”

“I suppose you could be right. *Could be*, however, doesn’t take the scared and worry away.”

“Come on, Runt Boy. Did you wash your feet? You know how I hate to have dirty feet leaving trails all over my sheets.”

“Yes. I was prepared for your generous offer. You are generally a very good big brother.”

“Only generally?”

“We can discuss the consistent quality of your siblinghood some other time – when my body stops shaking and my teeth stop clattering and I can breathe again without having to think about how to do it.”

“Shake and clatter quietly and don’t breathe your hot breath on the back of my neck. My purpose here is to get a full night’s sleep.”

Tommy crawled in behind his *generally good* brother and did his best to rein in his shakes; the clatters had taken care of themselves when his cheek made contact with his pillow. He carefully directed his hot breath in another direction. He understood it was fully irrational, but when he was there like that, he felt completely safe from any bad stuff the universe might decide to throw at him. He was asleep before his brother.

The next morning found Samuel volunteering to chop wood for the fireplaces. He was determined to build a *Charles Atlas* physique without paying the dollar-ninety-nine for his mail order bodybuilding program, which was so convincingly emblazoned

across the back of the Superman Comic book. Tommy was off on one of his tangents – repelling down the mill from the peak. He would say it was practice for the cliff above the swimming hole. Grampa had forbidden that until he was older. His stated purpose was thinking he might be able to shrink the distance between ‘now’ and ‘older’ with a few weeks of dedicated practice followed by a skillfully executed dramatic demonstration.

That, of course, was too tame a full reason for anybody who claimed to understand even the most basic innerworkings of Tommy’s brain. A rope draped from the peak dangled outside his grampa’s window. Early mornings, that end of the mill remained in the deep shadow of the hill. When the light was on inside that room, with the skimpy drapes drawn closed, one could see *inside* but not *out*. The boy could hang there watching for hours on end – well, actually, from a rope wrapped around his upper legs and back around his waist. He had some serious concerns about the blood flow being cut off to certain of his vital parts, so he limited himself to fifteen minutes of hanging at a time.

After lunch, Tommy shared his findings with his brother. They had returned to their room to spend time with their schoolwork.

“Okay. Here’s what I saw. First, Grampa locked his door from the inside, clearly not wanting us to know what he was doing – unlike him! Then, he took out the radio and set it upright on his nightstand. It seemed heavy even for him. He opened its door and plugged the cord into the wall socket. He turned it on and let it heat up. From where I was, I could see the largest of the tubes – one eight inches tall and an inch and a half in diameter – begin to glow as its filaments came to life.

“Then, he adjusted the main dial – the frequency I assume – no *presume* since I have supporting data based in my knowledge of how radios work.”

Samuel allowed a smile at the self-correction, which he

neither really understood nor cared to understand.

“After some dialing adjustments, he began to talk into the microphone. His expression remained all sober and businesslike, so I’m pretty sure it was not a social call – you understand?”

Samuel nodded. His own expression sobered.

“Could you hear what he said?”

“No, but reading his lips, I believe I learned some things. Like, his first phrase that he repeated over and over was, ‘*Calling Puppy. This is Backwoods One.*’ Just like they do in those spy movies. Watch my lips and see how easy those words are to read.”

“I just did, and I understand. Grampa is ‘Backwoods One’ and whoever he’s calling is, ‘Puppy’.”

“Okay. Good, then.”

“What else?”

“Not a lot, but he said three other words several time – ‘*not good news.*’ I sort of got two more words, but they don’t make sense – ‘*location who.*’”

“Let’s think about that,” Samuel said, intrigued that he suddenly found himself intrigued by the conversation. ‘Location’ seems easy enough to lip read. Maybe ‘who’ is incorrect. What other words might look like that? Talk awhile and let me watch your lips until I see something that looks like ‘who’ but isn’t.”

“That is a suburb suggestion. What shall I say?”

“It doesn’t matter. Talk about the mill.”

He began as if lecturing a visiting group of tourists.

“The mill was erected in 1900 from wood growing on this very acreage. Two brothers, Amos and Willy Toomey, who inherited the land . . .”

“Stop. That could be it. ‘Two’ and ‘Toomey’. Your ‘who and two’ looked almost identical. That would make it *Location Two.*”

“Gives us nothing specific, but, put in context, makes sense. That would make this location *one*, I guess. Grampa and

whomever he was talking with must have had several locations on a list. This suddenly seems like a big deal.”

“Yeah. Like location *two* had been planned for some time just waiting to be put into action – like a back-up in case it became needed to replace location *one* – here. Who could that other guy be?”

“One uncomfortable possibility could be the head Nazi Spy. Maybe the Feds were closing in on him and that’s why he moved us out so fast – to avoid arrest, conviction and the electric chair.”

“Hold it, hold it, hold it. You gotta get *that* kind of nonsense out of your head. Grampa is no Nazi spy.”

“Got a better reason why we had to leave Chicago in the middle of the night with no warning and no explanation – not even to this day, I might add?”

“Only about a hundred. Did you get the idea there was another move about to happen?”

“It might be, I guess. I couldn’t understand for sure the way those couple of phrases fit into everything. They talked for quite a while. Oh. There could have been one other word – ‘truck’, maybe.”

“Gee. I haven’t even got to run the big saw yet. I was just getting used to this place and my new friends – even if there aren’t many of them.”

“Me, too; even, Frog Girl, I suppose.”

“Face it, Runt. If we stayed to grow up here, you would have ended up marrying her – it’s how all those kinds of movies end – boy meets girl, boy hates girl, boy marries girl.”

The very idea fired Tommy’s cockles!

“If I could make you take that back . . . I’d . . . make you take that back.”

They tried to return to their books. Samuel looked over at Tommy and spoke.

“In answer to your *next* question, we *don’t do* anything. The

next move is up to grampa. We have to keep trusting that he will do the right thing. It appears he already has a list of alternative places for us. We're going to be fine – just like he said. He continues to protect and take good care of us.”

“I think I'm going to start packing, anyway.”

“No, you aren't. That will give away that we know something.”

“Okay. Can I make a list of what I want to make sure I get to take with me?”

“Sure. Just don't fasten it to grampa's room with a dagger.”

Samuel figured that would be humorous. Apparently, that wasn't how it had been received.

After a few more minutes, Samuel closed his book.

“If we're about to bug out of here, I think we should at least be able to see our friends one last time.”

“But you don't dare go up to the village.”

“I have the idea you can find Zeek – what's your word, *clandestinely* – and he can get a message to Joel.”

“I have the idea you are right. Perfect choice of a word, by the way. Glad my past rhetoric has proved instructive. Now? What do we tell grampa?”

“Going fishing?”

“Works for me.”

Half an hour later, Samuel was waiting for Joel in the bushes on the slope just down a few yards from the village. He was keeping watch on the top of the path. Tommy appeared. He was being held by two of Strom's men. One of them spoke.

“We know you are down there, Evan. Strom is holding Tommy up here until you come forward and give yourself up.”

“Give myself up for what?”

He had stood and stepped out onto the path to confront the situation face to face.

“To take the punishment Strom pronounced on you for

stealing the knife.”

“Go tell grampa,” Tommy called out before one of the men managed to clap a hand over his mouth.

Samuel turned and ran back down the path. It was a tossup which was going to be worse: grampa finding out they had lied to him about going fishing or having Tommy being held by Strom.

Samuel continued at full speed up the stairs and into his grandpa’s studio where he was painting. Samuel laid out the story. They hurried back up the path.

“You remain safely behind, Samuel. I will go confront the men at the top. If they should come after you, run and find Jake. I saw he was out back earlier.”

He stopped within ten feet of the common area.

“So, what is this I hear about you kidnapping my youngest grandson.”

“Not kidnappin’ him. Holdin’ him.”

“Oh, yes. You are definitely parties to kidnapping and my friend the sheriff will not look favorably on the two of you – Mitt and Reggie, isn’t it – being accomplices like you are. Kidnapping is a serious crime. I assume you are familiar with the Federal Lindbergh Kidnapping Act.”

“Strom said . . .”

“Strom has proved himself to be a self-centered egomaniac with no respect for lawful procedure. I don’t expect you to know those terms, but it means any court in the land will put him away for this final act of insanity and you two will be parties to it. Prepare to go to prison for the rest of your lives – in fact, it could mean the electric chair according to that law.”

The men looked at each other, growing uncertainty clearly showing.

Samuel stepped up beside his grampa.

“I’ll take the caning if that’s what it takes to get Tommy back.”

“No. You most certainly will not.”

He turned back to the men, raising his voice just a bit for no apparent reason.

“Gentlemen. When I raise my hand, you will *hear* a shotgun blast. If you do not release Tommy immediately, when I raise it a second time, you will *feel* a shotgun blast.”

The boys caught each other’s eyes and their brows furrowed. They had no idea what was up their grampa’s sleeve – but they wouldn’t miss it for the World.

The men made no move to release the boy. Tommy stopped struggling believing something extraordinary was about to happen.

Ollie slowly raised his right arm, making it a long, drawn out, dramatic, big deal.

It was unmistakably a shotgun blast and from very close by.

The men released him and ran back into town. Tommy ran down the slope into his grampa’s arms. A small group of onlookers – youngsters – cheered and moved forward to look down from the top edge of the path.

Jake moved out of the brush from the east, shotgun in hand, scratching his head.

“Oliver!” he began. “I do believe you have been engaged in subterfuge.”

“And I can verify that, Jake. For weeks now, I have known that when we leave the mill you follow us with that double-barreled shotgun. I figured Samuel’s mad dash down the hill would have caught your attention and, I was counting on you being close enough to hear what I was saying. For having had no rehearsal, I believe we pulled it off quite well.”

Jake accepted Ollie’s hand for a shake and spoke.

“You old son of a gun, Ollie. How much else do you know?”

“We will discuss that out of range of these two sets of virgin

ears. I believe my boys were on their way to do some fishing, correct, boys?”

“Yes, Sir. Fishing. Seem to have gotten sidetracked.”

“We’ll have a mess for supper. Get the griddle heating.”

It was just the sort of endgame Samuel liked: A bit of confusion. Not fully understanding – which, he believed, lessened his responsibility – but thinking they were somehow off the hook.

Tommy was already scheming to find out what Jake and grampa were going to discuss. One thing stumped him; how could ears be virgins? Perhaps he had missed something in that talk. Samuel had moved on to thoughts of bass, frying in butter a half an inch deep in the big, iron, skillet. His thoughts were never far away from food – and girls. (Maybe some fried potatoes, also, and grits and tomato slices and pickles . . .)

They had to settle for ham sandwiches. The fish had taken a holiday. Tommy wondered if there even were fish in that creek. When they finished the dishes, Oliver ushered them back to the table.

“There are things we must talk about.”

The boys shared knowing glances. Oliver took note but didn’t ask.

“I told you when the time was right, I would catch you up to speed on the mystery you have so patiently been enduring with me.”

“And that right time is now, right?” Tommy said scooting closer and folding his hands on the table.

Ollie nodded and began laying out his story.

“For several years, I have been working with the federal government to defend the country against Nazi influence and sabotage. My job was to cozy up to the group’s leadership in Chicago and pass along information about their plans. I often did that by hiding information in the frames of my paintings. Federal agents would purchase them and extract my messages. Being a



first-generation American citizen – you will remember that I arrived here at four months of age from Germany – and wearing an unmistakable German name and having degrees in political science, I was a natural for the assignment. The government contacted *me*. I felt an obligation to assist them.

“Just prior to leaving our home in the city, the Nazis somehow found out about my role. Preparing for just that possibility, the Bureau had established a system for us to leave, along with several possible destinations. We had been secretly escorted out of the city. This mill was designated as our first hiding place because it was so secluded – so off the beaten path. Not even local law enforcement paid any attention to it. I believe it has worked rather well.

“I was told that unidentified agents would always remain close to protect us, but I was given no specific information about them and no way to contact them. They would contact us if necessary. Today we learned that Jake is one of those agents.”

Tommy interrupted.

“I knew there was something fishy about him. I’ve said it. You all heard me say it. He was putting on his backwoods accent and sometimes he’d slip up and forget. It also explains why, when we first arrived – after the mill had supposedly been standing unused for more than a year – I discovered fresh sawdust at the saw – Jake had been practicing for his role as the long-time worker here.”

“I imagine both of those things are true. We can verify them, now. I know that you know about the radio. Tommy; a hair, really? That’s hardly up to what I’d expect from you. At the least, you should have used one of *my* white ones rather than one from your head. Anyway, I have been kept informed about our situation and recently learned that in some way our cover, here, may have been compromised. That is as much as I know. We must leave immediately. We will pack the trucks tonight, drive to Becker’s

Crossing and board a special eastbound train with our belongings.

“I’m betting Mr. Greenshirt is our bad guy,” Tommy said.

“I think you are too willing to jump to conclusions,” Samuel said.

Grampa continued, understanding and appreciating the lad’s need to search out and put a name to the nebulous, ‘bad guy’.

“A new location is waiting for us. We will be running a small hotel that services travelers down state highway 27 which helps connect the Missouri state line south to Little Rock down the center of the state. Again, it is in a very small town – *Ledger*. This time, we will have help packing.”

“You said trucks – plural,” Samuel repeated, just checking.

“A second truck is on its way now, so we can take all our possessions with us this time. I insisted on that. I’m sorry about all the important things you lost the last time. It’s all in storage for you to repossess at some later time. A special railroad car will be waiting for us at Becker’s Crossing – one that will accommodate us and our things. There are enough boxes and crates in the spare room to get started. We need to get crackin’. Jake and Wilson will arrive any time now to help us. They will have the supplies we need.”

“Wilson?” Samuel asked.

Having reevaluated his earlier conclusion, Tommy offered an alternative.

“Let me guess,” Tommy said. “I was wrong. The second agent is Mr. Greenshirt.”

“Very good. Anything else?”

“Just let us get this straight,” Samuel said. “The Nazis found out you were a plant in their organization – like a government spy – put there by the Feds, and they are now out to kill you.”

“Blunt but accurate.”

“And that makes Sammy and me likely collateral damage if

they should come upon us with their tommy guns blazing.”

“I am sorry to say that is, also, accurate. It is not how things were supposed to go. I have no reason to suspect anything that dramatic will ever take place. I hope you can forgive me for putting you in danger. The plan was for agents to close in on the bad guys up north before they found out about me, and the three of us would go on living our good life in Chicago – you two being none the wiser. I only agreed to a two-year operation.”

Sammy had the response.

“We understand. You’re a patriot – a hero, really. We’re proud of you.”

“There is an alternative I want you to consider, boys. We can send you to a fine boarding school in upstate New York where there is virtually no chance your identities could ever be learned. You would be completely safe there. It has educated senators and governors and leaders of commerce.”

The boys looked at each other, silently considering the alternative for most of ten seconds. Sammy was, again, the spokesman.

“No way, grampa. We stay with you. We wouldn’t have it any other way, would we, Tommy?”

“To provide a fully accurate answer, I’ll have to separate that question into its several components.”

Samuel put Tommy in a headlock.

“Just say you agree with me, Runt. You can get all technical latter. Pack a box.”

“Okay. Alright. Yes, I agree. Ears, brother. I need my ears.”

They stood. Ollie left the boys alone for a few minutes. Tommy placed himself in front of his brother and looked up, directly into his face.

“What you said up on the path – that you’d take the caning to get me back safely. I know you meant it. I don’t have words to let you know how grateful I am. I love you, you know.”

He moved forward and administered a long, strong, embrace. Samuel returned it without hesitation and, uncharacteristically, let it linger according to his brother's need. And that was that. They were brothers, after all and part of a family they were not about to break up. Tommy saw a major, if secondary, upside to the move; he would not have to end up marrying Frog Girl!

The other men arrived – Jake and Wilson plus two other agents with the second truck. They had everything packed and loaded within ninety minutes. Heavy with their possessions, the trucks took longer than usual to make the run to the Crossing. The special railroad car was waiting on a siding well-shielded from the depot. The men transferred the cargo, and by seven o'clock they were all settled into the passenger section of the car – up front. By seven-ten, their car had been added to a group of several other cars. With a single blast from the engine's whistle, the train jerked to life and they were on their way. It was a massive, black, smoke spouting, engine carrying them toward safety, east into the darkness.

Jake and Wilson – faces probably not connected with Ollie by the bad guys – rode with them, staying toward the rear of the passenger section. They would leave them once they reached Ledger where, Ollie understood, a similar arrangement with new agents would begin.

The non-stop trip took several hours. It was the first time the boys had ridden on a train and that presented a good diversion from the reasonable anxiety and fear accompanying the serious circumstance that confronted them. Food arrived – sandwiches, chips, melon balls, potato salad. The porter asked if they wanted him to make up sleeper units for them. They declined.

Tommy really, really wanted to shout to the world that they were government spies fleeing for their lives, but even he understood that dared not happen. Someday, he would write the

story, so all the world would know about how brave and patriotic his grampa had been.

At Ledger, the moving process was reversed and by midnight one would have thought the three Waggoners had occupied that five room, fifth floor, hotel suit for years. Having to say goodbye to Jake, they suddenly realized he had become important to them – way back before they knew he was their protector. There were hugs and handshakes all around.

They had been assigned another new last name – *Jansen*. The story was that Ollie had purchased the hotel partly as a venue from which to sell his paintings to tourists traveling the Ozark Mountains. One of the first acts would be to convert a room off the lobby into a gallery. The staff was to remain. They had been thoroughly vetted. There was not a German name among them. Of, course, they did not know the story.

