



Tommy Powers
Book Two
For kids 9 to 15



TOMMY POWERS



AND THE
Mutant Stranger
by David Drake

Tommy Powers
And
The Mutant Stranger

(Book Two)

**A magical experience for ten to fifteen year olds
(And those who ever were ten to fifteen year olds!)**

By

David Drake

Book One: The Sage of the Calibrators
Book Two: The Mutant Stranger
Book Three: The Sorcerer of Akmind Teeki
Book Four: The Replicator of Rio Azul

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THE COVER

Thanks to Max Evans,
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PREFACE

The reader will want to read *Book One: Tommy Powers and the Sage of the Calibrators*, before beginning this one. The story continues here.

Tommy, the naturally appealing, uninhibited young hero of this story, is not only unique in the almost magical powers he possesses but also in the things he believes about life and how to live it. Some of his ideas may be different from yours and those of your family. All Tommy asks is that you think about the usefulness of the values *he* treasures and uses to guide the way he interacts with other human beings. Some of those things might be topics for interesting family discussions.

– Enjoy the adventure!

- DD

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CHAPTER ONE

Memories!

Life as I had known it during my first thirteen years was gone forever, and *my* 'forever' had suddenly grown into thousands of years!

I was on a vacation, of sorts, back in the large, old, rustic loft, overlooking the docks – the home I'd always known there between the beauty of the sea and the starkness of the city. I was reclining comfortably on the long, brown couch, facing the huge window that allowed me to trace the unending, green, ocean out to where it silently slipped below the horizon and melted into the clear blue strip of sky above. It was the view with which I had grown up, the view that brought me that reassuring sense of peace and belonging that made me feel I was a perfect fit with the World.

I assumed that Gus had never been far away – invisibly, of course – during those past 30 days since my confirmation as a Practitioner in the *Guild of the Calibrators*. As planned, I had returned to the loft by the wharfs for a visit with my family. It was comfortable being back there among the five grown-ups who had so unselfishly taken me in as an orphaned infant and raised and cared for me so well.

The Sage's promise that on my 14th birthday I could meet my biological mother and father posed a quandary for me. On the one hand, part of me was eager to know who they were and to come to a better understanding about why they had been unable to provide the home I needed. Another part of me trembled at the thought. These folks I have lived with here in the loft *are* my family. Without hesitation, they took me

in when Molly found me crying and cold in that little wooden crate on the wharf the day I was born. They raised me well. I loved them. They loved me. I would never want anything to come between us that might alter that. There was almost a full year before I had to make that decision and I was not one to fret over such things. There was *lots* of time.

My powers, which instantly increased in strength a hundredfold at that terrifying moment of my 13th birthday, continue to astound me. I have learned to cloud the minds of a thousand people at a time and in a blink of an eye become fully invisible to the lot of them.

Nearjumping from place to place within my range of vision now occurs instantaneously – no hanging around for a second or two waiting for it to commence. Using it, I can fly invisibly virtually anywhere, at any time. I can see that Farjumping is much more difficult than I supposed and I'll need tutoring from Gus before it really becomes a useful tool. I tried to farjump from here to *Springfield*, a small town about 10 miles inland, and ended up in some farmer's cow pasture where the source of a small creek bubbled up through the ground!

Seeping ideas and options into other people's minds happens so easily, now, that I have to be constantly on guard *not* to do it unintentionally. It poses particular problems in the presence of attractive girls. I assume it's something that I'll get under control eventually. (Mind Seeping, not attractive girls! Although ... !)

Putting folks in Time-X – short periods in which time stands still for *them* but not me – is also easier. I'm quite sure I can do dozens of people at a time now, though I've had no opportunity to practice that. Not long ago, at breakfast, when I was feeling particularly impish, I did put my Wharfies (my name for my family since they are poor folks who live on the wharfs – docks) into a 30-second Time-X. During that time, I switched their plates and drinks around so when they came out of it, the arrangement of things on the table was all messed up. They suspect me in it, I'm sure, but since they can never be told about my new powers, it will have to remain my secret.

Speaking of quandaries, there is Susie, the very

attractive daughter of the man who owns this building and the boat repair shop down stairs. She's a year older than I am. I suppose I really never cared much about her as a person and she'll come right out and say she doesn't like me except as a kissing partner. I did enjoy kissing her but since Abby – wonderful, smiling Abby with the long black hair and beautiful brown eyes – came into my life during my time up on the mountain at Calibration Hall, I don't feel right about being with Susie. So far, I've been able to avoid her.

Abby and I don't have any official arrangement. I didn't ask her to be my steady girlfriend or anything, but I think we both sense how special we are to each other. My life suddenly seems filled with quandaries. I love it here with my family but I really do miss both Gus and Abby. I'm eager to return there this weekend – that's tomorrow afternoon. My 30-day "vacation" will be over as April 9 arrives.

As far as my family knows, I will again be gone to my friend Gus's place for the weekend. Last time, the three-day weekend as experienced here in the loft amounted to six months for me among the Calibrators (Time-X and related phenomena). Gus specifically avoided saying how long it would last this time.

I have accepted the fact that my destiny is to be a *Calibrator* – my powers and the star-shaped birthmark on the back of my right hand confirm that. My life's calling is to work with them to rid the world of all that is evil and to see that those whose lives are harmful to the rest of us learn the advantages of changing their ways so they will eventually opt to join the good guys.

Gus, as I found out, is not just Gus the fellow 13-year-old who befriended me last fall. He takes two forms, that of *Gus*, my new best friend and mentor for *Calibrator* training, and the *Sage of the Calibrators*, the wise head of the ... what can I call it? Organization? No, each of us 125 Calibrators is his own boss. I guess he's best described as the 1,000-year-old wise leader to whom the Calibrators defer in matters of judgment, duty and missions.