Tommy figured one or two of them were secret agents and he was determined to find out which ones. Sammy – the form of his name that Samuel determined he would begin using – was immediately infatuated with the young lady at the night desk. Her nametag read Ginny. She had jet black, shoulder length hair with an orange bow and trailing ribbons. Sammy was satisfied that everything else about her was just where and how it should be. She appeared to be no more than two or three years older than he. He figured that gave him a real shot. His fervent hope was that there was no ‘Matthew’ in her life.

Again, the boys shared a room similar in size to the one at the Mill. They were tired and wasted little time getting into bed. Ollie knocked and entered. He sat on the edge of Tommy’s bed, facing Sammy across the space between them.

“I’m so proud of you two boys. You’re real troopers. I have several bits of information that will be of interest to you. I am told youngsters from Ledger are bussed to a larger, nearby town for school. You will need to decide if you want to do that or continue

like you have been doing. Ledger has a small library, a volunteer fire department, a park, a summer baseball league, and well over a dozen different stores on Main Street – this hotel is also on Main Street. My information says that exactly one thousand people live here. An even one thousand! Can you believe that?

“I understand that unlike our last stop, Ledger has a three-man police department and a doctor. Please take time to get acquainted with the hotel staff – a couple of maids, three desk crews and a handyman. There is a small dining room with a cook or two and several waitresses. The specifics will emerge.

“As I indicated, we will use a new last name – this time Jansen. Make sure you practice saying it and writing it until it’s automatic. I have ID cards for you. Don’t sign them until after you have mastered your new signature.”

He handed them over. The boys studied them. Tommy understood that without a picture, they could belong to anybody, but such was the state of the ID art in 1940 Arkansas – hand-typed on a thick, ugly, green card. They placed them on the nightstand that separated the heads of their beds. Tommy moved on, addressing his grampa.

“Think the handyman’s the federal agent?”

“At seventy-two years of age, I sincerely doubt it,” Ollie said. “I know you will do your snooping in a – your words, here – *unobtrusive, clandestine* manner and treat everybody with kindness and respect because that’s the kind of good people you are.”

“Sammy is already making goo goo eyes at Ginny at the front desk. I expect he is planning to treat her *very well*.”

It may have been the fastest, and possibly the most forceful, pillow ever launched toward a younger brother in the long and revered history of pillow launches toward younger brothers. No permanent damage was reported. (Tommy was okay, also.)

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### New Digs

Their grampa moved to stand and leave the boys for the night. Sammy had a question and was even willing to sit up and lean back against his headboard to hear the response. Ollie settled back onto Tommy's bed while Sammy had his say. He needed to get some things straight.

"About all this Nazi talk, grampa. I suddenly realize all I really know about them is that they are the bad guys in this war. Why are they doing what they are doing?"

"Well, let's see, how can I summarize? Interrupt if I'm not being clear. Nazi's believe that the only way to grow a strong nation – unite a nation – is for that nation to be made up entirely of the same race of people – in terms of *their* theory, white people. They refer to themselves as Aryan and deem it to be the Master Race. As such, they believe they have the right – perhaps the responsibility or destiny – to rule over all other races.

"One way to purify the citizenry of the world is to exterminate the unclean minorities – just kill them off in huge numbers. Nazi's include in that group, Jews, Romani (Gypsy – for one), physically and mentally handicapped, Negroes, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals and other smaller groups. That

accomplishes several things, they believe; it prevents mixed marriage that would weaken or dilute the Aryan race, and it provides more living space for their chosen race. Since the early 1930s, Hitler and his Nazi compatriots have been systematically annihilating the Jews and other minorities within their realm of influence – Germany and occupied lands. The number is reported to be in the millions and growing. Such a horrendous blight on humanity.

“Not only are Nazis racist in the most extreme and ugly manner possible, they reject democracy, Marxism, and communism. They believe such movements reduce the possibility for National Unity for the Superior Race. Aryans are generally described as tall, blond, fair complected and well built – oddly just about as different in appearance from Hitler as is possible.

“Like Hitler, Nazis do not let well established facts get in the way of promoting what they want to believe – what they need others to believe. In other words, what they want or need the facts to be, becomes the only recognized truth. Hitler is a master of convincing his followers to put aside facts in favor of what he tells them they should believe. It has been said that if he tells them black is white, they will believe that black is white without question. That probably goes a bit too far, but you get the idea.”

“Wow! I didn’t know all that. That’s terrible. But why are they making war on Europe and England?”

Tommy took a stab at an answer.

“To make more room for them, like grampa said – for the superior, master race, I imagine. That destiny thing, maybe.”

“You seem to have it,” his grampa said.

“Since you have been involved with them here in our country, I suppose that means they want to take *us* over, too, huh?” Tommy continued.

“That is precisely the case. My time with them was to learn how – short of an invasion – they planned to go about that – the



who, where and when – so it could be nipped in the bud. Let me just say it is terrifying.”

“I can only imagine,” Sammy said. “Why doesn’t America go over there and help stop them while they are still in Europe?”

“Politics. Some powerful people in government prefer to look the other way and hope they will stay away from our shores. Believe me, that is *not* the Nazi’s plan. It’s ironic; Nazis need people to look the other way from the truth. These politicians are looking the other way – playing right into their hands. Frightening.”

“So, in the meantime, they send spies over here to make preparations for their invasion of the United States?”

It had been Tommy’s observation more than a question.

Oliver nodded.

“Why don’t we just round up all the Nazi sympathizers and put them in prison?” Sammy asked.

Tommy rolled his eyes, thinking he had already handled that. Ollie continued.

“Our wonderful Constitution provides us with the freedom of speech. We can all say what we believe. Until a Nazi breaks a law, they should have the same protection under that law as the rest of us. If we start rounding up people whose beliefs are different from ours, or who say things we don’t agree with, we are no better than they are.

“There is a theory in law that says by definition, all Nazis hold to the purpose of undermining and destroying our democracy and that that constitutes an illegal position or activity. The same is said of Japanese Americans, but that is another dreadful story. I believe that legal opinion sets a dangerous precedent. A better approach would be to launch an information campaign that counters the Nazi line. The uneducated are going to be the easiest converts, so we must support education with whatever resources are necessary – the cost will be slight next to paying for battleships and planes and experiencing the loss thousands of young men.

The purpose of me infiltrating the growing, Chicago Nazi organization was to uncover proof that they were in fact engaging in espionage – breaking laws – so they could be prosecuted – doing something harmful to our Republic beyond merely spewing their hateful rhetoric.”

“I can see I won’t be getting much sleep tonight,” Sammy said with a sigh, scrunching back down and settling in on his back.

Tommy and his grampa exchanged winks. They understood that nothing short of having his pajamas on fire would keep Sammy from missing even one minute of possible sleep time.

The next morning found both boys with an increased awareness of how serious their situation was. Tommy turned his attention to getting acquainted with the staff. Sammy spent time with the work schedule memorizing Ginny’s shifts for the week.

Tommy was amazed how his brother could learn *that* after one peek but still wasn’t sure what 8 X 7 was. It was clear that any assist hormones provided for a guy’s memory was quite focused. He headed downstairs toward the shop to meet the handyman – *Pascal*, according to his mother’s wishes, but just plain *Cal*, according to his.

The old man offered his hand for a shake – something that always impressed Tommy – when an adult did that with a child. He took it as a respectful gesture. His life suggested most adults did not take time to indicate their respect for kids – who were required to indicate it for adults whether the adult had earned it or not. In *his* world, things like that would be different – a system of fines, perhaps – after three offenses, the public stocks. Just contemplating the power of such fantasies immediately improved his outlook.

“So, you want me to call you Thomas, Tom, or Tommy?” he asked.

There it was again, another rarity among adults. Tommy

liked the man immediately.

“I’m used to Tommy. I figure, Tom, will come on my thirteenth birthday. It is a step in the overall life plan I am creating for myself.”

The man accepted that at face value.

Cal did well with the scraggly look – short, white stubble on his face that added a softness more than the look of whiskers. His hair was long and perfectly unkempt. Sammy used the word, ‘unkept’, instead, and although it was wrong from his younger brother’s interpretation of Mr. Webster’s thick book, Tommy was some miffed because it did convey a more or less accurate sense of things.

Tommy maneuvered himself close enough to take a whiff – clearly, the old man bathed regularly. Body odor was among Tommy’s least favorite things. He had noted that he never had any, but that Sammy often did. Sammy blamed hormones and bacteria that enjoyed hanging out and dying in big boy’s, hairy armpits – thus the condition. Tommy still had research to carry out on the matter, although he was inclined to accept the premise.

Cal showed him around the shop – tools, supplies, manuals, one well-used rocker bearing a time-flattened seat-cushion, and an ancient coffee percolator. He offered a mug. Tommy declined in the most mature fashion he could muster.

The furnace room was next door – a huge metal edifice, twelve feet wide and ten high, sprouting twelve-inch pipes directed in an orderly fashion upstairs near the walls. Cal called it a stoker; it used small, compacted pieces of coal which were fed along a metal conveyor belt from the coal bin and dropped directly into its firepot. Tommy had not known about such a thing. The ash developed in the form of irregularly shaped, hard, pocked, almost rock-like structures about the size of a football, many of which bore colorful streaks. They had to be removed daily from an iron door at the very bottom. There were huge, metal tongs he used to

grab them. He also said that during cold winter snaps, they received a new load of coal every week.

Tommy figured he just might have to learn to drink coffee because Cal had hinted at a fascinating personal history. A budding writer never knew who had stories that might come in handy. (It was possible to be a writer as well as a Super-Secret Federal Agent, right?)

He left the basement with an open invitation to return often. Although Tommy only got a quick glance through an open door, he could see that Cal had a great place of his own between the shop and furnace room – small and Spartan, but functional and neat – all any guy needed. Tommy checked him off his, ‘Possible Nazi’ list but was not yet ready to remove him from his, ‘Possible Agent’ list. He figured government agents grew old like everybody else – well, at least the successful ones. That was worth a chuckle and a shiver.

By lunchtime, he had met and endeared himself to all the help that was on day duty. He learned there were three shifts, each working eight hours. Every so often, they shifted around from shift to shift. It was worth giggles.

Madge – fiftyish, friendlyish, heavyish, smilingish and full of hugsyish – was the manager of the hotel. She was responsible to keep things running on a day to day basis and seemed competent to a ten-year-old. In contrast to Sammy, *she* smelled wonderful. She pretty well fit the description of the unsuspected, undercover federal agent in the spy movies – the one nobody would surmise was that guy no matter how many spy moves one had seen. He believed he could count on her in a pinch. She lived in room 101, just off the lobby behind the main desk. He would keep that in mind just in case, and, *of course*, pass his suspicion on to his brother who would, *of course*, roll his eyes and find reason to dismiss it.

There were twenty guest rooms in the hotel. He learned

they were seldom all full except during festival weeks. Each season, Ledger had a festival of some kind – Festival of the Leaves in Fall, the Green Festival in summer, the Snow Festival in the Winter and the Festival of New Life in the Spring. He momentarily wondered if the residents were Druids [religious guardians of nature – mostly in England in the old days]. He would listen for middle English accents. The next one (festival, not, Druid) would be the Winter Festival in December – Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s all rolled into one. Because of that, it was extended from one week to fourteen days – December 18<sup>th</sup> through the 31<sup>st</sup>. It was something new to get excited about since that time was soon upon them. There was seldom snow in central Arkansas, but he heard that didn’t really dampen their spirits; trees were decorated, lights were strung, cornstalks were arranged in shocks, and Santa’s sleigh was even fitted with auxiliary casters just in case.

Like he had learned earlier, the children were bussed out of town for school. At lunch with Ollie that day in the hotel dining room, he and Sammy made plans to be close by when the buses returned that afternoon – four o’clock in front of the jail. That sent Tommy into rails of laughter. He did not explain and neither Sammy nor his grampa were foolish enough to ask. Students. Jail. It seemed blatantly obvious to Tommy. Tommy hoped they would find compatible kids with whom to establish positive, ongoing friendships. Sammy hoped he’d find a few guys to hang out with. Linguistic genes had not been distributed equally between them.

“So,” Ollie began, “I’m sure you are forming impressions of this place. Give! What?”

They each offered generally positive takes on what they had learned about both the Hotel – the *Ledger Hotel*, for those who care about such things and may be amused by the predictably mundane – and the Village of Ledger, in existence from well before the Civil War and had played an important role as a final step in the Underground Railroad. After lunch, they

planned to spend time out in the community, “To see what’s what,” Tommy offered as his full and complete explanation.

The double-crust, peach pie with ice cream pretty well sealed the deal for Sammy. Tommy would eat his way through a full week of desserts before committing himself. Tommy stopped eating when he felt full. Sammy never felt full, so . . . They had a long-standing deal – they’d both order full servings and then Tommy would leverage what he had left into whatever concessions he could pry out of his brother. They both seemed content with the arrangement. After eight or so years under the plan, they seemed to be thriving.

As Tommy was taking bets with himself about whether his brother would lick the pie plate there in public, two official looking men dressed in black suits and carrying impressive briefcases with dial locks approached their table. The taller of the two bent in across the table and spoke in a hushed tone directly to Ollie.

“Mr. Waggoner – Oliver Waggoner – Backwoods One? We are Puppy.”

It certainly got the boys’ attention. Samuel even put down his fork. Big stuff was happening.

“I assume you know that,” Ollie responded. “Identification, please.”

Tommy saw no reason in asking for it, because documents and badges could have been fake. He was immediately intrigued – impressed, even – by what happened next. The men each offered a badge concealed in their palm – upside down with the back facing up. He supposed he understood – *that* was the secret signal that proved they were authentic agents – not the badges themselves. From his grampa’s reaction, he became certain of it.

“My suite?” Ollie asked.

They nodded. Ollie spoke to the boys.

“Things are fine. I will need to speak with these gentlemen in private. You two go about your business. Please, stick here,

inside, until I return.”

The three men took the elevator up to the fifth floor.

“What was all that about?” Sammy asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“No, it isn’t. Yours is *always* better than mine. What do you think?”

“I think those agents have something to tell grampa that is too important to risk through a phone call or a telegram.”

“Wow! What about?”

“No idea. Maybe something to do with our move. Maybe they got the Nazi spy who fingered us back in Gilead. I don’t know.”

After meals, they were used to looking after their things, so they picked up their plates, glasses and utensils and took them to the dishwasher in the kitchen. Amazed, Jackson became their immediate friend and best cheerleader among the staff.

They returned to the lobby, a spacious area with the check-in desk not far inside from the large double entrance doors. Most of the area was furnished with rustic, upholstered, sofas and chairs and floor lamps and game tables for the guests. A large stone fireplace – capable of handling six-foot logs – sat at the rear with the elevator to its right facing into the room. Large, colorful, handwoven pieces of fabric decorated the walls; from the looms of local craftsmen, Tommy surmised.

Every guestroom had a radio and a telephone connected to a switchboard, which sat just behind the desk. Ice water was provided at the time of check-in. Those were luxuries seldom found outside the big cities. There were an equal number of single and double rooms. Rollaway beds could be added for families at one dollar each for the duration of the stay. Double rooms were seven dollars a day – singles five. Sammy thought that was high. Tommy calculated the income his grampa would make when the place was full - \$120.00 a night, minimum. They were going to be

rich! (Overhead, Tommy, Overhead!)

Those ten minutes seemed like a hundred. Tommy introduced his brother to Madge. She proved, again, that she could always initiate pleasant conversation – a plus for somebody in her people populated position. Sammy paged through magazines looking at pictures, while little brother scanned editorials in the Arkansas Gazette – the longtime, premier newspaper in the state, out of Little Rock, the state capital. They sat and endured the boredom. Presently, Tommy stood and roamed, knocking on the interior walls in search of secret passages.

One of the dark-suited men entered the lobby from the elevator, paused a moment to scan the area, and made a quick exit through the front door. ‘Had they really been Nazi spies and done in his grampa?’ Tommy wondered. ‘Was the second one upstairs stashing the body in a trunk about to take it down the service elevator to the alley?’

Soon, the other one arrived with Ollie. He felt some relief. Why the apparent caution indicated by the separate ride, they could not be sure. Why one left and one stayed, they could not be sure. It added to the growing mystery. The boys moved across the room to intercept their grampa.

“So?” Sammy asked.

“Yeah. So?” Tommy echoed, moving himself in front of his brother.

“A slight complication, boys.”

He ushered them back away from others and continued in a low voice.

“I have to go back to Chicago for a few days to give a deposition and testify at a trial. This is Agent Harry. He and a colleague will be staying with you while I’m gone. He assures me that he will rarely curtail your activities. You will need to stick together during that time and remain within Harry’s line of sight.



“To be clear,” Tommy began, “that includes going to the bathroom?”

“Since when have *you* become modest, little brother.”

“Oh, not that. You understand the only reason I agree to wear clothes is because the law requires it.”

“And please don’t go into the 13 reasons you have that you believe justify your position.”

“Geeze! Just going for a clarification of the rule, Sammy.”

“You will have your privacy when needed,” Harry said.

He offered his hand to each of the boys.

“I don’t bite, and I have even been known to smile.”

To prove it, he did – smile – well, also, he didn’t bite. Only Tommy took note of both. Sammy took it as a downer. So much for any alone time with Ginny. Where it came to girls, Sammy’s head was typically a half dozen steps ahead of where it was ever going to get to go in the first place.

“Questions?” Oliver asked.

“Just about a gazillion,” Tommy said, “but I assume none of what’s on my mind will be answered. We just stay behind rubbing elbows with Harry and his sidekick while worrying about your welfare until you return.”

“I can’t keep you from worrying, of course, but I can assure you everything possible will be done to see that I remain safe. It is what these men do – witness protection specialists. I understand that I will testify from behind a screen to protect my identity. I will be fine. This is the culmination of what I did all those months – so the bad guys could be taken out of our society, prosecuted, and, hopefully, sent to prison. It represents the culmination, the endgame for me, in words I’ve heard you use.”

The boys did their patented synchronized shoulder thing and nodded.

“When will you leave?” Tommy asked.

“Within the hour. An escort will arrive momentarily.”

“Bodyguards, you mean, armed and taught eleven ways to kill men with their bare hands,” Tommy said cutting to the chase in his typically Tommy fashion.

Then, he turned his attention to the agent.

“You know, in spy movies, one of the secret agents is always named Harry.”

“What good taste those movie makers must have.”

The exchange had not needed him in the way Tommy had expected, but he managed a smile and gave the agent points for his quick thinking. He wanted to ask why he and Sammy were being given protection if everything was going to be fine but didn't. They needed to set their grampa's mind at ease before he left. Tommy tried to do just that.

“Okay, then. We will be fine right here. When you get back, grampa, if Harry, here, is scooting about in his boxers, you'll know he didn't fare so well in our poker game.”

Harry chuckled. Ollie shook his head and rolled his eyes for Harry's benefit. Things still did seem to be fully predictable, and that *had* set his mind at ease. After lingering family hugs, Ollie returned to the suite to pack. Harry spoke.

“An agent named Chuck is waiting for your grandfather upstairs. He will hand him over to the rest of his escort team that's waiting out back. He will go down the back stairs and leave through that door. The people with him are the best we have. I feel sure the three of us will get on just fine, here. I have two boys of my own.”

It was Tommy's reaction:

If that was intended to be reassuring, it wasn't. Just how often had *they* been forced into dangerous situations while *their* father was forced into an even more dangerous one? Upon reflection, that argument soon backfired.

“We were planning to meet the school buses at four o'clock,” Sammy said.

“And where will that be?”

“Down in front of the jail.”

Harry chuckled. Tommy smiled and nodded into the man’s face. Perhaps he had found a soulmate.

They were waiting at the jail. It was one bus – the longest school bus either of the boys had ever seen – but only one. Most of the riders were grade school age who managed three bottoms wide per seat. Perhaps a quarter of them looked to be high schoolers. The older boys got off last having generations before claimed the rear of the bus as their own.

Tommy stepped up and began introducing himself. They seemed like nice kids open to including new arrivals. Sammy held back – his recent experiences suggested he should go easy in the new friend department. He was reluctant to make them if he was not going to be able to keep them.

Presently, one of the boy’s approached Sammy and offered his hand.

“I’m Curt – Curtis to my family. We live at the south edge of town. That’s my sister. Me and my two big brothers are very protective of her. She asked to meet you.”

He motioned and she moved forward, appearing not to be at all shy about such things.

“Her name is Ruby – like the gem. Ruby Ann Finnegan, if you want the full pedigree. The Finnegan accounts for our red hair, I suppose. Ruby, this is Sammy – I didn’t get your last name.”

“Jansen – Sammy Jansen. Sorry, I didn’t mention that. That’s my little brother, Tommy over there bending the bus driver’s ear.”

“The bus driver is my oldest brother – 24 years old, two hundred fifty pounds, with a terrific temper.”

Having had enough of the unnecessary, terror, tactics, Sammy turned to Ruby.

“It seems your brother, here, will go to no ends to protect

you. I assure you, I am harmless.”

She smiled and picked up the conversation.

“I suppose that remains to be seen. Anyway, what fun is a *harmless* boy your age?”

She plucked him under his chin and moved toward him for an uncomfortably close face to face.

Sammy gulped most certainly not understanding the implication but beginning to understand why her brothers might feel the need to keep her leash short. It suddenly seemed likely it was *the boys* they were protecting.

“Ruby. You stop that now. Boys his age don’t need to have ideas put into their heads by vulnerable girls.”

Sammy believed the last time Ruby had been vulnerable was just prior to the moment her cord had been cut.

The messages were mixed. Sammy would be cautious. Anyway, there was already, Ginny.

Harry had passed the boys’ test. He had shed his coat, hat, and tie and had let them do their things, while keeping to the background. Maybe he *did* know some things about boys.

A few of the youngsters hung around to chat and get to know the town’s newest arrivals. Tommy enjoyed the notoriety of being the oddity; Sammy not so much.

“You gonna start comin’ to Wilson with us – that’s where we go to school?” one boy asked.

“Not sure yet,” Tommy said. “We are used to doing our schoolwork at home – under our grandfather’s supervision. It would probably be fun to go to a real school.”

“Either of you play ball?” a boy with a thirty-inch neck asked, waddling in their direction. “I’m our center on the football team.”

‘Really,’ Tommy thought. ‘I didn’t know Ogre’s were allowed to play, and where on Earth does he find shirts with size gazillion necks?’

Tommy tended to have a sarcastic tongue, but he was usually able to contain it inside his mouth. That one skill clearly explained his continued existence.

Sammy answered for the two of them.

“Just pick up games – stickball and hoops sometimes.”

He got looks. Perhaps he had tried to go too jock. Tommy quickly redirected the conversation – to what, neither could remember as they played it over later up in their living room.

“So, Harry. You just stay awake twenty-four hours every day?”

“Mac will be along at midnight to spell me. He’ll sit in here where he can keep an eye on the door. I’ll go eat and then return to sleep on the couch. You will need to leave your bedroom door open. Hope that will not be bothersome to you.”

The boys accepted the stipulation without a response. Tommy was relieved. Sammy was . . . well . . . Sammy.

“Do we eat in the dining room for supper, or call down for room service?” Sammy asked. “Got great pie here. Dinner’s on us. Grampa owns this place, but I suppose you know that.”

Harry acknowledged the offer.

“Thanks, but I will eat later, and, we’re on an expense account. I’ll pay my way.”

“Downstairs, then,” Sammy said.

“My brother’s hoping to see a girl he’s sweet on,” Tommy added fulfilling the obligatory, embarrass your big brother whenever possible, tell-all-role, eternally assigned to every little brother.

Ginny spoke as they passed the desk.

“Try the blackberry cobbler. It’s the best, sweetie.”

She winked. Tommy *saw* it. Sammy *felt* it deep inside. They would have three children. He’d let her name them. They’d wear matching outfits on picnics in the summer. What had she said – berries on black corn cobs? That would be nice.

Tommy would set him straight later. It brought up a situation for the lad, he had not previously contemplated; he was happy to save his brother from his teen boy hormones whenever possible, but who was going to save *him* once that dreaded stage in life came calling? Perhaps the new Mac character would agree to stick around for another decade. Maybe he and grampa could adopt some lonely little ragamuffin and assign him the task. There had been lots of them in Chicago, so he figured there must be some in Arkansas. The next day he would begin his search.

Two questions came to mind:

'Would ragamuffin be capitalized or not?'

'If Mac had a Cheder sandwich, would that be Mac and Cheese?'

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **Ollie Heads North**

Chuck, the agent, accompanied him downstairs and opened the back door of the hotel. He faced the open rear door of a small, black van. Chuck urged him on ahead and inside. He entered without hesitation. There were two other men in there. Four seats, four men. There were no windows behind the front seat which carried only the driver.

Clearly, it was something more than a drive in the country on a pleasant fall afternoon. In fact, upon seeing how well he was being protected, Ollie suddenly realized the gravity of his situation – the Feds had reason to believe he was in danger – apparently, substantial danger.

‘I hope the boys don’t sense this,’ he thought.

He assumed the trip north would not be made in that crowded van. Before he could ask, that was confirmed. They arrived at the train depot and he, along with the three there in the back with him, transferred to a waiting pullman car, window blinds closed. Its many rows of seats were empty. Several had been made up into sleeper bunks – for later on, Ollie presumed.

As they moved down the aisle, Chuck began providing information.

“About 650 miles to Chicago. This will be a private, four-car, non-stop, train. Should take about eleven hours. You will remain in this car and you may choose to use the time as you see fit – sit, pace, read, sleep. Food will be provided, of course. Restroom up front – there. He pointed. The other agents don’t use names but will happily respond to, *Hey you!*”

Apparently, there had been no humor implied.

“Thank you for that information. What may I expect when I reach Chicago?”

“You’ll be taken directly to a saferoom in a hotel close to the federal courthouse. The trial has been underway since nine this morning. It is expected to be short. You are scheduled to testify at nine tomorrow morning. You will return to the safe room for tomorrow night and will then be returned to Ledger in much the same fashion as you are being taken north.”

“Glad I packed a few books, then. Sounds like a simply boring trip both ways.”

“Yes, Sir. Join the club. Ninety percent of a federal agent’s life, when he is on protection detail, is spent dealing with boredom while remaining on full alert.”

Ollie spoke:

“I suppose given a choice, boring is superior to disastrous.

He received no response. He had made his point – “I am expecting you gentlemen to take good care of me.”

Ollie selected a seat on his left toward the center of the car. After he removed a book from his suitcase, Chuck helped him slip his two small bags into the overhead compartment. He settled in for the duration. Chuck moved to the rear. It soon became clear that the reading material would need to wait. One of the no-name agents approached, carrying a file folder and pointed to the seat beside him.



“Certainly,” Ollie said offering a smile. “It seems to be free at the moment.”

“I am your testimony coach. We need to go over the prosecution’s questions for which you will need to have ready answers. I will also pose some we expect the defense to ask. They should be predictable in such a trial. You will be shielded from the three who are on trial and the others in the courtroom by a screen and will speak through a voice distortion megaphone to further maintain your anonymity. The judge will be able to see you in profile to his right. I am told you will know the defendants as Hans, Dolf, and Herman.”

“Okay. Yes. They are familiar to me. Hans was the head man of the group. Dolf was the muscle, as I believe it is called. Herman was the sociopathic idea man. Would not choose to spend so much as one moment with any of them in a social setting. One question, however. How will my name be protected? Do I not have to state it when being sworn in?”

“You will be sworn in the judge’s chamber ahead of time. The judge will confirm that to those gathered before you begin, so, no, your name will not come out. It will be sealed in an addendum to the trial transcript.”

“That makes me feel better. The name thing has been of concern to me ever since we have been in hiding. I know the boys feel the quality of their lives is diminished by having to use false names. It’s like one constant, ongoing, fib.”

“One does what one has to do,” the coach came back with a shrug.

In other words, be appreciative of the efforts we are making to protect you and your family and understand part of it falls on you as a patriotic American.

His coach had dozens of questions and although he made no attempt to influence the content or direction of Ollie’s answers, he did have suggestions about ways to word his responses. He

knew and performed his job well. Ollie was a quick study and four hours later the agent pronounced him ready for court.

It would be his first time in court – not so much as a parking ticket had ever come between Ollie and the law. The only times he had ever been before a judge were on those occasions when clipboard wielding artists, rated paintings, at the county fair. He had always gotten on well with them, so saw no reason that would not continue.

There were egg salad sandwiches and chips with lemonade. It was Tommy's favorite lunch. Sammy, of course, would eat anything including the paper plate if he weren't paying attention. That brought a smile to his old face. Those boys were his whole life. The fact that Hans and his 'crew' knew that, was suddenly unsettling.

"Do you believe my boys are in danger – well, you must since you are providing 'round the clock protection for them."

"Strictly a precaution. We believe your new venue there in Ledger is secure. The agency has gone to extraordinary lengths to make sure of that."

"Apparently something went wrong with security over at Gilead – where I assume you also believed things were secure."

"Things evolved in such a way we were not entirely sure, and when things reach that stage, we pull our people out. We need to know for sure that they are safe – no, 'probablys' about it. The likelihood was that you would have been safe had you continued living there."

"Reassuring, I suppose. Still, I worry about the boys."

"I understand. I can't prevent that. I worry about my daughter even though I know she's safe at home and asleep in her bed."

"I suppose. I used to feel guilty after my grandboys' parents died that I was so pleased about getting to have them in my life permanently. Parenthood is a fascinating tapestry formed

from the privilege and the responsibility, isn't it?"

"And the joy, I'd add," the agent said.

"Oh, yes. Definitely the joy."

Suddenly, he seemed like a real person. Wasn't that against Bureau rules? Ollie smiled.

The coach stood and moved to the rear joining his colleagues, leaving Ollie alone with his thoughts and his book.

Ollie wished he had suggested to the boys and Madge that they begin getting the gallery room ready. It would have provided a perfect distraction for them. Mostly empty at that point, it sat just off the lobby and had served as a large storeroom for a decade or more. The transformation should be neither difficult nor time-consuming – a good scrubbing, painting the walls and ceiling, add new carpet. It would require some innovative lighting. He had scribbled some very rough diagrams, which depicted how he thought that could be arranged. Cal could help them. It was the sort of project the boys enjoyed and would have added to their sense of permanence, he figured. He could just hear the boys bickering themselves into a perfect outcome. Like all too many things in life, it would have to wait.

Although it had not been stated, Ollie assumed he could not contact them. He already missed them. It was past their bedtime and he hoped they would use good sense about such things. Of course, they wouldn't. They were kids. That was a primary purpose of having adults around – to provide the 'good sense' part of the team. They were good kids with the judgement of kids. He knew he could trust them to do what they perceived to be right – and safe. One can't ask for more than that. Typically, in the past, that had proved to be good enough.

He leaned back and closed his eyes against the surprising anxiety he suddenly realized was building inside him. It had begun like a tiny, prickly, feather duster directly behind his navel and was spreading throughout his torso. Ollie seldom let concerns

do that to him, but he understood this was an extraordinary circumstance and received it as caution intended to keep him on his toes.

'Where's a guy's hard-toed ballet slippers when he needed them?' he smiled to himself. Could it be Tommy had come by that sort of thing naturally?

At some point, he had apparently opted for the comfort of a bunk, because that was where he found himself the next morning. It was still dark outside. He looked at his watch – going on four o'clock. Two of the men were awake. The aroma of an urn of fresh coffee drew him to the food table at the rear. A porter stood nearby.

"Breakfast, Sir. Most anything that's to your likin'. I was tasked with makin' things perfect for ya."

As was Ollie's habit, he offered his hand.

"I'm . . . er . . . Jansen. Glad to meet you."

"I'm Oliver, Sir," the porter said. "At your service."

Ollie had to chuckle. What were *those* odds.

He hastened to explain that chuckle.

"A private joke came to mind," he said, hoping to gloss over any unease his spontaneous response may have caused the old gentleman.

"Well, then, let me put you to the test, 'Oliver'. How about two eggs scrambled, lots of sausage, whole wheat toast, well buttered, and grits. Never had grits before I moved to the south. I have been missing a true culinary delight all these years. I like butter, cream, and sugar on them."

"I can whip up everything but that there culinary. If you can instruct me, I'll sure give it my best effort, though."

"Let's just omit that then – leave it out."

The man smiled and filled a mug for Ollie before making his way to the car just to the rear of the pullman. Ollie chose to walk the car as he sipped his wakeup brew and worked his old muscles

and bones back into daytime dependability. Tommy would have had a field day with his grampa's realization that it was really only that first cup in the morning that tasted good to him, yet he continued to pour it into his system throughout the day.

Presently, Oliver the Porter, returned and set a large tray on the food table. Just across the aisle, he flipped up a shelf from the back of one seat and indicated for Ollie to slip in behind it for breakfast.

He arranged the several dishes on the shelf and refilled the mug. Somewhat comically, Ollie thought, he shook open a large, linen, napkin and tucked in under his – Ollie's – chin, spreading it wide across his shirt.

'If my boys could only see me now,' he thought.

Continuing in the lighter mood, 'Oliver's, Oliver' pointed to each plate and announced the food it contained. He stood there, clearly expecting Ollie to taste his spread and offer some comment. Ollie obliged.

"This is magnificent, Oliver. Are you available to cook Thanksgiving Dinner for my grandsons and me?"

The old man recognized the humor and responded through a wonderful smile.

"Oh, no Sir. Me and mama is cookin' for our twelve grand kids. I told them they could bring their parents, too."

He chuckled at his little joke. Ollie joined him, apparently causing more of a ruckus than was expected. One of the agents moved close to make sure things had not become strained. Ollie turned to him.

"I have to thank you folks for providing such a fine chef with such a delightful way about him."

The agent clearly did not approve of such comradery between a white man and a black man but, being a professional, once he ascertained things were safe, he backed off and returned to his seat. Ollie had a hard time understanding how such a

generally nice young man could hold such distasteful beliefs dictated by the color barrier of the day. He felt more sorrow for him than anger – although there was some anger – and fear about a society so silently and yet so obviously divided along those lines.

Passionate young Tommy would have had his say about it right then and there – most likely right up in the agent's face. That pleased Ollie, even though he understood the position he had handed off to his boys was not the prevailing position of the time and place, and that it would surely provide some tension and probably outright conflict down the road.

Prejudice was a mindless state closed to logic and facts. His boys were mindful youngsters, and they welcomed logic and facts. Prejudice – though often subtle – was pervasive in those times – unquestioned, accepted without thoughtful deliberation, as normal and right by most white citizens; separate rest rooms, separate drinking fountains, separate dining facilities, separate seating sections on buses and apparently, judging by the agent's reaction, separate conversations.

The most frightening aspect for Ollie was that virtually no one seemed to understand that those aspects of society did, in fact, represent racist prejudice. Instead, they unquestionably accepted the division as normal – just how things were supposed to be. The vast majority of white people would not personally set out to inflict bodily harm on a black person – that they would consider wrong, but to force the continued separation of rights and privileges seemed harmless and proper. No thought was given to how it might affect the black person because that was none of the black person's concern.