The biggest surprise of my stay with the Calibrators – and one of the main reasons I came within a hair's breadth of declining the offer to become one of them – was that

someday, centuries from now, I am destined to become the next Sage. The responsibility appears overwhelming. It calls for wisdom beyond measure and a vastness of knowledge that seems unimaginable to me at this point. I must study. I must observe. I must listen. I must keep in mind the Sage's definition of wisdom – "The careful blending of knowledge and experience, well taken." *Well taken*, I've come to understand, means learning the lessons that both successes and failures have to teach me.

I have just put the finishing touches on my Civil War assignment. Otto – the Wharfie who has always acted as my teacher – is approaching me from the rear of the loft.

* * *

"How's it going there?" he asked taking a seat on the other end of the couch and indicating the folder on my lap.

"Just finished – at least the *first* paper on the subject. Came out to be 40-some pages. It's like only *half* the job, I think. Reading the diaries and letters written by the soldiers has given me a feeling for the absolute horrors of combat, but now I think I'd like to find a way to learn about the other end of it all – how the war affected the families and loved ones who lost sons and brothers and husbands or had them return home maimed or emotionally distraught."

"You really got into this, didn't you?" Otto said accepting the folder from me. "I can't imagine how you accomplished so much in such a short time."

Truth was, of course, I had been working on it during a large part of the 'six months' I'd been away at Calibrator training. It's hard to explain how the two sets of time work, but they do. It still seems confusing as I move back and forth between them.

"It became an all-consuming undertaking, I guess you could say," I said, trying to explain away what I realized could not really be explained.

Otto became serious. I could always tell when that was about to happen. He would take off his reading glasses and slip them into his shirt pocket. Then he'd fold his hands on his crossed knee. All of that had just occurred.

"We are aware that something remarkable took place in your life while you were away a few weekends ago, Tommy.

We assume it has to do with Gus and with the powers that led us to give you your last name. We also know that you would share with us whatever of that you could. Having heard nothing, we assume it is a very serious and private matter. We will never pry; you know that.

“We decided that I should convey to you our feelings on the matter. There has never been a moment’s doubt in any of our minds but that you were destined for greatness, and we assume that your trek along that path has now officially begun. We will always be here for you, you understand.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks and I nodded, holding a steady gaze directly into my dear old friend’s eyes. I said nothing, but he understood I was indicating that his assumptions were correct and that we could never speak of it. I sat up and moved to his side. We held each other in a long, loving, hug – just like all the others we had shared before and yet completely different.

“Well, I’m eager to read your paper,” he said at last, standing, the subject understood to be closed.

My lower lip alternately smiled and trembled as I looked up at him and nodded.

“I’ll be eager to hear your thoughts about it,” I managed, gratefully receiving his handkerchief to sop up the tears still dropping onto my lap. He made his way back toward his area at the rear of the loft.

It was a tremendous relief to have had that talk. It would make my life so much easier. It would make my Wharfies’ lives so much easier. Most of all, though, I hoped it didn’t change our basic relationship.

“By the way,” Otto called back to me as he passed my area of the loft. “Your place is an unholy *mess*. Be sure it’s cleaned up before your friend arrives.”

I smiled. Things had *not* changed. I had never, ever, before, been so fully and totally pleased about being told to clean up a mess!”

Molly was clearly puzzled about how fast my clothes had worn out (over that ‘one’ weekend) but, neither questioning nor fretting over it, she found a new set for me at the local thrift shop and hemmed up the cuffs on the baggy pants and blousy shirt. She knew I liked loose clothes. I

thought I looked pretty *spiffy* in them, as she would say. (*Spiffy* is Molly's England English for *really cool!*)

I had to wonder how the kids from the private school would react to my new duds. Even though I no longer attended, they were still my friends. Ted and Jerry wouldn't care one way or the other. Kate and Tasha wouldn't like them but neither would they say anything. Some of the others would stick their noses in the air and look down on me (not easy things to do at the same moment, by the way!). It was *their* loss, I'd say! To me the wearing of clothes was pretty much just for warmth and because it's a legal requirement – certainly not a way by which to judge the basic worth of a fellow human being. I'm learning, however, that lots of folks take issue with almost every part of my beliefs on that topic. I have to wonder how many interesting people – wonderful friends – they miss by holding to that snooty point of view.

Molly continued to refer to Gus as, "Your new little friend." I awoke each morning to Mario singing familiar arias from Italian operas. I did my homework to Yorka's violin each afternoon. Like I had for as long as I could remember, I helped Tina pack the brown bag lunches and sell them to the dock workers at noon. Evenings, Otto tutored high school kids in French and German – sometimes he asked me to help. Yorka taught violin lessons – he *didn't* ask me to help! No matter what classical piece I began playing, it always evolved into a hillbilly hoedown!

It was comfortable hearing the five languages again – Yorka's Russian, Otto's German, Mario's Italian, Tina's Spanish, and even London-raised Molly's version of 'real English' as she had been heard to call it. As had been our custom for years, I'd speak to them in French when I tired of responding in their native tongues or wanted to take control of a conversation.

Nothing had changed and yet everything had changed. I could see that having my Wharfies and the loft as a place for occasional retreat would be wonderfully renewing for me. While I was there, I was treated like just plain Tommy Powers, the smiling kid with off-the-wall ideas, and there were five loving folks always willing to listen attentively while I spun them.

Remarkably, I lived through my first humongous pimple without sustaining any permanent damage. I must admit that when I first saw it perched there on my nose I had to wonder if it might be a terminal condition. Amazingly, it disappeared without a trace. I suppose my reaction to it was different from that of most guys. I was actually happy to find it because it meant my body was developing normally. That was good news! The fact that it resembled Mount Etna was *not* such good news, but if other kids were going to accept or reject me on the basis of a zit or two I'd just feel very sorry for *them* and their shallow character, and move on.

I found myself wondering about Antipathy – the arch villain I had dispatched to live out his next several hundred years at the bottom of the ocean. Part of me felt sad for him – alone down there in that little water-tight room. Most of me, however, felt relieved that he was no longer free to work his malevolent magic on the rest of us. Like one of the Calibrator's *Ten Pillars of Life* states: *When folks refuse to interact peaceably with the rest of us, they must give up their right to live among us while rehabilitation is attempted.* [The Ten Pillars are repeated at the end of this book.]

I wondered how much time would have passed at *Calibration Hall* – the home base of the Calibrators – while I'd been gone. Gus hadn't said how that would work and I had not thought to ask. The Time-X aspect of my new life continued to be the most confusing part. It was like imagination made real.

I also wondered if Gus had continued to stay in the room we shared or if he had gone back to his stuffy old *Sage* accommodations. There was no reason to fret over any of that. I couldn't know until later and then it would be easily determined.

Having moved up from *Calibrator Tyro* (novice or beginner) to *Calibrator Practitioner*, I also moved from my green, cotton outfit to blue silks. They were just my color and although I'd miss the greens at first, I was sure it wouldn't be for long. The crimson togs of the *Master Calibrators*, like Gus wore, were still centuries away for me so I felt fortunate that blue had long been my favorite color.

Mario had always awakened me mornings with a song. How that tradition began I have no idea. It was usually

accompanied by a gentle shaking of my shoulder. When it arrived in the form of an energetic operatic aria, I knew his first several attempts had failed.

On the eve of the day I was to return with Gus, I had, for some reason, set the star on the back of my hand to awaken me at six a.m. I felt Mario touch my shoulder, but then he didn't proceed to the shaking. I opened my eyes and saw him staring at the 'alarm point' of my star as it blinked there on the back of my right hand. I rushed to touch it, which turned it off. What would I say if he asked? He ruffled my hair and in his familiar Italian accent repeated his usual greeting:

"Time to rise and shine, sleepyhead."

He didn't mention it and I didn't offer an explanation. I assumed Otto had conveyed to the others my silent confirmation of their deductions and conclusions. I skipped my shower, saving the precious hot water for my Wharfies, knowing I would have all I could ever want in my own, private, shower back at the Hall.

After breakfast I was restless and went for a walk along the wharfs. The familiar sounds of the water lapping against the old, wooden, pilings that supported the piers had always calmed me. It was no different that day. My pace slowed. Eventually, I perched myself atop a low, wide post and watched the ships as they moved from place to place in the harbor. Most appeared to be all business – heading straight for some specified destination. Others put to a less serious course and dawdled along the way as if savoring each moment there upon the sea.

I'd always had the privilege of living my life like the dawdlers – moving slowly and erratically from one point to another as a variety of things caught my attention. It seemed clear that, now, my life would often more closely reflect those businesslike ships, as I undertook mission after mission as a *Calibrator*.

I wondered if that was a definition of maturity – leaving capricious behavior behind and becoming strictly goal-directed. I hoped not. I hoped that growing up merely meant *adding* a serious and responsible side to my life so, from time to time, I would be able to come about from one course to another as situations required and allowed.

On my way back toward the loft, I ran into Susie and a boy I didn't know.

"Hey, Susie!" I said, trying to act friendly in a somewhat awkward situation. It had to have been obvious that I had been avoiding her.

"Hi, Tommy. This is *Andrew*, my new *boyfriend*."

Perhaps it had not been I who had been doing the avoiding! Her tone was not merely informational. It was a flaunting of her new guy – her replacement guy – as obviously as possible. I was immediately *relieved* – undoubtedly *not* the reaction that she had in mind.

I extended my hand for a shake. He did not return a pleasant, "Glad to meet you" grip. It was a knuckle-busting event that, inappropriately, lingered far too long. I was pleasantly surprised that I could match him might for might. I relaxed first giving him an out if it wanted it. He did. Nothing was said in words. It raised questions in my mind, like why he needed to try to establish physical superiority at the moment of our initial introduction. I passed it off as some macho guy problem he still hadn't resolved.

"Andrew's 14 and he's just moved into the area. He's rich and rides in a limo and has a boat and is the *best* kisser I've ever kissed."

Four pointed putdowns attempted within one short sentence. Probably not a record, but it did show her true, self-centered, snobbish, colors. Since I refuse to accept putdowns myself – and therefore never needed to stew about them – I just moved on.

"How nice," I said, putting on a smile as I looked from face to face. "Hope you like it here, Andrew."

"Oh, I do, now that I've met Susie."

He turned his head and plastered a way too long, way too wet, way too active kiss on her lips that all but turned my stomach. He was also doing *his* best to provoke me or make me jealous.

It was a strange ritual I had noticed back at the private school. You take a boyfriend or girlfriend away from someone else and then attempt to rub their face in it over and over again. It seemed to be more of a power play than a tender romantic act between people who cared about each other.

How power struggles could be played out that way was beyond me. I'd be happy to leave these two behind when I left to go with Gus.

"Well, I need to be getting home. Nice meeting you Andrew," I said hoping to cut the encounter as short as possible.

He stepped to block my progress. I'm sure my brow furrowed at the unexpected turn of events.

"I know *who* and *what* you are," Andrew said.

I looked him in the eyes and frowned, not understanding but trying to turn a joke.

"Tommy Powers, boy pimple factory?" I said going with a major grin.

"No! *Tommy Powers, the youngest Practitioner in the Guild of the Calibrators.*"

CHAPTER TWO

The Adversary Shows His Colors

My mental tingles began having tingles! My first thought was to protect the Calibrators by clouding all references to them in the minds of Susie and Andrew. It clearly worked immediately with Susie. I was quite sure it had not been successful in Andrew's mind. I tried again.

He stood there, arms on his hips; the sneer on his face curled his lips and grew more pronounced with each of my attempts. Could this be some new, young Antipathy, I wondered. I tried a positive option seep. It did not bounce back to me as would have happened had that been the case. I was baffled. I had no good idea about how to proceed. Andrew spoke.