The darkest leavings of slavery – whites, ordained as the privileged, deserved the good life; blacks, ordained as the less privileged, did not – were still with them. Even the most subtle acknowledgement of that was a frightening gateway into the Nazi way of thinking – it tipped the scales in the direction of white above

all others.

To his knowledge, as distressing as they believed Nazism was, none of the major social or political leaders of the time were talking about that prejudice/Nazi connection or proposing methods for combating it.

The incident allowed some insight about how perfectly nice people could morph into Nazi's: inherit a minor prejudice, do poorly in life or need to do better, succumb to the Nazi line, turn against their country. How scary that was – right there in the U.S. of A.

From what Ollie knew about Hitler – and it was considerable – the man was a master at mind control. Reversing a person's belief on any topic was best achieved through a slow, deliberate process, undertaken in small but unrelenting steps, each of which posed no immediately distasteful challenge or discomfort. Over and over again, Hitler had characterized those who were *different* in Germany – in the world – as posing if not hurtful, at least uncomfortable consequences for the white race. The transition was subtle but effective; at first, suggesting they should be ignored, then that they should be isolated, and finally that they should be exterminated.

People naturally like hearing they are special – it was the basis for Hitler's Aryan Race narrative. If being Aryan was best, then being anything else was *not* best – worse, bad, evil, fully unacceptable, even. Gradually, good people – Bishops in the church, among them – allowed their moral compass to be pulled off course. At one degree at a time over years, it was hardly noticed.

Others, the poor and less able, jumped onboard immediately – they found instant recognition, power, and worth as a Nazi – suddenly one of the best society had to offer – an instant winner – what an invigorating and self-fulfilling 'climb' it was. It provided immediate escape from life-long feelings of being less

worthy. An Aryan – the best – could not, by definition, have feelings of inferiority or poor self-worth – Hitler said.

And then there was the man, the cult, the Hitler. Since he had given so many Germans a new, positive perspective about themselves, surely the other things he had to say would be equally good – true – right. There would be no reason to question them. Traditionally, for most down and out folks, there were no positive, personal goals within reach. Hitler was providing goals. He was visibly achieving goals. His goals became goals those hapless masses could embrace, cling to, and by which they could feel transformed. Morality became easily trampled under the feet of greed – my whiteness above all others, my selfish needs above all others, my Aryan heritage above all others, my beliefs above all others, my nation above all other, Deutschland uber alles.

His influence even spread easily to many of the older aristocrats that were still seething because of the loss of the World War [wwi]. The more they heard it, the more likely it seemed that this man – Hitler – had what it took to regain the glory Germany had been unable to attain in the recent past. *Machen Deutschland Wieder Groß*. He repeated it often. *Make Germany Great Again!*

At five o'clock, the train jerked to a stop. It was time to leave. He moved up the aisle toward the front of the car carrying the smaller of his two bags. The porter *followed* with the *larger* one. Through the windows he could see there were more agents waiting on the platform. Federal Agents looked like federal agents – full stop.

The fabled Chicago wind was cold, and Ollie pulled the collar of his jacket close about his neck. There were filth encrusted remnants of a recent snowfall suggesting places the noontday shadows continued to allow it life. The air was filled with the putrid leavings of dozens of smoke puffing locomotives. Against the blackness, which still encompassed the rails where they hugged the ground, bright streams of steam hissed as they spewed from



beneath the waiting, massive, iron engines. That provided unexpected pockets of warmth as the men crossed to waiting vehicles.

The coach stuck with Ollie, directing him into the third of the four, long, black, cars. They entered the back seat.

“From here to the safe room,” the man explained, again. “You can get cleaned up and unwind from the journey. Regardless of the reassuring words in the rail line’s pretty brochures, a train ride is still just a bone-jostling train ride like it’s always been.”

Ollie agreed with a smile and a nod. ‘Coach’ was an interesting combination of federal agent, legal expert, master teacher, and caring human being.

It was a twenty-minute ride to the hotel. They entered through the rear, basement level, and rode a freight elevator to the fourteenth floor. They entered a room – the door marked, ‘Broom Closet’. During the ride to the top, Ollie had noted there had been no thirteenth floor.

‘Superstition suggested rattled, lazy, minds,’ he said to himself. ‘Based in correlation-driven ignorance rather than fact, it is impervious to the well-founded messages from science and research. And half the world seems to willingly run on it! What chance do my boys have spreading ideas based in rational thought among such closed, mushy minds of the masses?’

He sighed.

That was more cynical than Ollie’s usual take on the present or the future. His tendency in that direction had grown during that past year. The world was dealing with the greatest and ugliest turmoil that had ever threatened its existence. The nature of the future was genuinely in doubt. He would wait to see, since that was the only alternative he had, short of the time machine Tommy was working on.

If nothing else came of that gadget, it had prodded the old man to consider whether he would be inclined to use it and venture

a peek into the future. He was leaning toward, 'no'. The present, there in 1940, offered more problems than he could possibly fathom, let alone solve. He would not buy trouble by also taking on those of the year 2000 or 2020 or 2040.

Tommy pointed out that in the future many of the problems of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century might have been solved, and to know 'the how' about that could speed the process up and prevent much hardship and suffering. Ollie believed time travel was one of those, 'won't happen, so why even contemplate it', things. Such cautious considerations never reined-in Tommy's enthusiasm. At one level he hoped Tommy was correct. The reliable promise of a peaceful, well-ordered world would really be something.

There had been no police on motorcycles or flashing lights accompanying them. The plan seemed to be to keep the jaunt from the train low key – sure, low key with a parade of four, smoked glass, black limos in close order drill navigating the back streets of Chicago, through the first tentative rays of a new day.

Even so, he felt safe.

Up in the room, Coach spoke.

"Within sensible limits, you have free rein over your life until 8:45 at which time we will go downstairs, enter a vehicle, drive the block to the courthouse and whisk you up the back stairs to a holding room next to the Judge's chambers where you will be sworn. When you are called, we will escort you into the courtroom from the rear in such a way as to keep your physical identity secret. The trial has been going on since yesterday at about this time. The prosecutor has saved your testimony for near the end. Got it?"

"Got it!"

"Questions?"

"None."

It seemed he had a little under three hours to kill – please make that 'fill'. He had slept remarkably well on the train, so felt

no need to rest. It was just he and Coach in the room. He eased into one of two comfortable looking chairs that faced a large window looking northeast across the city. He could just make out the skyline along Lake Michigan. There were many familiar landmarks and the roofs of a million smaller, mostly decades old buildings – those places where the real Chicago lived and breathed, where often faceless folks hoped and failed, struggled and prospered, lived and died.

It had been that way for a hundred years, rising and falling, coming and going, and always beckoning to and accommodating the newcomers from every imaginable place around the world. There were local skirmishes and tensions, which changed in ethnic and racial makeup from decade to decade, but across the city as a whole, their contributions were understood to be the essential backbone of its society – too often, perhaps, in retrospect.

Coach brought a phone, dragging the long cord across the carpet.

“We have taken the liberty, Sir. A couple of young voices here wanting to wish you well.”

Ollie’s face brightened. He accepted the phone, his spirits buoyed up and filled with confidence and purpose. He turned away, as if there could really be any privacy.

“Hey there. I understand there are a pair of imps on this line.”

“That is, of course, two of the most adorable imps in the known universe!”

It had been Tommy, of course.

“You put the bad guys away yet?”

“My testimony will take place in a couple of hours. You two doing well, I assume.”

“Of course. Rather boring having to stay here in this big old hotel. Harry and Mac aren’t all that bad. We had an idea. I’ll let

Sammy bounce it off you. We just have two minutes.”

“Hi grampa. I’ve been listening. We were thinking about getting started on that gallery room – you know, clean it up, give it a paint job, get Cal to help us put in some fantastic lighting. What do you say?”

“What a fine idea. I’ll just suggest that you get Madge into the loop. She’ll have good ideas, I’m sure.”

“Already there. She said to ask you about colors.”

“I have been thinking *black* – walls and ceiling. Black carpet with deep pile.”

“You serious? Black?”

“Yes. Think about it. White frames against a black background so the only colors will be those in the individually lit paintings. It will seem as if the pictures are just floating there in quiet darkness.”

“Neat! We’ll do it.”

Tommy came back on the line.

“*In quiet darkness* – that was a great line. You’re doing okay, right?”

“I’m doing just fine. I’ll be home before you know it. An hour or so on the witness stand and then back here to my room. The plan is for me to stay here tonight and start back tomorrow morning. No idea when I’ll arrive in Ledger. Harry may know.”

Ollie looked at Coach to see if he’d offer some sign. He did. A nod.

“Yes, I’m told he will know. You guys take care. See you soon. Love you.”

“Love you, back.”

He handed the phone to his man.

“Thank you for that. Very thoughtful. I hadn’t realized how concerned I’d been. Besides their week at summer camp every July, I’m never away from them for more than a few hours at a time.”

Ollie opened his book hoping that pursuing a chapter or two would make the time pass more quickly. It did – sort of.

At 8:30, Coach said he needed to start getting ready. He changed his shirt and removed his sport coat from the hanger. He did what he could to shake out the wrinkles and slipped it on. With the addition of a blue tie, and a once through with his comb, he felt presentable. After all, nobody was going to see him. Coach offered a thumbs up and they walked toward the door.

The phone rang. Coach answered and listened for the better part of five minutes. As he hung up, he turned toward Ollie.

“A complication – a very unpleasant complication, Oliver. It will require a serious decision on your part. Your grandsons have just been kidnapped. The note left behind states that if you go ahead and testify, the boys will be harmed. My supervisor is on the phone with the judge as we speak.”

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## CHAPTER NINE

### Kidnapped

“Are the chances for my grandsons’ safety really any better if I *don’t* testify?” Ollie asked the agent. “Be truthful with me.”

“In all honesty, then, no. It’s that simple.”

“I have two very resourceful grandsons. Let’s move out and get this testimony behind me.”

\* \* \*

*A few minutes earlier – 650 miles to the south.*

Tommy hung up the phone in their living room.

“That was pretty nice of the Feds – to arrange that call. I’ve never talked long distance, before. I think he sounded okay. How about you?”

“Yeah. Good. I’ll be glad to get him back here safe and sound, though. Chicago seems like a long way away.”

“I was snooping earlier,” Tommy began, “and I found some diagrams on grampa’s desk – the plan for the lights on the gallery ceiling, I’m thinking.”

He pulled the folded sheets out of his rear pocket and shared them.

“You just may be right about what this is, Tommy, since

across the top of the sheet it says, 'Lighting plans for the new Gallery'."

Before the shrug and grin could be offered, their lives took a frightening turn.

Mac, who had been sitting across the room near a window, suddenly stood, and put his finger to his lips. As he removed his handgun from inside his jacket, he extended his arm and ushered the boys back against the wall. Tommy went directly to his brother's side and attached his arms around his waist. Sammy drew him close. They waited in silence unsure which emotion they should be feeling.

The agent had clearly heard something. The boys had not, but then, that had not been their job.

Mac crossed the room to the door, unlocked it using the key he kept in the keyhole. He turned the handle, preparing to peek out into the hall.

The door swung into the room with great force, overwhelming Mac and dislodging his gun from his hand. Three, gun wielding men, looking much like the James Gang with bandanas across their faces, burst into the room. One pistol whipped Mac and he slumped unconscious onto the rug. Empty, white, twenty-pound, cloth flour sacks were slipped over the boys' heads and the draw string tightened and tied below their chins. They were thick enough so they couldn't see but thin enough to allow them to make out light from dark.

One man leaned over and whispered, barely audibly, into Sammy's ear.

"Make a move to escape or make a single sound and I will shoot your brother."

Another man leaned over and whispered, barely audibly, into Tommy's ear.

"Make a move to escape or make a single sound and I will shoot your brother."



The abduction had been planned down to the last detail – the last syllable, apparently.

A man grabbed the front of each boy's belt, pulled him into the hall and through the door that led to the loading area at the freight elevator. They entered and rode it down to the first floor. Another man was waiting and removed the '*Out of Order*' sign that had been placed on it. They went outside where the boys were lifted onto the floor of a waiting, dark green, van. Within two minutes of Mac's first reaction, they were uncomfortably on their way to somewhere.

The boys were concerned about what had happened to Mac.

The boys were concerned about what was about to happen to them.

The boys were concerned about what it meant for their grampa's testimony.

The van left Ledger and made its way east along a jarring, country road that paralleled the railroad tracks. Half an hour later it stopped. The boys heard railroad noises – chugging engines, escaping steam, livestock making their livestock sounds as they climbed ramps into stock cars. Clearly, it was a railroad siding.

They were carried like bags of feed over men's shoulders, from the van to what they would discover was a mostly empty box car. The door was closed leaving them inside where it was dark as night. Out of the blackness, a man's voice reminded them of the previous warnings.

"Remember what you were each told about the fate of your brother if you make any attempt to call attention to yourself or try to escape."

He spoke through a thick accent from the rear of the car.

Once the train began moving, he spoke again.

"You can take off the sacks, then move to the front of the car and sit with your back against it."

He remained at the rear, apparently facing them. In the darkness, the boys could not see him but did hear him slide his back down the wall into a sitting position. Eyes uncovered, they could but make out the faintest of forms. An occasional burst of light through a crack in one of the doors provided no useful illumination. From the source of his voice, they knew where he was but even free from the sacks could not see him. That meant he could not see them. Perhaps they could use that to their advantage.

The doubting Thomas had to confront the threat – just to check out its authenticity, so he whispered something meaningless to Sammy. The man’s response was immediate and serious in nature.

“Shut up. Only warning before you know what.”

Tommy had his answer. Although it sounded convincing, he didn’t believe it; he hadn’t believed it from the beginning, or he would not have tried it. They would be no good to the bad guys unless they were alive. That was why they had been snatched – they couldn’t threaten their grampa about killing them if they were already dead. If there were some sort of call about it, grampa would demand to hear their voices. As well as the operation seemed to have been planned, the bad guys would surely know that. It happened in all those movies.

They sat where and how they had been instructed. The noise from the iron wheels against the iron rails was amplified inside the boxcar, like the sound of plucked strings from inside a guitar. That was also a good thing for them. It would obscure most of the incidental sounds they might make.

Tommy was usually the one with great ideas. However, that day, there in the uncomfortable, cold, and growing colder, box car, it was Sammy’s turn.

He reached out and opened his younger brother’s hand placing the fingers from his own right hand on it. His fingers

moved. Tommy was baffled. Was he drawing? Sammy repeated the process.

He tapped his brother on his chest with his left hand and then quickly moved his fingers against his palm. He took it slowly, clearly offering three distinct arrangements of his fingers.

He took Tommy's hand and moved it to pat his own chest and again moved his fingers in three distinct, though mostly different, sequences.

Nothing. Tommy placed one of his brother's hands on his shoulder and shrugged to indicate he didn't get it.

Sammy tried again repeating the first sequence. When finished, he touched Tommy's chest, his face, his leg and then repeated the motions.

In a burst of insight, Tommy understood – *T – O – M* in sign language – finger language – the way they had always communicated with their friend Dereck back home. Instead of looking at it, they had to visualize the signs from how they felt against their palms.

'You are a genius, Sam,' Tommy signed back into his brother's palm.

'About time you recognized that, Tom. And, *slow* down.'

'We need a plan.'

'Did they frisk you? They didn't me.'

'No. Can't understand why not,' Tommy signed, then continued.

"Are you carrying anything worthwhile?"

"Not really. My big handkerchief. You?"

'My pocketknife in its holster on my right calf.'

"You aren't considering stabbing him, are you?"

'I hadn't until you mentioned it. Get this. After you somehow subdue him, we will need something to tie him up with.'

'I can't believe you said that,' Sammy signed.

'What?'

‘Ended that sentence with a preposition – *up with.*’

Tommy shook his head into the darkness and continued, ignoring his brother’s remark – though having to admit the realization did upset him. He pulled up his pants leg to remove the knife.

‘You remember how we’ve laughed about how in the movies, guys get tied up with belts that are three inches wide – a complete impossibility for a secure binding. What we need are narrow leather strips – rawhide-like. I will cut my belt into three long strips and remove them from the buckle. With them, we can tie his wrists and ankles so tight his fingers and toes will fall off. We can stuff his mouth with his socks. While I work on that, you figure a way to get the best of him. The darkness is in *our* favor – not his. He believes he has us terrified into submission. I’d opt for rendering him unconscious.’

‘Most folks would have said knock him out.’

Again, Tommy shrugged into the darkness.

Quietly, for a ten-year-old boy, Tommy slipped his belt from the pants loops, quieting any possible noise from the metal buckle by clasping it tightly in the palm of his left hand. Fortunately, he thought, his jeans had grown tight during the past month or so, tight enough around his waist to not fall down – he hoped.

He flattened the belt out against the floor and began making the incisions – removing the buckle, first. His task was difficult and required his fingers, rather than his eyes, to guide him. Great care was required. Red dyed leather, though colorful, would not bode well for the lad’s blood supply.

Silently and slowly, Sammy crawled back and forth across the floor through the darkness feeling his way in hope of finding something he could use as a weapon. No such luck. He did discover lots of small pebbles – sharp pebbles – chat, perhaps – but his hope for a three-foot long 2 X 4 went unfulfilled.

‘Boogers!’ Sammy signed into the air out of habit. There

had been lots of emotion included. He returned to Tommy.