"I know you did something with my father and I won't rest until I find out what."

"Your father? I don't understand."

"What fun! I suppose that's a puzzle for you, then. I understand you like puzzles, *Practitioner Powers*."

I searched the back of his hands with my eyes on the off chance there would be a starburst birthmark. I saw none. He was right. It was a puzzle for me.

He turned around, facing away from me and disappeared. Gus could not arrive too soon!

* * *

In fact, he arrived on schedule at four o'clock. Prior to that, I wondered whether to have him come up to the loft so my family could all meet him or make it simple for him and wait for him down on the dock. I decided my family had the

right to at least eyeball him – he was my best friend, the only real best friend I'd ever had and only Otto had met him.

Like before, Tina had a snack ready. Unlike before, all five family members hung around for the occasion. They didn't pry, but the women did ask some generic women-like questions. Gus fielded them with the skill of a seasoned diplomat and charmed all five.

The good-bye hugs I received seemed extra special – held just a bit longer with firmer pats to my back from the men. The women's smiles flickered in and out through teary eyes.

"Until Monday at nine, then," I said as Gus and I prepared to descend the stairs.

They called their good-byes after me. The door at the top of the stairs framed five smiling faces and remained open as I closed the one behind us down at the dock.

"That was interesting," Gus said, allowing the opportunity for me to comment while not requiring it.

I related the one-sided conversation I had with Otto; Gus understood.

"May have a new problem," I said.

"Andrew?" he asked.

I should have known that Gus would know about him. I nodded waiting for his take on it all.

"We've suspected he existed, but today is the first time we received solid evidence."

"Who is the 'he' you refer to, Gus? Explain! Explain!"

"Exactly one year before your first signal – from your starburst – reached us, we received another. It was short-lived and we were unable to trace it to its source. It was odd – unstable and disjointed unlike any other we had ever received. One hypothesis was that it could have been some new mutant Antipathy form. Thirteen years later to the day, we again received a powerful signal – a hundred times the force of the original. It was then I came to believe that Andrew – whatever he is – existed and had just come into his powers."

"So, you saw him with me today?"

"Yes. You handled yourself admirably, by the way – moving so swiftly to protect the Calibrators."

I nodded, not being in the market for praise, and twirled my finger wanting to hear more.

“Like you, I tried a positive mind seep. I received no bounce as would be the case if the being were a true Antipathy.”

“So, are you saying we have a mutant version of the original Antipathy mutant?”

“It seems so. Bad news, I’m afraid.”

“Could be worse, I suppose.”

Gus smiled.

“How’s that?”

“It seems that mutant Andrew must have a positive end on his *Integrity Path* – unlike his Father.”

“I see. You’re saying there may be some hope to convert him into a good guy. I don’t know, Tommy. I like your optimism, but I caution you. Any being that is even part Antipathy is bound to possess tremendous powers for evil.”

“You were unable to trace his mother, I assume,” I said searching for a starting place.

“That’s right. My best guess is that she is right here in the city, but that’s a lot more hunch than fact.”

“A year to the day before I was born, you say. Seems we have at least one thing in common, then.”

“A birthday. Yes. You *are* going to work on him, aren’t you?” Gus said as we turned down the street toward Amy’s Bagel Stand.

“Unless told not to, or other more important missions come up.”

We remained silent during the next several blocks.

“Gus! Tommy! Good to see you! Thought you’d dropped off the face of the earth,” Amy said, arms open wide for hugs.

“Been away,” Gus explained.

Gus had his usual onion. I had become hooked on blueberry with cream cheese. We took them to “our” park bench and sat to enjoy them.

“So how long have I been away – in Hall time, I mean.”

“Only a month. Seems longer to everybody up there. Your exuberance has been missed.”

I smiled. I liked that image of myself – outgoing, entertaining and energetic. I wasn’t sure how to phrase my next question. I didn’t have to.

“Abby misses you. Nobody’s taken your place.”

My place! That sounded *very* positive. I had a *place* with Abby. That *had* to be good!

“I’ve sure missed you guys,” I said looking my friend in his face.

“And we, you. *Calibration Hall* just doesn’t have the *pizzazz* when you’re not there.”

He smiled and we stood, continuing on our way toward the woods at the north edge of the city. We passed the school playground. Jerry and Marcus were playing some one-on-one in the basketball court. They came over to the fence as we approached.

“Hey, guys,” Jerry began. “Long time no see.”

“Ya,” Marcus added. “Where ya been?”

“Away. Glad to be back,” I said hoping that my one-word explanation would be accepted. It was. They were guys.

“Friday night pool party at Hanson’s,” Jerry said. “You both know you’re always invited.”

“Thanks,” I said looking at Gus. “Not sure what our plans are yet.”

“Let me know if you need a ride,” Jerry added as if it were a done deal.

We made small talk for a few more minutes and then were on our way again. I was interested in how the excitement grew within me as we approached the cabin – the magical gateway to the grand and rustic Calibration Hall. It was like I imagined it would feel to be going home for the holidays.

“Abby knows I’m coming back today, right?” I asked.

“Oh, my, yes! Been bugging me for a week to make sure she had the time right. Her little brother, Jesse, as well. I expect you’ll be greeted by a standing room only crowd in the great room. We need to stride out. You’re expected in eight minutes.”

“This seems like a big deal. I didn’t expect that. I don’t understand.”

“Well, it’s time you did. You are the most immediately loveable youngster any of us has ever met. Everybody enjoys being in your presence even if only for a few minutes. You have smiles and kind words for everyone. You have the very special gift of making people feel good about themselves and

life”

“No pressure there,” I said sounding more sarcastic than I intended.

“You are not required to ever be anybody but who you are,” Gus said as if explaining, “I would think that should, *indeed*, be no pressure.”

I felt better and I felt sheepish. There was really nothing to say so I sighed and shrugged as we hurried on.