They exchanged their information – no weapon and knee-gouging chat from Sammy, and three, great, twenty-four-inch leather thongs not quite half an inch wide from Tommy.

‘Perfect,’ Sammy said feeling them, end to end.

‘Of course,’ came Tommy’s response – not bragging, just stating the truth as he understood it.

‘If our boots were just heavy enough, we could use them to clobber the guy over his head,’ Sammy offered, like the bad guy clobbered Mac.

‘A great weapon,’ Tommy agreed. ‘We just have to find some way to make them heavy.’

‘Iron bars?’ Sammy offered – he wasn’t sure how to make that sound sarcastic in sign language. He poked extra hard. It didn’t matter. Tommy had a solution – maybe.

‘Is there enough chat on the floor to fill up the bottom of one of your boots – the foot part – to make it heavy?’

‘I imagine. Take a while, one chat at a time. It’s spread all over the floor – like it was missed when the car was swept out.’

‘We better get crackin’ then. No idea how long we have here on the train. We seem to be moving slowly.’

‘Maybe they want to keep us close to Ledger for some reason. I assume they and the Chicago agents only know how to contact each other there at the hotel. They wouldn’t advertise some other place or phone number, do you think?’

Tommy let alone what he figured was the obvious.

Sammy was correct about filling the boot, it seemed to be taking forever. After, perhaps, twenty minutes, they agreed it was full enough – *quite* heavy, in fact.

‘We need to remove our socks and stuff them down inside the top of the boot to keep the chat in place as it’s raised for the critical blow.’

That had been Tommy, of course. Socks off, they were

ready to proceed with the stuffing, when the man at the rear stirred and spoke.

‘In a few minutes we will be changing you two to another train headed west.’

Tommy responded to his brother in signs.

‘West is the way from which we came.’

Sammy smiled – the preposition thing had been corrected. He was the first to mention the problem.

‘I’ll have to wear my boot, or he’ll know something’s up.’

‘Ok. Pour the chat into one of your socks to save it.’

‘Too much for one. I’ll need to half and half it into two socks.’

‘Let’s do that, then. We will use the thongs to tie them closed and then hide them in our pants – one in yours and one in mine.’

‘Won’t they see a bulge?’

‘We can walk with our hands in our pockets and press them flat against the inside of our upper legs. We can loop one end of the thong around a belt loop to keep the sock from slipping.’

‘Sounds good. We can try that, I guess.’

They spent several minutes preparing the socks and positioning them at pocket level inside the fronts of their pants. Although they couldn’t observe the result, feeling things made it seem successful. They pulled on their boots and waited.

The whistle sounded and the train began to slow after having swerved onto a siding to their left – that would be north – at least that is how the boys interpreted the swaying of the car and the changing sounds from the rails. They heard the suddenly escaping steam relieving pressure on the tank in the engine as they came to a stop. They remained still for perhaps five minutes before they heard the distant sound of a second train approaching from the east. It apparently pulled into the siding as well.

When the door was slid open, the late afternoon light

entered and surprised their eyes. Sammy caught a quick glance at his watch – going on four. It had not seemed that long a trip, but then they had been busy. It would soon be dark – a cold, November night. They were hungry and thirsty. They were directed to jump down to the ground and walk to the other train. It was far longer – perhaps twenty cars – one empty pullman up front, two coal cars next and the rest the familiar box cars completing the train back to the caboose – some loaded and some empty.

Again, it would be the hospitality of a box car that greeted them. There was a ramp, which they were directed to climb. Like before, they were told to move to the front and sit. The men made no attempt to hide their faces. A small, open, wooden crate was set in place after them, just inside the door.

Somebody loosened the ramp and it crashed to the ground. The door was closed and locked from the outside. That time, no man remained inside with them. Perhaps they had caught a break.

Perhaps *two*. The slit between the door and the vertical edge of the opening was a full inch wide, allowing light to enter. It lit the inside well enough and provided a good view of what there was to see outside. With the coming darkness, they could not be sure if that really offered any benefit. They took advantage while they could. To free both hands, they lay aside the chat-filled socks.

The train that had brought them that far, pulled away and continued east. The train they were on – the one sitting on a siding facing west – remained stationary. The engine sat close to the switch that would allow them access to the main rails back toward Ledger.

Tommy examined the crate.

“Food,” he whispered, also signing. It was the habit from when they were with their friend – simultaneous signing and speaking to keep everybody in the loop.

There were sandwiches enough to keep them through

several meals, an opened can of beans, and jars of water – even a quart of milk. There were four apples, two peaches and a bag of carrots. Not quality cuisine, but boys could get by on quantity. Tommy pushed the crate to where Sammy was sitting just to the front of the door, while he continued watching through the slit closer to the rear.

“A good sign, I think,” Tommy whispered. “The food here should last two days – I hope that means they expect to keep us alive for at least that long.”

Sammy offered no response. It had been the first time either one had mentioned their mortality.

As their eyes adjusted to the darkness, they found even the faint light from the slit allowed them to see well enough to get around and make out the essential features inside the car.

While they drank and ate, they remained near the slit positioned so they could watch what was going on outside and catch occasional words and phrases. Nothing of note was taking place. Occasionally, there would be a muffled voice – usually in German. They recognized the language because their grampa spoke it with certain friends. They were not fluent, themselves. They couldn’t make out what was being said, but it indicated they had not been left alone.

“Do you suppose this is our destination? Sammy asked. “The place we will stay until whatever is going to happen, happens?”

“No way of knowing, of course. Do you agree that the first train – the one from Ledger – kept to pretty much a straight path – east across the state?”

“Seemed that way to me. It was a strange, start and stop trip. We moved onto several sidings for short periods but other than that, yeah, straight. Why?” Sammy asked.

“I was just doing some calculations – eight hours averaging say fifty miles an hour would have put us some 400 miles from



Ledger. But we made those stops you mentioned, six times – for how long each time do you think?”

“Nearly an hour, I’d say,” Sammy said. “That sure cuts down the distance that we traveled, doesn’t it?”

“By 300 miles. That makes more sense. I couldn’t understand it because it can’t be more than 150 miles from Ledger way over to the east side of Arkansas. There, we’d come to the Mississippi River and I’m pretty sure we haven’t crossed that river.”

“I agree, but I’m not sure what it tells us,” Sammy said.

“It tells us that after traveling for eight hours, sitting here on this siding like we are, now, we can’t really be more than a hundred miles from the hotel. We could walk that in two days if we needed to.”

“So, any ideas why we are just sitting here, facing west?”

“Ready to make a quick return trip if necessary, maybe,” Tommy said, suddenly sounding a bit hopeful for the first time.

Something had been concerning both of them though neither had mentioned it. Most of the practical information they had acquired about Nazi’s, they had learned Saturday afternoons in the near-by movie theater in Chicago. They understood that lent some doubt about the authenticity of the information. Still, in those spy movies, the bad guy’s plan – to build up the suspense – usually was to kill the captives once the payoff or whatever was received – *always* if they had seen the faces of their captors, and Tommy and Sammy *had* been allowed to see their captor’s faces when they left the first boxcar. In the movies, that was clearly included to play on emotions, increase the suspense, and indicate the inevitable, dire, fate awaiting the captives. Predictably, however, the good guys – the men in the lighter colored trench coats and fedoras – arrived in time to thwart those plans. They hoped that would be true for them. My, how they hoped that would be true for them.

Not willing to count on that, they had been preparing to take things into their own hands. Oliver had it right when he told the agent he had two very resourceful grandsons.

“We still need to escape,” Sammy said. “Should be easier now that we don’t have a guard here with us.”

“Agreed,” Tommy came back.

“In order to escape we first need to get out of this box car.”

“Agreed.”

“The doors are kept locked so set your head to figuring some different way out, little brother.”

“Our options seem to be through the floor or through the roof. I suggest roof. Through the floor sets us down on the tracks – the most treacherous place in all of railroading – and puts us rubbing shoulders with the bad guys.”

“Agreed. How?”

“Two things to begin with,” Tommy said moving back to the slit in the door. “Come here. Look at the top of that box car over their on the far siding. Two dealeos on the roof – little lids maybe, or doors, eighteen inches square, raised some six inches above the roof. They’re set in about three feet from each end.”

“I know about them,” Sammy said. “Used for ventilation, I think. We can find the underside of the ones on this car if we examine the ceiling.”

“Do you know if they open all the way?”

“I don’t know. Let’s take a look.”

“The ceiling is ten feet above the floor. You bring a ladder in your pocket, big brother?”

“No. But I brought a scrawny ten-year-old who’s all arms and legs, and my own, two, pretty sturdy shoulders. If you stand on them, you can reach one of the vents and examine it.”

“I could do that. Good thinking. Let’s give it a try.”

Sammy positioned himself directly under the rear vent – that area received more light from the opening than the one to the

front. He gave Tommy a leg up with his cupped hands. With some ease, Tommy managed to perch himself on Sammy's shoulders. It certainly had not been the first time he'd ridden there. Then, holding onto his brother's up-stretched arms and hands, he managed to stand, bent forward for stability.

"Okay. Here comes the hard part – balancing on my own while I let go, unfold myself upward, reach out, and get hold of that vent."

The process took some time since Tommy lost his balance and had to jump to the floor several times.

"Third time's the charm," he said, clearly confident as he began the process again.

As Tommy would, he had learned important things from the initial failures.

He was again standing on his brother's shoulders. He again carefully let go of Sammy's hands and straightened himself – arms upward and a bit to his sides for balance.

"Got my hands inside the recess up here. I'm steady – stable. Like we figured, it's a square hole with that lid structure set in place covering it. All around the edges is screen. When I push up, the top raises another four inches exposing the screen so air can flow out of the car. Hey. In luck. That structure is held in place by just four screws. I feel them. Can you reach up my right pant leg and remove my pocketknife for me?"

"We will soon know. I'm letting loose of your right leg, now. I'm trying to find the bottom of your pant leg. Got it. Just enough room for my hand up inside."

"You are tickling me!"

"Sorry. Suggestion?"

"Try pressing harder against my leg. Tickling usually occurs from light pressure. Ouch! Your job is not to skin me alive."

Sammy ignored that newest complaint and made the adjustment.

“Got it. Can you bend down to take it from me?”

“I think I can. You better open it first. If I don’t keep one hand braced up here, I’ll surely find myself on the floor again. The last time I took a header, I hurt my left shoulder.”

“Easy does it then . . . My hands are away from your legs for just a moment . . . opening . . . I got it open. That helps, actually. Makes it three or four inches longer – shortens the distance for you to reach. I have it by the end of the blade, so try to slip it out carefully. I’m starting with four fingers and a thumb and I’d like to end up with four fingers and a thumb.”

“Got ya. Here I come on the bend-down. Try to stand still, now.”

They grew quiet. They made the exchange.

The unexpected happened.

“You boys alright in there?” came a question from a shadow suddenly covering the lower foot or so of the slit by the door.

Sammy answered.

“Can’t think of it as *alright* after being kidnapped, you understand, but if you mean, are we surviving, I guess so. Thanks for the food and water, by the way. We are tired and just settled in for a nap. How long will we be here?”

“Can’t say. Just keep quiet. Sleep’s probably a good idea.”

He had not seen them.

The man’s accent was thick but not the voice of the one who had been riding with them. It was somehow gentler.

The shadow moved away. Tommy wanted to cheer, considering how masterfully he thought his brother had handled it. Perhaps he had not been giving him enough credit for what could actually take place inside that skull of his. He had to admit he had fretted about that because his grades in school were excellent.

Tommy began attending to the screws. They were not rusted in place the way he feared they might be. He attributed that

to their position in the vent system – always awash in an updraft would tend to keep them dry.

None of that meant it was an easy task. Upon removing the first one, he dropped it. It would probably not be needed again, anyway. He proceeded to remove the remaining three, having learned how to be more careful. ‘Careful’ and ten-year-old boys had never gone together since the advent of ten-year-old boys.

“Got them all out. I’m going to see if I can force the whole frame up and away from the hole.”

“Don’t lose *it* like you did that *screw*. Be gentle with it. We probably should leave it in place, so the bad guys don’t see it and find out what we’re up to.”

Tommy was ahead of him on that one but didn’t mention it.

‘We combine to make an exceptionally well-tuned unit,’ Tommy thought to himself.

‘Together, we make a darn good team,’ Sammy thought to himself.

Could they have read each other’s minds, it would have been the revelation from which smiles were created/the stuff smiles were made of.

The little structure was eighteen inches square, little more than an upright, 1 X 4 frame with a wooden top. It included a baffle system, which let air out but kept rain from coming inside. They would learn the outside of the top and sides had been coated in tar – waterproofing, Tommy would figure. What he had not figured at that point was that the tar was holding the frame in place on the roof, screws or no screws. Not knowing that, then, he described what he knew to Sammy.

“Even with the screws removed, it seems stuck in place. Maybe straps across the top that are screwed to the roof. That would not be good.”

“Here’s an idea. Use the long knife blade and see if you can force it under the bottom of the frame all the way around. Derick

and I went down to the rail yard a couple of times and one thing we learned was that the roofs of the older cars, like this one, were often tarred. If this one is like that, it's what could be holding it in place."

"I already considered that, and by the way, Grampa said the rail yard was off limits to us."

"You complaining, now? It may have offered me an important piece of *life-changing knowledge*, as you have so often called such things that *you've* done or learned. Think of my time there as an important part of my education and get on with things up there. My shoulders are killing me. Next time, boots off."

Tommy was able to smile at the exchange. While Sammy had been talking, Tommy had been slicing through the very tar that his brother figured might be the culprit. By the time Sammy was finished with his explanation down below, up above the vent frame was free and Tommy set it aside – only an inch or so, thinking it would not be good to let any more light brighten the interior of the car. The men might see it through the slit and move to investigate.

Perhaps that did not matter since by then it was turning dark outside. The process had taken half an hour. Tommy closed the knife and jumped to the floor. Sammy worked his shoulders and gently jumped up and down to relieve the pain and reset his bones. They had done those things thoughtfully – quietly.

"Dark in here, again," Tommy said going to the door to discover what he could see outside.

There were a half dozen lights at the tops of as many tall poles scattered across the long, narrow, area along the rails. They were on, but they did not light the entire area, leaving the east and west ends in the shadows. The boys had gotten a good look around earlier, so the lack of light would not pose any real problem should they decide they needed to navigate the area on foot. Just to the north of the main rails were four sets of siding rails – room

for four strings of cars. They were on the one closest to the railroad track.

The boys figured the time had come for a more all-inclusive plan. Would they wait to exit the car until the train was moving? Probably not, since the program seemed to be to move them from car to car, train to train, so they couldn't depend on even being in that one for much longer. Once up on top, what would they do? Lay flat and wait as they traveled west would be one option. Climb down the ladder on the side of the car to the ground and escape into the darkness. It wouldn't do to be stranded a hundred miles from home plus that did nothing to deal with the bad guys. Although that had not been stated, both assumed that would be included in the plan. How long did they dare wait? It seemed important to get back to the hotel as soon as they could, so their grampa would know they were safe, and he could continue testifying – in case the trial had been stopped in light of the turn in events.

Once the cover of darkness was upon them, it took but a few minutes for them to set their plan. Outside, moonless darkness under a cloud-laden sky set the stage for the world in which they would be working. Sammy understood and accepted that the dark was the great equalizer between opponents, so he welcomed it. Tommy was less enthusiastic, still harboring fantasies of dragons, ogres, and monsters maintaining their lairs in the deepest blackness the world had to offer. Perhaps, he could entice them into helping. An army of ogres could surely overpower a half dozen Nazis. Without the slightest problem, he could see himself leading them into battle.

/



## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **The candle was burning at both ends**

After the judge had been apprised of the threat, Oliver's testimony was delayed until after a face-on meeting with him. Ollie finally took his seat in the courtroom at one o'clock. It could not be said he felt *calm* or *cool*, but he came close to meeting the criteria for *collected*. His decision was to approach his time on the stand the way he approached painting – while concentrating on one specific area of the picture, he would put the rest of it out of mind. He couldn't do that completely, of course, but he was able to keep his focus, content in the knowledge he had not raised two boys who would be willing to sit back and let their fates be managed by some evil force.

The prosecutor was well organized and, with Oliver's carefully articulated answers, made a solid case against the three defendants. Their attorney – a Middle-aged public defender – was relentless in his attempt at discrediting Oliver as a super-zealous, semi-senile, patriot who would tell any story, however farfetched, to smear his clients – peaceful, dedicated, hardworking, immigrants from Germany who had come to the states to establish

a better way of life.

Ollie was a man of peace and had been all his life, but by the end of that afternoon he would have taken great pleasure in publicly strangling the life out of that defense attorney.

His testimony ended at 5:55 p.m. He returned to the holding room where he needed to sign an affidavit based on his testimony. There was a knock on the door. It opened and an agent announced the visitor. It was that public defender. Ollie was surprised and puzzled. Perhaps he was to be given the opportunity to strangle him, after all.

The man walked directly to him his hand offered for a shake. Baffled, Ollie accepted it. The man spoke.

“Mr. Waggoner. Before you got away, I just had to shake your hand and tell you how much I appreciate the service you have rendered our country. I realize how necessary it was as well as how terribly risky it was for you and your family. Our country owes you a debt of gratitude it will never be able to repay. I am devastated about you grandsons’ situation. Just wanted you to know. Honored to have met you, Sir. One of the best witness I have ever faced.”

He nodded at the judge and agents, turned and left. Ollie moved from baffled to dumfounded. The judge sensed it and spoke.

“John Kessler, one of the finest attorneys and men you will ever meet. He is relentless in his belief that defendants deserve the best representation the law can provide – just as the laws of our country require to assure complete, unbiased, fairness, regardless of social or financial circumstances.”

“I seem to have a great deal to learn about the confrontational workings of the legal system. I really was ready to climb down off that stand, crawl down his throat, and remove his appendix from the inside.”

The judge smiled and chuckled. He made no further

comment.

Ollie was back in his hotel room at 6:25. Considering the new circumstances, arrangements had been made for him to return immediately to Ledger, and an hour later he and a half dozen agents were settled back into the pullman car that had delivered him to Chicago. In truth, he told the chief agent if they didn't have him on his way by seven, he would begin walking. By then, the agent believed him.

He asked, first thing, about the progress in finding the boys. The answer had not taken long – there was none to report. The van had apparently continued east on back roads, apparently making sure it remained visible to locals, so it would appear the abductors were still moving the boys east. The agent doubted that, since they were making no effort to hide their route. At some point, the van just disappeared. Regardless of the agent's take, it was not what Ollie had been hoping for.

He settled into the same seat he had occupied on the trip north – something familiar and more or less comfortable thinking that might help him handle his growing anxiety and concern. Oliver – the porter – had been taken ill and was not making the trip south. It was of no importance to Ollie who had no desire for food.

Coach was not along – his job had been well done on the earlier trip. Ollie hoped he was tucking in his daughter. From their appearance, the men who accompanied him could have been on their way to an undertaker's convention – sober faced wearing black suits, shoes, socks and hats. Ollie suspected black undies as well. That produced his first 'sort of' smile in many hours. The white shirts notwithstanding, they were a fearsome looking group of men who would have clearly felt more at home playing linebackers for the Chicago Bears on a muddy field during a chilling, November, downpour. Perhaps, they had!

He figured nothing about that was in any way bad, considering the dire situation that suddenly surrounded his family.

He wanted to trust the professionals. He wanted to yell profanities at them for having allowed the abduction and not having it resolved yet. He remained quiet. That feathery thing behind his navel, reappeared.

The new porter approached him from the rear of the car with a tray carrying a plate covered by the traditional stainless-steel dome used to assure a warm meal. He opened the legs of the tray and sat it in the aisle beside him. Offering a broad smile, he bent down to remove the dome. Ollie was willing to take a look.

Under it lay not a plate of food, but a handgun. The porter reached for it. Ollie instinctively laid over on the seat, hoping to make himself less of a target. The man took the weapon and was aiming it as three agents swarmed over him. The gun went off. Ollie grasped his left shoulder. He was immediately awash in blood.

The agents subdued the porter pinning him to the floor. They removed him from the car through the rear door. Another approached Ollie with a medical bag, proceeded with an examination, and offered first aid.

The bullet was pronounced a ‘through and through’, meaning it had entered through the rear of the shoulder and exited through the front. Apparently, a good thing. Through the growing pain, Ollie had difficulty seeing it that way. It brought his boys’ well-being into focus. Once their abductors heard he had gone ahead and testified, there would be no reason to keep them alive – or would there.

He figured there might be one chance – their backup plan – to use the boys as bait to lure him to his own death. He that voiced that theory to the agent in charge.

“That is our hope, actually,” he said. “The attempt to lure, not the death, understand. We have already sent out word that the attempt on your life here on the train was unsuccessful. If they learned you had been killed, the boys’ lives wouldn’t be worth a

plug nickel. Rest assured, they will wait to hear.”

“How would they have planned to receive that report from a train speeding through the night?”

“Assuming there is not an illicit radio on board, a message confirming success or failure could have been dropped out a window in a box or envelope or book at some specified point after the attempt. Since that is a possibility it would mean there would have to be a second Nazi agent onboard. They would know the shooter wouldn’t be free to do that once he had pulled the trigger. We have done what we can to make *our* announcement very public and, so, readily available to them – that you survived.

“So, we are moving two agents to sit behind you, two to sit in front of you and two to sit across from you. If you decide to use a sleeper bunk, they will accompany you back there. We are mystified about how the assassin slipped through our safety net. He was thoroughly vetted. In fact, we have used him before. Perhaps the agents with him now will have found out something.”

“Maybe he is in a similar situation to the one I’ve been in – except it would be a threat to some family member if he *didn’t* go through with it. Clearly, from the process you describe, the weapon could not have arrived with him, could it?”

“No. We are looking into all those possibilities. You think like an agent, Sir. Let me know if you need anything that we can reasonably provide.”

“Those final four words shoot the offer to heck you know, since the only thing I want, remains out of reach.”

“Don’t give up. We do have some things working for us.”

“When all of this is over, I want you to spend five minutes with my grandsons, and you will then realize why I have no reason to give up.”

The agent raised his eyebrows and left Ollie to himself. It had not been a reassuring gesture.

‘He really thinks I’m a doting, old grandfather teetering

between senility and tainted memories. My boys will prove him wrong.'

The agent returned almost immediately.

"One more thing. I have just been told that we will be stopping in about five minutes to pick up a surgical team to attend to your shoulder. Our medic determined there may be some serious muscle and blood vessel damage that needs immediate attention. Also, you lost a great deal of blood and need to have your fluids brought back to normal."

Ollie made no effort to discourage any of it. He needed to make sure he remained in good shape. He had two boys to finish raising.

"I assume the doc will have been better vetted than the porter was."

"We deserved that. He will have been strip searched right down to the dirt under his fingernails before we let him near you."

"And the porter's accomplice you say probably remains on the train?"

"There is a possibility he could have jumped off. Nobody in or out of this car without impeccable ID. Fewer than a half dozen on board that are not federal agents. They will not be hard to surveil."

"I suppose there is nothing I can do anyway, so I might as well leave it alone. I don't mean to sound ungrateful."

Like the man said, the train soon stopped. It was more a very short pause, since it couldn't have taken more than one minute before it was on its way again.

Ollie figured he had listened to one too many of Tommy's blow by blow recountings of those spy movies, because he envisioned a half dozen bad guys in ski masks – tommy guns at the ready – jumping aboard the caboose at that stop and moving forward toward his car at that very minute.

Instead, it was a doctor in his forties who entered and

approached him. He was followed by a somewhat younger man.

“Let’s get you onto a lower bunk so I can take a good look. I’ll need to cut your shirt away. This is my nurse – John. He’s been my right-hand man for six years. I am a surgeon.”

They arranged Ollie on his back, so his left shoulder was facing the aisle. His shirt was removed. The nurse first set up a flood light and then an I-V.

“We’ll stick you with a couple shots in the area of the wound – front and back. They should dull the pain from my probing and such.”

“Should?” Ollie said/asked.

The doctor continued, offering a quick, half smile. He waited something more than a minute before he began his work, examining Ollie’s eyes and listening to his heart while he waited.

‘Probing’ sounded painful enough. The ‘and such’ seemed to have the potential of being even worse.

“If you feel pain, let me know. I may not be able to do much about it, but I need to know?”

Federal agents that can’t protect him. A Nazi agent roaming around the train. A nurse that’s a man. And a doc who intends to continue doing what he has to do in spite of the fact it may be seriously painful. At that moment, the comfortable solitude of his little hotel down in Ledger seemed very inviting.

A few minutes into the exam the doctor spoke.

“Bad news.”

It was always so reassuring when a doctor began his report with the words, ‘bad news’. He continued.

“The bullet was a hollow point and it split in two – half is still sitting there just under your shoulder bone. The bone has been chipped. I will need to make an incision to remove the splinters and do the repairs. That means anesthetic. Objections?”

“I guess not. Do what has to be done. Just make sure it’s ether and not cyanide.”

Ollie thought he was making a joke – apparently, not.

The lead agent approached them.

“Need to try the anesthetic on an agent first to make sure it is what you think it is. We are in the midst of attempted murder by a well-organized group of determined criminals.”

The nurse walked to the rear of the car and spoke with an agent who turned and entered the car to the rear. He returned pushing an enclosed, stainless steel, cart – the anesthesia cart Ollie would learn. They had certainly come well prepared – Ollie would give them that – a nurse, a light, an I-V, a stool for the doctor, anesthesia, and a doctor who knew shoulders inside and out. Tommy would have loved that shoulder thing.

Two agents examined the cart and its contents. One took to a bunk. The nurse placed a rubber mask over his nose and mouth and turned a knob. The agent was immediately asleep. The nurse monitored his vitals for a few moments. Ten minutes later, he was sitting up alert and well. The doctor was ready to proceed.

He worked for nearly an hour, at which point he declared complete success. There were internal as well as external stitches. He bandaged the area and wrapped it in gauze. When Ollie awoke, he was admonished to remain there on the bunk for the rest of the journey. The I-V was removed.

The doctor, his nurse and their equipment left the car into the one just behind.

As the mental fog lifted, Ollie came to understand that agent who tried the gas first had risked his life for him. (Later, less risky methods were developed.) How could he ever find a way to thank him? It put things into perspective. Events had transpired so quickly, he hadn't had time to consider the danger the agents had been facing for his benefit – for his protection. They had been thanking *him* for *his* service. He believed it was he who needed to be thanking them. He would find ways. If he came up empty, he always had Tommy in reserve. That boy could be relied on to spit



out a dozen possibilities a minute and only stop after his big brother gagged him.

He found he really didn't want to get up. The wound, the anesthetic, and the procedure had taken its toll. He hoped he could arrange some way to meet his boys that would not telegraph the degree of his incapacitation. The doctor had left pain pills and a prescription. They should help. He would play the pain portion of the situation by ear. He couldn't make out for sure what the doctor had written on the little box – he decided to interpret it as, 'Take as needed'.

He fell asleep and missed the stop at which the medical team made their exit. The train was pulling into Ledger as he awoke. The lead agent was at his side.

"Had a good sleep, I hope. We got you home now. The local doctor has been brought up to speed on your condition by phone and we will leave a swarm of plain clothes guys in and around the hotel until this mess gets cleared up."

"Any word on the boys?"

The man shook his head but shared what he had.

"The dark green, side panel van – the one described by locals as heading east out of town at the time of the abduction – was located submerged behind a levee clear over along the Mississippi. That may give some direction, or it may be sheer showmanship – distraction – a false lead. You must understand, we have no information that actually places the boys inside that van. It is our only lead. We are attempting a match of the tire tread with that of imprints left behind the hotel. That's the current situation. It goes without saying, it has been a very well-planned operation.

"Perhaps one more thing. An unscheduled, private train left Ledger moving east an hour before the abduction. I will need to receive an update on that. No ideas about how that might have been involved. We do know the geography east of here is hilly,

but the rails were laid over an old creek bed making it a relatively flat, level, straight structure. There are dozens of tiny settlements along the railroad. Most don't have a depot, but trains stop or not on demand. We are tracking that whole thing for clues and information. Lots of sidings for cattle and grain and timber and the distribution of coal. Most of the records are only available from the trains rather than any local resource, so it is more time consuming to run them down."

"Do you have an update from the trial," Ollie asked. "After all, all this represents fallout from that."

The agent motioned to a colleague who apparently would be the one with such information. After huddling for several minutes, the agent returned, smiling. It was the first time during the entire ordeal Ollie remembered seeing an agent with a full-out smile – maybe the second. He had visions of them all having undergone their own surgery at agent school to remove them – smilectomies. He chuckled at his inane silliness, probably born out of his concerns and apprehension. Where was Tommy when he needed an audience?

"Some good news at least, Mr. . . whatever name you are using at this moment. The jury deliberated ninety-nine minutes and delivered guilty verdicts against all three on all four counts. Espionage, alone, carries the death penalty."

Ollie cringed. He never thought he would be a party to such a terrible thing – executing a fellow human being. It saddened him greatly.

An agent arrived beside his bunk with a wheelchair and helped him navigate from prone to sitting and, subsequently, into the chair. It escaped him how his legs could be so weak when it was his shoulder that had been operated on. Tommy would have theories!

The pills had worn off while he slept. He asked for water and took two. He momentarily wondered why all pills were round,

flat, and white. The next time Tommy got antsy, he would pose the question to him – it would occupy him for a week and pill manufacturing would never be the same. Sometime following that, he'd ask him to find the derivation of the word, 'antsy'. He smiled. It lasted but a moment. Clearly, movement was not going to be his friend.

His shoulders and legs were draped in blankets and he was removed from the train.

At the hotel, Ollie was secreted up to his suite. Agents were posted liberally inside and out – a few in suits to mark their presence, but most in civvies. It brought home for Ollie just how important his infiltration and subsequent testimony had been for his country. He allowed a moment of pride.

Ollie was finally hungry. He called the kitchen. A ham sandwich, chips and milk should hit the spot. He offered to order for the agent who was 'babysitting' him, but he declined. He had to wonder if Federal Agents ever ate.

Apparently, unlike with the boys' protective detail, agents were stationed in the hall just outside the suite, in the elevator, and on the stairwell. Ollie envisioned one hiding in the chandelier in the lobby.

He received word that Mac, the agent left to stay with the boys, was recovering from a concussion and broken wrist – damaged in his fall after having been knocked out.

The chief agent on the case knocked and entered. He had news.

“Good news/bad news, Oliver.”

“Let's get the bad out of the way first.”

“Wilhelm Gruber, believed to be the Berlin anointed leader of the Nazi movement here in the Midwest, has been spotted in this area. A few years ago, he was a lowly assassin for the group. He has rapidly worked his way up through the ranks. The man has no conscious. He is ruthless. It is not a good sign when he shows

up to take charge of an operation personally. We have flooded the greater area with two dozen agents. I am confident we will soon have him in our sights. Got him dead to rights on several brutal crimes. Find him, nab him, try him and we will have one more dangerous bad guy off the German's playing field – in a roundabout way, also, thanks to you.

“On the good side of the story, however, a string of several boxcars was located on a siding a hundred plus miles east of here. Low on the front wall inside one of them, words were found freshly carved into the wood. ‘*S and T safe so far. Attempting escape.*’ I assume it was the handywork of those two boys you’ve been talking up.”

“I assume. Wonderful news. Thank you. So how does this change things?”

“At least we know where they were at one time and that at that time, they were safe and unharmed. Also, we can discount the location of the van as being meaningful. As to the escape part, we have no information. There is one more thing. The agents who located that boxcar, report chat scattered over the floor. Probably just left over from a load of something earlier – a sack with a rip, perhaps. There is a note added here. Let’s see. Chat mostly at rear of car. Front area largely clean. Seems unreasonable.”

Ollie nodded. He had no idea what they were up to, but ‘up to’ something seemed clear to him. He was tired. His ‘sitter’ assisted him out of the wheelchair and into bed. Ollie got a commitment from him to awaken him the moment new information became available. His sleep was fitful, filled with horrible images and frightening dreams as if he were a ten-year-old again. His subconscious – in its attempt to comfort him – may have been handing him the best rendering of the boy it could manage.

It was just past ten p.m. when he awoke. An older, professional looking man sporting a precisely trimmed, modest, white moustache, was sitting across the room from him chatting

with his sitter. The man noticed Ollie had awakened. He stood and walked to the bed, picking up Ollie's wrist.

"I'm Doc Sounder," he said, "the local sawbones. I was asked to come and keep an eye on you. Agents, locked doors, checkpoints, frisking – one would think you must be worth your weight in gold. Some trauma your body's been through. Need something for pain?"

Ollie removed the slide box of pills from his front pants pocket.

"This is what the doc gave me on the train."

"I'll leave you something else. The book says you can take up to two every two hours. I've known four every two hours to ease a lot more pain. Those patients may have died, but never from an overdose."

He chuckled. Ollie liked the man.

"I expect my grandson's to be arriving within the next few hours. I don't want to be groggy when they get here."

"You'll be fine. I met your Tommy the other day."

"Oh. He didn't mention it. What was the occasion?"

"He dropped by apparently to check out my diploma – as if to verify I am the real thing."

"That would certainly have been my Tommy. No offense, please. He was once known to require proof that our butcher's tetanus shots were up to date."

It was cause for a chuckle between them. The edges of Sitter's mouth may have even curled ever so slightly. Ollie hoped that had not been too painful.

"I'll come back in the morning to change the dressing."

"Any problem about doing that now? I'd like to look my best when the boys arrive, you know. A white bandage would certainly suggest a more positive state of affairs than this one caked in dry blood."

The doctor made the change and took time to wash his arm

and chest, ridding them of the last remnants of blood.

“Thank you. Any problem if I get into a shirt?”

“A shirt will be too tight – cut off the circulation and for the next seven days you need all the circulation you can get up there. A robe would be fine.”

Ollie pointed to his closet. Sitter brought his robe and he and Doc helped him into it.

“This feels so much better. Thank you, gentlemen.”

The doctor offered him two pills, which Ollie readily accepted.

“Why don’t you lay back and rest your eyes while you wait,” the doctor suggested. “Your system needs all the rest you can give it.”

Ollie acquiesced to the doctor’s suggestion and relaxed back against his pillow. The doctor left. The sitter, sat.

It had not been the set of experiences Ollie had envisioned when he began that day or those days or however long it had been. His final realization before succumbing to sleep; ‘That blasted new doc just slipped me a box of sleeping pills!’

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **“Sure you know what you’re doin’?”**

Tommy had laid down and closed his eyes near the front wall. Sammy was sitting near the crack, finishing a ham sandwich and the quart of milk, listening to what was going on in the near darkness, outside. He understood only bits and pieces of the German being spoken. His grampa spoke German well, but insisted on English within their household. Much of the discussion that had caught his attention was in English – an exchange between a man with a thick accent and one with none – accounting for the English, he figured.