We entered the cabin.

“I suppose if it’s a show they’re expecting, it’s a show I should give them.”

I removed my shoes and heavy coat and handed them to Gus.

“How about supplying some upbeat music to take along to the Great Room?” I suggested.

“Like this?”

It was perfect of course. I was sure it had also begun up at the Hall announcing my imminent arrival.

“Let’s go, then,” I said beginning to dance.

We were immediately there. I danced across the floor. I danced on the tables and three feet in the air. In the end, I danced my way up the massive, curved staircase and ended it all by sliding down the banister – standing up – and doing a front flip into the splits onto the rug at the bottom of the steps.

They applauded and whistled. I waded into the gathering shaking hands and making small, glad-to-be-back, talk – all of it sincere. It was so good to be back. It didn’t take much to please them and that was good because truthfully, I really didn’t think I had all that many great moves to offer. Perhaps I should consider dancing lessons.

Eventually they began moving onto other things. I turned around. Abby was there. I felt a sudden burst of happiness, but was uncertain how to proceed. Should I give her the hug of all hugs? Should I just hold her hands between us so I could revisit her lovely face? Should I tell her how wonderful it was to be back there close to her and how much I’d missed her?

In the end, the decision was not to be mine alone. She put her hands on my waist and rose up on her tiptoes. It was a sweet, tender kiss, though longer than our usual public

displays. My heart pounded and my being filled with a most extraordinary, though still mostly unfamiliar, feeling. I wanted it to last forever. It didn't.

"My, how I've missed you," I said pulling her close. "I thought about you all the time – and I mean ALL the time."

I administered a gentle peck to her forehead.

"Same here," she said.

There was an attraction between our eyes that kept our gaze locked in place.

I nodded. There seemed to come a point where words no longer held the kind of meaning I needed to convey my feelings to her. I had noticed it several times before. That was the exact point where the conversation needed to be turned toward other topics. It was.

"How's your family?" she asked.

"They are fine. Thank you for asking."

I spotted Jesse, Abby's younger brother, making a beeline for me across the huge room. Not slowing as he approached, I prepared for a flying leap. I held him as he straddled my hips and hugged a "gee I missed you" hug, which, under other circumstances might have been considered downright painful. After a long moment, I put him down. He took my hand, jabbering on as if needing to immediately catch me up to date on everything he'd done while I was gone. Abby took my other hand, lovingly patient about the intrusion; we walked to their apartment.

I hugged her mother and made small talk for a few minutes before making my way to my room. Gus was waiting there in his big chair.

"She does make your blood pressure rise, doesn't she," he said partly serious and partly kidding."

"Oh, yes! I didn't realize how much I missed her and I really was missing her the entire time I was away."

He nodded, knowingly, then spoke as he looked around the room.

"As a *Practitioner*, you're allowed a full-size apartment, now."

"Why would I want that? I like it this way. Having lots of little rooms seems so unfriendly. It's not like there's anything private between us. Unless *you'd* feel more comfortable with

your own room, I'd really rather have it this way."

"That was easily settled. One room it is. I *also* like the idea of open spaces."

I went to the closet and took out my new blue silk outfit. Gus smiled as I stroked it and examined this and that about it.

"Time for dinner. Your first opportunity to appear in public in your *blues*. Expect some new reactions from the others when they see you."

"Reactions?"

"As a *Tyro* in your greens, you were still a kid in most of these folk's minds – an extraordinary kid, but a kid, nonetheless. Now, in your blues, you will be seen as a young man, a full-fledged *Practitioner Calibrator*. The position is revered and the men who hold it are set aside as special – uncommon – extraordinary. Some things *will* change. I'm just alerting you ahead of time."

I can't say I really understood the full extent of his message but I nodded and changed clothes. As I stood there admiring myself in the mirror on the back of the door, Gus came up behind me in his crimson outfit. Except for the color, they looked alike – baggy pants, drawn tight at the ankles; and a full cut, tuck-in shirt with blousy long sleeves. The hats resembled short, squat versions of baker's hats and the sandals were open-heeled with three straps across the front of the foot and one at the heel. I caught Gus's eyes in the mirror.

"I like the blue and crimson together," I said. "The green and red looked like Christmas, but the blue and red reminds me of the Forth of July and all the fireworks that go with it."

As we entered the dining room, those already gathered there stood and faced me, clapping in silent, respectful applause. I had seen it once before when the Sage appeared at my confirmation. The hands moved as if clapping, but they stopped short of making a sound. It was a symbolic gesture which acknowledged awe, and respect and admiration. I was not at all sure I deserved any of that. I *was* sure it made me very uncomfortable.

I looked at Gus hoping for some direction. He whispered to me out of the corner of his mouth.

"Nod once, slowly; raise your arms high in their

direction, and say thank you.”

I did as he suggested. The applause then turned into a deafening reception with shouted greetings and whistles and the stomping of feet. Abby brought me a single rose and delivered it with a quick kiss to my cheek.

“Wooo-oo,” came the happy, unison response, clearly intended to turn my ears red. I was later told that I didn’t disappoint them in that regard.

“I can still sit anywhere I want?” I asked Gus.

“Certainly. It looks as though Abby’s family saved a spot for you.”

“Thank you,” I said to him, grasping his hand and patting it. It may not have made sense to others – me thanking him at that moment – but it did to me and I could tell Gus understood. I went with Abby and joined her family.

Jesse was full of questions, many of which were unceremoniously *shushed* by his mother who thought they were inappropriately personal. The boy reminded me of myself at his age – overflowing with questions and fully uninhibited in their delivery. The shushing aside, I knew he’d corner me later and try again.

The last time Abby and I took our walk after dinner I was certain it would be the last time I’d ever see her. That made it exceptionally nice to be there with her on the path leading to our private place. We mostly talked. She caught me up on what she’d been doing, how her studies were going, and things like that. I listened and responded where appropriate. It was a comfortable time. She didn’t pry.