“Gruber will be here in an hour or so. He’s put together a short, three-car train – it will be the next one up the track, heading our way from Ledger. The plan is for him to just move pass us on the main track and stop. I will then set the switch so this train – the 227 – can immediately leave to the west and clog up the track in case the Feds mount another train in our direction. Gruber’s will then back onto this siding from the east. When he arrives, he will tell us what to do with the kids, how to do it and where. Then, I assume he will leave.

“From what I’ve gathered listening to the chatter on our shortwave, he is hoppin’ mad that everything’s gone sour. Apparently, this Waggoner guy had been given access to the most sensitive information and documents – maps, timelines, targets, high-up supporters’ and sympathizer’s names and addresses, even. His testimony will likely put us out of business for a long time all across the mid-west. Gruber will attempt to lure the old man here with threats to his grandchildren.

“Our boys up there in Chicago are goin’ away for life – at least. Berlin will probably recall Gruber if he even lets it go that far. Failure isn’t tolerated, you know. Check out here or be checked out in Berlin? Not much of a choice.

“One piece of sort of good of news, I suppose; our plant on the train, shot the old man on the way back from Chicago. These federal agents are totally incompetent. That should send a message to anybody else considering doing a tell-all to a judge.”

Just how those agents who shut down the entire mid-western operation could be called incompetent, Sammy couldn’t understand – the ‘black is white’ thing, maybe. More important and more upsetting was his grampa’s condition.

Sammy sat back on his legs, stunned and sickened. His tears had a mind of their own that neither age nor determination could control. Grampa, shot? He needed to let Tommy know. That wasn’t going to be easy. Neither was the information about that Gruber guy and his clear plans for the two of them.

He woke up Tommy and laid it all out, just like he had heard it. Tommy nodded and also allowed tears. He sniffed before he spoke.

“Shot doesn’t necessarily mean killed, Sammy. We have to believe he is still okay.”

Sammy nodded and continued thinking out loud.

“It seems obvious that Gruber is the head guy in all this, probably so high up even grampa didn’t know him. What a catch



he will be.”

Tommy responded.

“So, it sounds like we have a busy hour ahead of us. Is it fully dark out, yet?”

“Yeah. Pitch.”

“I’ve been planning more than sleeping up here. What you’ve just told me seems to complete it in a hurry. You ready to risk everything?”

“Sounds like we have no choice. Our ‘everything’ is in the hands of Gruber if we don’t get busy and take it back, so we need to make our move first and fast. What are you thinking?”

“Understand it is not fully worked out yet, but here’s the basic idea. We leave this car through the roof, *now*, make our way to the engine, knock out the engineer, take over the engine and head back to Ledger at a full head of steam. An engine like this one can turn 90 miles an hour if it isn’t pulling a load. No vehicle they have here could keep up with us along the access road.”

“A question. What about Gruber’s train heading our direction?”

“A detail we’ll handle on up the track.”

“Do you have any idea how to drive a steam engine?”

“Sort of, yes. I’ve read about it. Remember a few years back when I was really into trains.”

“Yeah! *Model* trains.”

“The essence is the same, believe me.”

“Adjusting the red handle on the black transformer on a toy, electric trainset is *not* the same as piloting a twenty-ton steam engine down the rails at ninety miles an hour, through the dark, into the path of an oncoming train, little brother?”

“May have to make a few adjustments – I’ll give you that.”

“It needs to have a full head of steam up, you said.”

“Right.”

“What exactly does *that* mean?”

“The water tank needs to be full. The fire needs to be blazing under the steam tank. The coal needs to be easily at hand so the fire can be fed and kept ablaze.”

“How do we do all that, so nobody suspects? It’s not like anybody will believe a fifteen-year-old and a ten-year-old have any business working around the engine – plus, they know us. We are their prisoners.”

“My assumption is, they are keeping the engine close to ready so it can haul out of here at a few minutes notice. What you overheard seems to confirm that. So, the engineer will probably do all that out in the open prep work for us – maintain it at the ready.”

“Way too many if’s and probably’s in your plan for me.”

“I’ll listen to your alternative.”

“You know I don’t have one. Well, maybe one. We escape this box car and disappear into the night hoping to be found come daylight.”

“Found by whom? This is obviously Spy territory. No other trains have come onto the siding. The ones that have come along have moved right on past us down the track. We’d get found, okay, just in time to be given one last cigarette before being blindfolded and shot at dawn.”

“Now you’re being melodramatic.”

“Probably, but have I made my point.”

“Yes. You always do. But we need more to go on.”

“Okay. One step at a time. That will allow us time and space in which to modify the plan at any point according to what transpires – how things are going. Does that make you more comfortable?”

“Actually, it does. First step is escaping through the roof.”

“Right. We already need to modify – extend – the plan. What do we do once we are up there?”

“Well, we agreed we needed to set the vent box back in

place after us. I doubt if they will even consider that we could have used that for our get away.”

“I think they will,” Tommy said. “They’ll know we didn’t just slip through the slit by the door. Not many other possibilities. Nazi’s may be scum, but that doesn’t mean dumb scum.”

“You’re probably right on that. It means we need to get a move on immediately, so they don’t have a chance to put your ‘one and one’ together and look for us up top.”

“Agreed. To where do we move?”

“We talked about it; forward on the roof or forward between the rails under the cars. We run the risk of being seen down there.”

“Only a slight risk, I think,” Tommy said. “I’ve been thinking. The cars themselves will cast deep shadows across the rails from those high lights. It’s probably more a case of keeping quiet and not dislodging anything that might end up outside the tracks, in the light where it might be seen.”

“I can see your point. So, which?”

“Before we go there, let’s think about what equipment we might need to gather. We can be pretty sure there will be *nothing* available on top.”

“The only equipment your plan calls for is something to use to knock out the engineer.”

“We still have our chat loaded socks.”

“A 2 X 4 or a length of pipe would be better if we could lay our hands on it,” Sammy said.

Tommy agreed and offered a problem that needed a solution right from the outset.

“If we are on the ground, getting up into the cab to incapacitate the engineer is not going to be easy and would take too long and draw attention from the men. If we were on the roof, we could come on him from the rear and above him – probably off the coal car – it’s called the tender.”

Here’s a possible solution,” Sammy offered. “We begin

under the cars between the rails until we find our weapon – maybe a spike to use like a dagger. Then we climb back up top and move forward to the position you described. By the way, have you ever actually hit anybody with a 2 X 4?”

“Of course not.”

“Me either. Then, how do we know how hard to swing it.”

“I’m thinking just as hard as you possibly can.”

“*You* – meaning *me*?”

“Of course. These biceps of mine are barely monoceps. You’re the one with the powerful upper body.”

“Okay. I see that. Don’t like it, but I see it. So, once we have control of the engine, which way do we go – forward or reverse?”

“Unless you have some super-duper reason for going backward, I suggest forward toward Leger.”

“My reason may not have been super-duper, but it was intended to get us *away* from Gruber instead of racing headlong *into* him.”

“And I understand that. Here’s a consideration. What if, when we see we are coming upon him on the track, and assume he sees us coming at him, we slow just enough to engage the engine and begin pushing it backward into town and let the feds take it from there?”

“Has merit, but won’t it be coming toward us just as fast as we’re going toward it?”

“Not really; think about it this way. You’re an engineer and you see an engine heading toward you at a high rate of speed. What would you do?”

“Slow down, of course, and probably begin backing up hoping to outrun it – outback it – so to speak.”

“Yeah. What I was thinking. We could back it into town like I said.”

“One possible problem. Gruber’s train is very likely crawling with armed bad guys. Don’t you just imagine they might start

shooting.”

“Good point, or worse yet, jump off their train, wait for us to pass by, jump on this train, and it would be all over for that great new team of Agents Sammy and Tommy.”

“Hmm?”

“Hmm?”

“That still leaves us one pretty good option,” Tommy said.’

“I don’t get it.”

“We crank this baby up to ninety and ram Gruber head on. We’ve done that with toy trains – they fold up like an accordion. We’d take out Gruber and all his associates in one quick smashup. Might even be medals in it.”

“Posthumously! And, probably huge balls of fire from the two engines providing complimentary cremations. Think about that for just a moment, little brother – *two* engines ending up as balls of fire. And where would we be while that was going on.”

“Hmm?”

“Hmm?”

“Got it,” Tommy said.

“So do I, Sammy said.

He waited for his little brother’s explanation. They turned out to be the same – clearly that ‘great minds’ thing grampa had mentioned earlier.

“It’s not as if a train engine that’s riding along a track has to be steered or anything. We can jump off at a safe distance before impact.”

“Jump off a train traveling at ninety-miles an hour?” Sammy said having second thoughts about his own similar plan.

“Tuck and roll?” Tommy suggested really asking. “We’ve done it before, just never off anything traveling at anywhere near that speed.”

“Sounds like unavoidable disaster.”

“Our choice may come down to tucking and rolling at high

speed or facing Gruber's firing squad."

"You do have a way with words, little brother."

"I've been told that many times – not always in as kindly a manner as that."

"Oh, oh," Tommy said. "We still have a major problem. Our plan is based on speed and speed is dependent on having the engine free from the rest of the train. We have to uncouple the rest of the cars from the tender – an addition to our plan. See how well our flexible approach is working?"

Sammy assumed that was rhetorical or maybe justificational – sounded like one of grampa's made-up words.

"I know how to do that," Sammy said. "Derick and I watched them do it at the rail yard lots of times. I've noticed the coupling mechanisms as we've moved between these trains. I'm familiar with them. It merely amounts to turning a small wheel, which opens half the coupling and lets the other half loose – essentially."

"We'll need to do that before we attack the engineer," Tommy said. "Once we do *that*, we need get out of here like a bat out of hell."

"Okay. So, that's our plan, then?" Sammy asked as if confirming it, suddenly wondering why there would be bats in hell. Plainly, he had been around his little brother way too long.

"Seems so. We need to get a move on. Lots to accomplish in a short amount of time. You know, with him traveling toward us and us traveling toward him, the time thing changes by about half. Instead of an hour, maybe a half or maybe less depending on speeds. I'm not sure I had the proper data to figure that right."

"On my shoulders then. You'll need to reach up, grab the outside of the frame and pull yourself up. You can do a pull up, can't you?"

"I'll just bet old *A. Drenny Lynn* will see to it. I can feel myself getting pumped up on the stuff already. Let's do it."

Tommy was up and out in no time even though the pain to

his injured shoulder was intense. He didn't mention that. Sammy had to jump in order to get his hold and missed the first time. With sudden help from *Miss Lynn*, the second was on target and he struggled himself out and onto the roof beside his brother. They lay flat on their stomachs while they got organized. Sammy reached out and replaced the frame. It fit into a one-inch depression in the roof. Tommy hadn't told him that. He figured that should keep it in place even after the train began to move. Why that might be helpful, he had no idea. Perhaps *that's* why Tommy hadn't mentioned it.

"I'll feel better once we have our weapon," Sammy said.

"Okay, then. Down the ladder I guess – the one on the side away from the men, of course."

Staying low, they elbow-crawled themselves toward the ladder.

"Let me go down first," Sammy said. "Then I can help you off at the bottom. As I remember, it's a three-foot drop to the ground and we need to be quiet about it – and everything from now on. *No noise!*"

Tommy accepted that without comment. On another occasion he would have contested the fact that any characterization of his cat-like moves might legitimately be referred to as anything other than silken silence.

It worked according to plan. Just outside the tracks, Tommy squatted to see what there was to be seen from under the car, across the way toward the men. There were, perhaps, a half dozen. Most leaning or sitting alone or with one other. The air was filled with noxious cigarette smoke. None seemed to have any particular job at that moment. He whispered to Sammy who had joined him, kneeling at his side.

"We seem to have free rein until one of them goes to check on us."

"Yeah. If we don't respond when they call to us, I hope they

just think we're asleep like I suggested. One other good thing, little brother. There are no other engines on the siding. The only vehicle seems to be that old pickup clear up at the front of the train – fifteen yards to the right side of the engine – remember it? May be sitting in the dark since the sun went down.”

“That fifteen yards in between is cloaked in velvet darkness. I can see up there.”

“You're getting melodramatic again.”

“What's your point? I have been blessed with flair and I intend to flaunt it.”

“Flaunt this, then! We need to get out of this alive.”

Tommy nodded and became serious while voicing his next idea.

“I'm thinking a slender, but swift and very sneaky, ten-year-old could probably get over there and sink the blade of his knife into a couple of that truck's tires so it couldn't follow along on the access road loaded with men taking pot shots at us.”

“Risky, I'd say,” Sammy came back.

“And the rest of our plan isn't?”

Sammy shrugged.

They stood, crouching, as they moved forward toward the engine.

“Dark over here – the shadow of the cars,” Sammy said, meaning he was worried that it was going to be difficult to find something to use as a weapon.

Tommy nodded. Shorter, he had an easier view under the train and between the tracks, which was catching some of the light from the poles. They had passed several cars when he spotted something. He pulled on Sammy's shirttail and pointed. They stopped.

“A crowbar somebody left lying where a recent repair to a rail has been made. Better than we had hoped for, I'm thinking.”

He scooted under the car on all fours and handed it out to



Sammy who gave it a few practice swishes through the air.

“Perfect! The crowbar gods are with us. What’s next, the coupling?”

“I’d say so – the one connecting the tender to the rest of the cars, right?”

“Right.”

Bending low, they crept on until they were standing beside it. Sammy moved in to give the mechanism a onceover. It was even darker between the cars up front away from the lights. He pointed at the small wheel and grasped it with both hands.

“Sure you know what you’re doing?” Tommy asked.

“Watch and learn, ‘youngin’.”

He gave it an initial tug as if to gauge how difficult a task lay before him. It turned easily. That made sense, of course, on a working train. He smiled back at Tommy and nodded. He set to work – one revolution, two revolutions . . . At the end of the sixth, the giant claws stood free from one another. Sammy nodded.

“Got it. Easier than I figured it would be.”

“Good going. Now, let me get those tires slit.”

They ducked under the couplings, which put them near the north side of the train – the side where the men were. They stood there well hidden in the darkness as they considered the dash to the truck.

“I can make it. I know I can. Nothing but darkness the whole way. At this moment it would certainly be a plus if my skin were black, but, what is, is.”

“Okay, then. If it works, it’s a great idea.”

“It’s a great idea whether it works or not. It is only the degree to which I am able to execute it that will be open to appraisal.”

Sammy offered a quick smile and sigh wishing his brother had used some term other than, ‘execute’.

“You should open your knife here, before you leave,”

Sammy suggested.

“Yes. Good idea . . . there . . . here I go.”

“Good luck.”

“No luck to it – it is a good plan and my implementation will be flawless.”

Too bad the boy had no self-confidence.

Merely awake, Tommy had an exception mind. On full alert with the adrenalin pumping, it was remarkable.

Sammy moved as far back into the shadows as he could. The deep darkness into which Tommy disappeared made it impossible to follow his progress. That was good, Sammy figured. That was unnerving, Sammy discovered. For some reason he had begun counting when his brother left.

‘...30... 60... 90... 120.’

He needed to go no further. A small body slammed into him at full speed, pushing him back into the couplings. Why the kid wasn’t huffing and puffing Sammy couldn’t figure. Big lungs, tiny body, perhaps.

“Piece of cake. Went ahead and did all four tires just for good measure. Next time I do this sort of thing, I will grease the blade first to help it slip through the rubber more easily. Hope nobody heard the hisses – hadn’t factored that in.”

“Let’s hope there is no ‘next time’. Good job, by the way.”

In the darkness, they missed each other’s quick grins.

“How did you manage to run so quietly?”

“On my toes – thought of it at the last moment – less foot surface making contact with sticks and such.”

Sammy acknowledged the answer with a nod and then tugged on Tommy’s shirt, directing them to follow him to the other side of the train and make ready for their attack. That was going to be so unlike either one of them, that it had not fully sunk in – rendering another human being unconscious or possibly worse.

Like the other cars, the tender had a ladder.

“Let me climb and take the first peek,” Tommy said. “My profile will be smaller than yours.”

“Saying I have a big head?”

“Yes, that is what I am saying. You have a big head. I’ve been told a big head attracts the most amorous girls.”

“Really?”

“Of course not. You’re going to have to count on your winning personality and handsome face.”

“Kidding, again?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Thanks. You’re okay in those departments, too.”

Tommy couldn’t understand the importance teen boys placed on such things. He tried to refocus.

Once on the ladder, he moved up three rungs. There he strained, carefully, one way and another to get the full picture of what they were up against. He moved up another rung, which provided a broad, full view of the inside of the engine – the cab. He was close enough to read the pressure gauge. The needle fluttered slightly but remained within the green, safe, zone. He figured that confirmed the system really was being maintained in a ‘ready to leave’ mode like the English speaker had indicated. He could see flames through the louvers in the cast iron door at the base of the steam tank.

He studied the levers and handles. They were like those he had read about; marked ‘F’, ‘R’, and ‘B’ – Forward, Reverse, Brake. It had entered his mind before – the long handles might be too difficult for him to budge – especially with a bum shoulder. He would count on Sammy’s strength and his direction.

Everything seemed ready to go except one thing – there was no engineer in sight.

That should have been a good thing, he thought. Why then did it feel a letdown? It seemed some part of him had really wanted to hammer away on another human being. *That* was disturbing.

He would deal with it later.

Tommy descended the ladder and stood beside Sammy who bend down as he whispered his several observations.

“So, we just throw it into gear and take off?”