After I dropped her back at her apartment I began wondering how a relationship like that could be both comfortable and exciting. Somehow the two feelings were not as mutually exclusive as I would have thought. There was also an element of mystery involved in it all – knowing certain things still lay ahead for us and wondering how it would be – when it would be – if it would be.

Again, Gus was waiting for me when I returned to our room. I was soon out of my blues and into the towel around my waist that had become my standard eveningwear there in our room.

“All you got to do is sit around here waiting for me to

come back?" I asked poking fun at him.

"Hey, *you* seem to be the one with a life. *I'm* just the shy, reclusive one," he came back.

"Like *that's* so! I remember you and that girl at the pool party – she fed you strawberries all evening and the two of you giggled like – well, like 13-year-olds! That reminds me about Kate's party Friday evening. We're invited, you remember. Suppose we can work it in? I haven't said anything to Abby yet, not knowing the plans."

"I guess we need to work out a schedule," he said. "Our first order of business is to begin honing your Practitioner level powers. I must admit I was amused when, instead of arriving in Springfield, you ended up in that cow pasture a few weeks back – a *field* with a *spring* in it. But, in good Tommy Powers' fashion, you took advantage of what you had and went for a

swim in the creek. It cracked me up!"

He shook his head. I shrugged and smiled. It was what I did – make the best of what I had and help others do the same. I've always been able to find ways of enjoying the moment – well, most moments.

Gus continued.

"I don't see any reason why Friday evening can't be held open."

My immediate quandary was how to let Jerry know. It had not occurred to me before, but there were no telephones in the Hall. I supposed that with Farjumping and long-distance *Mind Speak* available, such a device was not necessary.

"In the morning, I'll hop down to the school and set it up with Jerry and Ted. Shall we accept the ride I'm sure they'll offer?"

"That's best. We don't usually involve the folks here with our powers. We could hold hands with Abby and farjump to the Hansons' mansion but, like I said, it's not something we like to do. It highlights our differences and here we strive to do just the opposite."

"In the morning I can practice Farjumping when I go down to the school," I said. "I'm afraid that without some

guidance when I head for the 'school' I'm likely to find myself swimming with a large group of fish off the coast of Iceland."

Gus chuckled.

"So. About Andrew?" I said turning onto my side on the couch and facing Gus directly. "What do you know about him?"

"Very little, actually. Like I said, he has evaded our detection until he showed up to confront you earlier in the day."

"So, we don't know if he really has powers or if he's just a loud-mouthed teenager trying to impress his girlfriend."

"That's about it. He clearly either has the power to become invisible or to nearjump out of sight."

I nodded, remembering the event on the dock.

"You suspect he's the son of Antipathy?"

"That's our best guess. He is certainly *not* from typical Calibrator stock."

"How does he know about me?" I asked.

"That's a puzzle."

"Maybe he's been in contact with his father," I suggested.

"It could be that Andrew is the reason Antipathy returned here from the Middle East," Gus said. "To be with him when he went through his 13th birth moment."

I nodded and raised my eyebrows thinking if that had been the case it probably would have been because Antipathy figured he could use Andrew to his advantage rather than out of any sort of fatherly love – Antipathy being incapable of love.

"What would Andrew have to gain by exposing me? Nobody out in the world knows about *Calibrators*. Most folks would likely think he was crazy telling a tale like that."

Gus shrugged as I continued.

"We don't know if he's responsible for any trouble or problems then."

"That's right. We don't."

"Why would he be after me – if that's what the confrontation amounted to?"

"Antipathy – posing as Andy – knew that *you* were interfering with his drug operation. He may have passed that onto Andrew or the two of them may have hatched some plan

of revenge against you.”

It made sense. It had been a month since I sent him to spend the rest of his life in that little water tight bunker at the bottom of the ocean. Andrew, by his own admission down on the dock, realized Antipathy was gone and suggested he suspected me in it. That gave me an idea.

“It sounds like Andrew wasn’t watching my final struggle with his father so can’t be sure what happened to him.”

“That’s a good possibility – *if* the two of them had, in fact, been working together before that,” Gus agreed emphasizing another option I needed to be keeping in mind.

“Assuming, as we seem to be, that Andrew is Antipathy’s offspring, and that he has a bone to pick with us or at least with me, it seems the first order of business is to determine just what capabilities he has.”

“That is certainly the starting place,” Gus said, nodding his agreement.

I stretched and put on a yawn.

“I’m tired. Think I’ll turn in early. It’s been a big day.”

“Don’t try to pull that stuff on me, Tommy Powers. You know I can read your thoughts.”

I shrugged.

“I thought maybe you’d give me a pass on this one,” I said, my grin acknowledging that he’d caught me red-handed.

“What was your plan, other than waiting until I was asleep and then sneaking out to do whatever?”

“I thought I’d seep Andrew an ink blot.”

“I am lost beyond belief, pal. Help me out.”

“An ink blot, like the test psychologists use. The viewer tells what they look like to him and it reveals things about his needs and emotions.”

“I know that much. But how are you proposing to use it?”

“I’ll seep a thought to Andrew that Susie promises a big surprise for him if he will meet her immediately at the shack south of her dad’s boat shop.”

“A big surprise?” Gus asked looking puzzled and not immediately offering his approval.

“*That’s* the ink blot. He can make of it what he will. If

he's anything like a normal teenage male, his fantasies will impel him to show up."

"I see. Very clever. But why will he think the message is from her and how would she get it to him?"

"I'm counting on his hormones to overpower his intellect and logic. And, who knows, he may have some thought-reading thing going with her and assume it came to him that way."

"And then ... ?"

"Then, I'll show up. I'll tease him into revealing his powers and we'll know what we're up against."

"Okay, but I will accompany you. I can insert a *mental homing beacon*."

"A what?"