“Pretty much. First, we need to load up that fire box with chunks of coal and set the louvers wide open – to be sure we maintain a really hot fire to keep the steam coming. We’re going to fly down the track wide open. I do hope the steam tank doesn’t explode. It came to me that I’m not entirely sure how to control the pressure. There is undoubtedly a pressure release valve to control such things should it produce too much pressure. Of course, if it blows, I assume the train will grind to a stop.”

“While our remains are scattered across a ten-acre plot?”

Tommy shrugged. Sammy continued.

“You saying we really haven’t thought this through well enough?”

“Something like that. However, with the information we have, I believe we’ve done an exceptional job.”

“You seem to be saying, it’s a tossup about whether we get killed by plowing into Gruber’s train at ninety miles an hour or by being blown to smithereens by a steam tank explosion.”

“And once again, quite clearly, I have done an exceptional job with my explanation.

“One other thing I hadn’t counted on,” Tommy went on. “There is a radio in the cab. It may just be for communication among cars on the train – engine to caboose – or it might be engine to depot stuff. When we get a chance to examine it more closely, we may be able to determine that. It might be possible for us to send a message.”

“Do we still go, considering all the unknowns and possible problems?”

“I vote yes. Note. Here at the bottom of the steps that lead up to the cab is a wide, running board like on a car or truck. When

we get ready to jump and roll, we can do it from squatting down there. It will only be like a two or three-foot drop to the ground.”

“Three feet at ninety miles an hour,” Sammy pointed out. “Surely you know some formula that tells us how badly mutilated a human body will be after making that leap.”

“You worry far too much. In case things don’t go our way, I love you, you know, Sammy.”

“Yeah, me too.”

They allowed a quick embrace – two back-pats and release. “

“You’re sure you heard the guy say this switch has been thrown so we’re ready to roll right onto the main track?”

“That’s right. It’s exactly what he said. He even confirmed that *he* had done it.”

Tommy turned and climbed up the steps into the cab. As Sammy arrived beside him, Tommy pointed repeatedly toward the ground out the opposite, open, cab door – the engineer was there, leaning against the tender car, lighting a cigarette. He had exited the cab sometime after the completion of Tommy’s fifteen-yard dash. The timing seemed perfect.

All quite unnecessarily, Tommy put his index finger to his lips. It was more a reminder for him than his brother. Still, Sammy nodded.

There were thick leather gloves. Sammy slipped into them and opened the fire box door. Tommy bet it would squeak. He lost. A good thing. Open, it brightened the cab but went unnoticed by the engineer who stood with his back to the engine. Tommy kept an eye on him while Sammy, quietly and carefully, added several, large, chunks of coal and eased the door closed. He dropped the gloves. Tommy mimed a two-phase process to be used on the levers which rose from slots in the floor. Each lever was made of cast iron, looking much like a black, triple-thick yardstick some four feet tall.

First, lever 'B', *the brake*, needed to be released by pushing it forward all the way and slipped into the furthest notch to hold it there. That should cause no noise. Lever 'F', *forward*, which engaged the wheels with the steam power, then needed to be pushed ahead to the furthest – fifth – notch. That would make lots of noise. At that point the battle for the engine would be on. Tommy hoped full forward represented full speed ahead. He indicated it would be Sammy's job to do those honors.

With the added heat, the pressure valve was standing right against the red zone. When lever 'F' was moved, steam would begin entering the propulsion system to turn the wheels. When that happened the steam pressure would drop immediately – he believed, at least.

Tommy was convinced that things were progressing perfectly. He gave Sammy the nod. He slipped the 'B' lever forward – almost a silent operation. It was well-greased and slid easily in its track. That had no noticeable effect on the engine. Tommy figured it shouldn't have. They exchanged glances, ready for the main show.

Sammy took a big breath, grasped lever 'F' and pushed it forward – it took a good deal more effort, but he soon had that move accomplished as well.

As suddenly as suddenly had ever occurred, the engine shook to life – probably not in the well-coordinated manner it would have had the driver actually known what he was doing. Their world could no longer be characterized as silent. Their movements, no longer clandestine.

The engineer called out, turned, and jumped up onto the running board as the engine began to move. He began climbing the steps. Suddenly, they were committed, and things no longer seemed to be progressing perfectly.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### It is what it is!

Tommy called to his brother. Grab the back of my pants, *now!*”

Even before he felt the hand in place, Tommy lunged forward, planting his head into the engineer’s chest forcing him to fall backward onto the ground. Tommy was hanging there in space, his brother’s hand and arm his only lifeline. Sammy, with his other hand clinging to a pipe, pulled him back and held him close.

“You’ve done some lamebrained things in your ten years but that has to be the lamebraindiest of them all.”

“And you are welcome, brother who remains alive and well because of my noble deed.”

Tommy looked out the window toward the rear.

“We now have a hoard of angry men chasing us – ignorant jerks – as if they could catch us. We are gaining speed quite satisfactorily and leaving them and the litter of boxcars in our dust.”

“Okay! It’s good, then,” Sammy said having some difficulty

turning his take on things from fear of certain disaster to some glimmer of hope – momentary hope, at least. Tommy sensed they had things well under control.

Gunfire arose from behind. Sammy pulled Tommy to the floor. Even over the noise of the engine, they heard the pickup being cranked to life. That was soon accompanied by swearing – lots and lots of swearing. The boys allowed quick grins and returned their attention forward along the track.

Presently, believing they were out of gun fire range, they stood with some caution, checked the gauges, and made sure the forward lever was secure in its notch. Sammy took over the position on the right side by the levers.

“Speedometer, I assume,” Sammy said pointing to a dial close to him on the far right of the console.

“Yes. Up to thirty already.”

“When did we decide we’d jump?” Sammy asked.

“Not sure, but let’s get a lot closer to town so we won’t have so far to walk if that becomes our lot. My tender, svelte, physique is about tuckered out, here.”

Sammy returned a weak nod and bent close to the window. Tommy handed him goggles and donned a pair himself. Presenting some faint resemblance to the Lone Ranger, Sammy stuck his head out through the open window and looked forward down the tracks. He could see nothing and spoke about it as Tommy positioned himself beside the left window.

“You see anything from over there, Tommy?”

“Nothing. Even so, I’m thinking we should have knocked out the headlight so Gruber’s train couldn’t see us coming.”

“A great idea! Since we didn’t, I suppose we could just flip this switch to OFF – the switch labeled, ‘HEADLIGHT’.”

“Probably so. Good move. Do it.”

The running lights remained on.

“You know, little brother, of all the dumb stuff we’ve done



together, this the dumbest times a million.”

“At this point, I’d say it is what it is, big brother.”

“You sound like grampa, Tommy. Hope he’s okay.”

“Yeah. Okay. He’s a tough old codger. I’m sure he is.”

“Yeah, the Feds won’t let anything happen to their star witness.”

“I’m sure you’re right, even though they haven’t done such a bang-up job for his grandsons,” Tommy pointed out, more as a matter of fact than the target of anger.

Sammy remained silent. He pointed to the speedometer, which indicated forty-two. He spoke, nodding, letting some excitement show.

“That was good thinking about jumping from the running boards rather than from up here – a good five feet closer to the ground from down there.”

Tommy nodded – more out of habit than purpose. His brother tended to run on about things that were either repetitive of the obvious or otherwise of no interest to little brother, so over the years, he had perfected his nod-just-enough-to-remain-polite-and-appear-interested response.

The dials stayed within what Tommy believed were safe ranges. After the initial, sudden, loss of steam pressure, it was building back up. The fire burned high and hot, casting intense heat against their legs and feet through the louvers. The needle on the speedometer advanced to seventy miles an hour. It was the fastest either of them had ever traveled. There was no time to celebrate or even acknowledge that.

Eighty.

Eighty-eight.

“The moon’s peeking out, Sammy.”

“I see. Can you tell what the track looks like ahead?”

“Straight and long, heading for the gap between those two long, low hills ahead.”

Sammy leaned forward out the window and spoke, needing to raise his voice against the noise of the wind.

“Could that be the headlight on Gruber’s train – that tiny speck way out there?”

“I suppose, *or* a wandering troubadour wearing a brown waistcoat and green tights lighting his way with a coal oil lantern held high.”

“Get serious. The time of reckoning may be upon us any moment, little brother.”

“We just hit ninety-five. I suppose that’s about maximum, Sammy. I hadn’t counted on the old engine shaking itself apart at such a speed. I suggest we hold on.”

After a moment, he continued.

“We need to figure exactly how we are going to position ourselves down on the running boards. Here’s a caution: we’ll be experiencing at least ninety mile an hour winds from the west the second our bodies leave the shelter of the cab, so we must hold tight. A lot different down there from up here. I suggest we move down the steps on our butts and lean back out of the wind for as long as we can. Then, just quickly dive forward into the air, tucking into a ball as we go. It is a ‘fire when ready’ exercise. Expect to be blown backward something ferociously.”

The radio crackled to life with a burst of loud static. Tommy had the comment.

“I’d forgotten about it. Must come on automatically when it receives a message on its wavelength. Probably identifies the engine as well. Hold down the button labeled, ‘RECEIVE’, and find out what’s what.”

*“Calling Engine 227 traveling westbound just east of ledger. This is Federal Agent Jasper. We have boarded the train heading your way and have taken control.”*

“Press talk and hold the microphone over here,” Tommy said.

“This is Engine 227,” Tommy began leery about the exchange. “Unless you can verify who you are, we will continue to assume you are Gruber.”

*“Figured as much. This Tommy I’m speaking to?”*

“Yes. Sammy is here with me. What was our dog’s name when we lived in Chicago?”

*“What?”*

There was a pause at the other end – longer than seemed reasonable. Then a voice.

*“You didn’t have a dog in Chicago. You need to brake immediately, or the collision that is about to happen will light up Chicago and cost dozens of lives. We are moving in reverse hoping to offset your speed and minimize the damage. Traveling in reverse at high speed tends to send the lead cars careening off the track.”*

“One more thing. What is Sammy’s middle name?”

There was another pause – shorter – then, *“Evan.”*

Tommy nodded at his brother. Sammy dislodged the forward lever from its notch and with great effort fought it back toward him, eventually securing it in the nearest notch. Tommy joined Sammy and tried to do the same with the brake, but it pulled away from him. Sammy pushed the ‘R’ lever forward hoping to send the wheels into reverse. Gears ground. Massive showers of sparks spewed from the locked wheels, ten yards out into the darkness on both sides. Tommy silently gave his brother good marks for his quick thinking about ‘R’.

“There’s the Gruber engine,” Sammy said. “We’re never going to be able to stop in time. Should we jump yet?”

“We have a least sixty seconds at the rate we are slowing, and they are moving away. Let’s hold on for another forty. Be safer to jump if we wait for a slower speed. You hold that reverse lever, forward.”

“I can’t get it far enough to hit the notch.” Leverage your

foot against the side of the door for added strength and control. The pressure is well into the red zone. I'll see if I can jettison the relief valve on the tank. Be alert for steam because I don't know which direction it may spew. Straight up is my best guess."

Forty.

"Still too fast, Tommy."

"Thirty."

"We're gonna crash for sure."

Using his knife, Tommy pried the release valve out of its setting. He had been right. Straight up. One thing was suddenly plain – they might die from the head-on collision but not from an exploding steam tank. Remaining, was the real possibility of those colorful cremations.

The other engine had been laying on the whistle. Tommy figured that had been a major waste of energy – who needed to be alerted to what was going on?

Out of the darkness, the Gruber headlight suddenly grew larger and larger, brighter and brighter.

"Time to jump, Tommy."

"I think I got this. No more than fifty yards and remember they are backing up, by now at a high rate of speed giving us additional time."

Tommy took to the radio as calm as if he were ordering a shirt from Sears and Roebuck.

"This is engine 227. We are in for a dead stop in thirty yards. Repeat, dead stop in thirty yards. Be prepared to return and take on two very hungry boys. One *may* have wet his pants. We left a passel of very angry bad guys without transportation some forty or so miles back on a multi-rail siding to the north."

The engine jerked to a stop and shuddered, tossing Tommy forward against the console, breaking the glass covering the speedometer and slicing a deep gash in his forehead. Sammy let go of the lever. His palms were bleeding. The other train stopped,

and slowly moved back in their direction. The engines sat nose to nose not ten feet apart. Seeing that, Tommy wondered where the golden spike might be. He slumped to the floor. Sammy joined him.

“What’s one notch beyond exhausted, Tommy?”

“Dead, I imagine.”

He continued to speak, unexpected disappointment in his tone.

“It was such a good plan, Sammy – our plan to jump off this thing. Now, we’re never going to know if it would have worked.”

“You *are*, you know, *thee* strangest ten-year-old who has ever drawn a breath.”

“That should have been ‘*that* has,’ not ‘*who* has’.”

“And what does he do but immediately *prove* my point!”

Agent Jasper found them sitting there entwined as one in the best brotherly embrace ever constituted. Well, a little less blood just might have improved it.

\* \* \*

“Do you think grampa is *ever* going to wake up?” Tommy asked.

The boys were sitting by his bed. It was something after four in the morning – nobody had really counted hours and minutes during that night. They had showered and changed into clean clothes wanting to be presentable when he awakened. Doc had patched Tommy’s forehead and wrapped Sammy’s hands. He drew their weary grins when he predicted they would both live. He prescribed lots of library time for Tommy, and extended periods of alone time for Sammy and Ginny. Word was out! Who in the world might have spread that? They were going to get on just fine with Doc.

“You’d wake an old man from his beauty rest,” Ollie said, opening one eye at a time attempting to be comical. “What sort of a dolt must have raised you two?”

He turned his head in their direction.

“What a sight for sore eyes, boys. Come over here; its hug an old man day, haven’t you been told?”

“We *did* know that,” Tommy went on. “We just haven’t been able to locate an old man.”

There was a long, three-way, tear-filled embrace.

There was a knock on the open door. It signaled time to break the huddle. It was Agent Jasper.

“Knock, knock. Everybody mending together in here,” he quipped. It may well have been the most humorous thing Agent Jasper had ever said. How very sad. At any rate, that seemed to have been his intention, so they smiled.

“We really are a mess aren’t we,” Sammy said holding up his new white mitts.

Tommy spoke.

“Doc said he got to my head before I leaked too many brain cells. Fortunately, I have spares and engage them on a rotating basis”

“I take it you three have met,” Ollie said clearly puzzled.

“*Almost* met at about ninety miles an hour on open track, Oliver,” the agent said. “You are raising a pair of daredevils – very bright and courageous and resourceful boys, but *daredevils*.”

The three of them went on to catch Ollie up to date on the most recent events. Ollie sat back against his headboard shaking his head. From time to time he managed a ‘what?’, ‘who?’, ‘how?’, ‘say that again!’, ‘not really!’, ‘who did that!’, ‘more pills, doc!’

“I suppose doc knew what he was doing when he slipped me that Micky last evening. I slept the sleep of the dead.”

“Then you don’t remember helping us,” Jasper said.

“Helping. While I was drug-bound asleep?”

“Tommy here insisted I prove who I was while we spoke over the radio and asked questions the answers to which I had no way of knowing. My assistant called here to the hotel, the

handyman shook you awake and asked them of you, then relayed the answers back to me.”

“That accounts for the long delay – one explanation I had not figured on,” Tommy said. “Nice work, Sir. I take back *some* of the thoughts I have been harboring about how badly you bungled things.”

The seasoned agent let that roll off.

“I’ll say this, boys,” Jasper said, “this act of yours is going to be a hard one to follow.”

“Oh! No! Please!” Ollie said. “No more acts. No more following. I’m going to wrap them in cotton batting and keep them in the attic until they’re eighty-eight.”

Discounting the fallacy in his grampa’s thinking that they could possibly ever be eighty-eight at the same time, or that there was any likelihood of him being around to contain them, then, Tommy turned to the agent.

“He doesn’t mean that, you know. You could tell that he was hanging on every word as we were recounting our perilous, perfectly executed, adventure to save these United States of America from the filthy scheme of the filthy men who were the filthy spawn of the filthy Nazis. See, we have this arrangement – grampa and us. He does the easy stuff – infiltration of subversive social and political groups, enjoying their milk and cookies, and sitting in a cushy witness chair sipping tea with the judge – while Sammy and I take care of the really dangerous stuff – taking down armies of hardened criminals and ruthless assassins while hurtling through space in a sixty ton cast-iron missile at 150 miles an hour, all the while exuding a Devil may care mien while laughing at danger.”

Of course, level-headed, all business, truthful to a fault, Tommy never allowed himself to so much as consider offering an exaggeration.

“Yeah,” Sammy said. “Doing algebra homework just isn’t

going to cut it, anymore, Agent. We will be ready for our next assignment as soon as we can convince grampa to let us to pluck that Band-Aid from the scratch on his shoulder.”

It was a dumfounded Tommy who responded.

“Pluck, Sammy! Really? You said, *Pluck?*”

“I must admit, that having lived much of my life being regularly regaled by your riveting rhetoric, I may have lowered my defenses just long enough on some occasions to have allowed some portion of your veritable vortex of verbiage to have found a place in my internal thesaurus – that sets between my liver and my spleen, I believe.”

“So much for that shriveled mushroom inside your head, big brother. Touché!”

Of course, the stories could never be told, so the boys had to rely on their own, abundant, personal resources to build grand lives and relationships there in Ledger, Arkansas – recently updated population to, 1,003.

[Little did Sammy know when he offered his family’s continued assistance to the Federal Bureau of Investigation that they would soon be calling on the Jansen family again! *Flaming Crosses Aflame: 1940*, coming soon to a booksource or library near you.]