"It's a Master Level skill. I will reconfigure some of his brain cells to emit a unique electrical signal so we will always know where he is."

I got up and began pacing off the excitement brought on by the concept.

"That's mind-boggling, Gus. Great! Let's do it."

"We probably ought to get dressed. Never know how these things may turn out," he suggested.

"I've never tried to seep a mind that wasn't right there with me. I'll need some guidance, here."

"Sit and close your eyes. Recall the exact image you saw when you looked into Andrew's eyes. Then look inside to his retina. Enlarge a section a thousand times. Now, enlarge that section another thousand times. What you are seeing is his DNA molecule. Take a mental snapshot and save it. Then open your eyes."

Again, I popped to my feet, even more excited than before.

"This thing just keeps getting awesomer and awesomer."

"*Awesomer?*"

"Well, it's in *my* dictionary even if not in any others."

I calmed down and seeped the message toward Andrew's DNA. We dressed in our street clothes and with Gus's guidance farjumped to the docks. Andrew had taken the bait and was already there, pacing back and forth, obviously

steaming mad at being stood up by Susie. I walked toward him while Gus remained invisible. I was on highest alert to jump quickly in case he became violent.

When I stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight and he realized who I was, his eyes began to glow the brightest, reddest red I had ever seen. In an instant, they shot a laser-like ray into my chest. It was a single hole that penetrated my heart. I fell to the dock unconscious.

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CHAPTER THREE

Renewing Old Acquaintances

When I came to, I was back on the couch in our room. The only remaining catastrophe was my shirt, which Gus had removed so he could monitor the progress of my healing. It sported huge holes front and back with their edges bloody and charred black.

I looked up at Gus.

“Don’t *you* ever get hurt?” I asked, only partly in humor. “It seems like I’m always the one on my back recovering and you’re always the one up there smiling down at me.”

He didn’t answer my question, but did speak.

“I imagine it will continue to sting a bit for an hour or so, but you do heal remarkably fast.”

“In all honesty, I don’t feel a thing. Where was the hole?”

“He touched my chest over my heart.”

“Ouch!” I said reflecting the terror of that moment on the dock rather than any pain from his contact.

“Let’s see,” Gus began, taking a seat in his big chair. “You’ve been one of us for seven months and during that time you’ve taken a bullet to the stomach, all but splattered yourself into oblivion in a full power dive from 30,000 feet and now this. I’m quite sure it’s a record.”

“Careless, you mean?”

“No. *Careless* would not be the word. *Eager*, perhaps. *Bold*, perhaps. *Undisciplined*, perhaps.”

“They all sound like compliments to me,” I said

struggling to sit up. “That ruined shirt will be really hard to explain to Molly, you know.”

“I imagine we can search the world and find one like it for you.”

I nodded, not have considered that possibility.

“Well,” I said trying to put a positive spin on the evening’s activity, “At least we got a look at *one* more of his powers. Any idea how it works?”

“Oh yes. We all have that power, but since its sole purpose is destruction, we choose not to develop it. It has to do with exciting retinal cells by overcharging them with a flow of electrochemical energy and then, using a technique similar to flying, we project that energy toward some target. It is an extremely difficult act so either Andrew has exceptional natural power or he has spent years developing it.”

“I got the idea it was drawing power from the rage he was feeling at having been deceived by us.”

“*Us*, is it now?” Gus said smiling. “*Us*?”

I shrugged and stood, amazed at how rapidly and completely my body had healed. I walked to the big window and looked down on the docks and my Wharfies’ loft.

“I guess this sends us back to the drawing board in terms of discovering Andrew’s full arsenal of potential powers,” I said, my back toward Gus.

“We now have the beacon implanted, Tommy. I believe that was worth all the fuss.”

“*Fuss*?” I said copying his earlier reaction to my use of the term, ‘*us*’. I spun on my heel to face him. “You call taking a laser to my heart a mere ‘*fuss*’, Gus?”

The unintended rhyme sounded humorous and we laughed and then laughed some more. It had been triggered by my words, but soon reflected much more – releasing the tension acquired during the past several hours. It felt good. I suddenly realized how tired I was.

“I think I better turn in, and *this* time there is no ulterior motive – just a good night’s rest.”

“I’ll take your word on that. I’m ready as well.”

* * *

The next morning, with guidance from Gus, I made my first successful, solo, farjump. It as was from the front lawn at

Calibrator Hall to the fence by the playground at the school. I was standing there feeling prouder of myself than I probably should have, when Jerry and Ted spotted me and jogged in my direction. The only downside to it all was that I couldn't share the excitement of my success with my friends.

"Where you been?" Ted asked. I thought you'd left our time zone or something."

I had to smile, since his *time zone* analogy was pretty much on target.

"Been on vacation with my family. Glad to be back. Thought I should let you know I'm on for the party Friday if the invite is still on."

"Of course. Gus and his girl are coming, too, right?" Ted asked.

I nodded. "Wouldn't miss it. That Gus is quite the party boy."

I chuckled out loud at my little joke. They frowned awaiting an explanation but, of course, I couldn't explain why calling a 1,000-year-old Sage a *party boy* seemed humorous. I diverted the conversation.

"Can we beg a ride, again?"

"Sure. Usual time. Usual place," Ted said.

"Great. We appreciate it."

It was then I saw him – *Andrew* – walking across the playground toward the school door.

"New kid?" I asked, somewhat hesitantly, indicating him with a quick flick of my head.

"Ya. Andrew Pathé. Ninth-grader. Super smart. All the girls are ga-ga over him," Jerry explained.

I assumed I understood the '*ga-ga*' reference. He was a great physical specimen and handsome, I suppose. I can never be sure about guys' looks.

"When did he start?"

"About a month ago. To look at him you'd think he'd be a star athlete, but he doesn't even seem to know the games – basketball, baseball, football – none of them. It's like he's lived his life in a closet somewhere."

"Nice kid?" I asked.

They looked at each other during an awkward pause. Ted responded.

“Not really. He comes off rude and doesn’t seem to want to make friends. Kate – you know how she’s on a kick to save the world right now – invited him to the pool party. He wanted to hear who’d be there and then said he’d come. If he does, you’ll get to meet him.”

“Not that it’s really such a privilege,” Jerry added, in an uncharacteristically sarcastic tone. Jerry always saw the best in other folks.

Kate arrived in the Hanson limo and came directly to where I was standing on the outside of the fence. She took my arm and gave me a friend to friend peck on the cheek. I returned it, not remembering ever having done that before to anybody outside the loft. It was nice. It made me feel ... what’s the word? ... significant ... important ... included.

“You and Abby will be coming Friday night, won’t you?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. And Gus, too.”

“Cool! We’ve missed you guys. Suppose you could manage another sack of these delicious bagels?”

“You got it!”

“Have you met Andrew the new guy?” she asked.

“I just saw him going into the school.”

I had neatly avoided the truth about our previous meetings.

“He’ll be at the party, too.”

“Wonder if he can swim,” Jerry asked, his unfriendly tone continuing.

“Who cares?” she said. “We girls just want to see him in a bathing suit.”

She giggled and looked into Ted’s face. He shook his head and they kissed a quick kiss through the wire fence – not something that was permitted on the school grounds, but a sweet gesture nonetheless.

“Well, I got to get inside. See you Friday night,” she said.

“I better get going as well,” I said, realizing first bell wasn’t far off for them.

“See ya.”

“See ya,” they said, then turned and walked toward the back door. Ted ran ahead to catch up with Kate.

I had to wonder what Andrew was doing at *that* school

– of all the possible schools in the city. The idea of a bagel had whetted my appetite so I made my way to Amy’s place near the park.

“Tommy! Good to see you, honey! Fresh blueberry, today.”

“You always know what I want. That’s great! Thanks.”

“Where’s Gussy?” she asked as she picked through the assortment. “I’ll find you the largest, blueberriest, one of the lot.”

“Blueberriest?” came Gus’s amused voice from behind me as a question.

“I understood,” I said turning and smiling.

It seemed that both Amy’s dictionary and mine were significantly different from his.

“Gussy!” she said, offering him her usual long hug. They had some very special connection. I was not privy to it and I would be patient. It was both interesting and satisfying to see them relating to each other in that special way.

“I got your little buddy here all fixed up. What for you? Onion?”

“Tommy swears, your blueberry’s are the best thing he’s ever tasted. How about I try one of them, today? I feel the need for a change.”

I was intrigued by Amy’s use of the phrase, “little buddy.” I knew I was more slightly built than Gus, but the term made it seem like I appeared *much* younger – *much* smaller in her eyes. I dwelled on my questions about it knowing Gus would hear my thoughts. If he chose to answer, fine. If not, I would understand that it was none of my business.

We enjoyed our treats on the park bench.

“Andrew is enrolled at the school I attended last semester,” I said, supposing he already knew.

He nodded.

“Any idea why?” he asked.

“None. Been wondering about it, though. Might have something to do with getting to me through my friends.”

“That makes sense. I guess we work on the assumptions that he knows about both you and his father and that he suspects you had some involvement in his disappearance.”

“You couldn’t read his thoughts at the dock?” I asked.

“I tried, but no. It’s like they were all negative. Lots of rage like you said. He may have a positive end to his *Integrity Path*, but at *that* point he certainly wasn’t spending his time there.”

“I suppose he’ll be surprised to see me alive and well at the party tomorrow night.”

“Depends on how much he really knows about the Calibrator constitution – physical make-up.”

“Wouldn’t his be pretty much the same as ours?” I asked.

“Depends a lot on his mother, I suppose. Clearly it is not time for another Antipathy to be born – we’re at least two centuries away from that. Andrew is a genetic mistake and that means we have no reliable previous data that we can call upon.”

“So, I still need to find things out.”

“So, *WE* still need to find things out,” Gus said reminding me we were a team. “He’s clever and ruthless and reacts impulsively. He proved that to us last night.”

“I wonder if he needs rage to power his evil capabilities.”

“What an interesting idea,” Gus said thoughtfully, then added, “But no halfcocked attempts at finding out, *agreed?*”

I nodded, understanding that it had really been a direct order from my Mentor even though it had been phrased as if I had some say in it. We *were* a team and although I *had* dispensed of Antipathy almost by myself, I needed to remember that I was still there to learn from Gus.

“Should I re-enroll in school?” I asked, interested that my own reaction to the suggestion was not one of complete disgust.

“Let’s hold that open as an option depending on how things go at the party.”

“So, you’re saying the party is a work assignment rather than one of those rare occasions during which I get to ogle beautiful, girls who are wearing next to nothing.”

“I just imagine you’ll find a way to accomplish both,” he said with a smile.

We finished the bagels and tossed the paper into the

trashcan; mine was a perfect 10-foot jump shot while Gus kidded around with a slam dunk into the 3-foot-high container. I had to smile.

“So, were you trying to get to Springfield for some special reason the day you ended up in the creek?” he asked.

“Last summer Otto tutored a kid from over there. I sort of thought I’d go look him up. Nice boy. Sometimes after his lesson we’d go swimming off dock 6. He was like the only kid friend I really had that summer – besides Susie, the kissing machine.”

“Well, let’s get over there, then,” he said. “Take me along.”

“Okay. I see the town on the map. I see where we are. I turn that into the view it would be from several thousand feet above. If *I’m* taking *you*, give me your hand. I now intend to be in the nearby town of Springfield.”

Just that fast, there we were. I was amazed. Gus seemed relieved he didn’t have to do battle with a jealous bull in a pasture.

“O k a y, *T o m m y* ! ! !” I said, a little full of myself I suppose. Then I recovered and asked. “So, what do I do to improve it next time?”

“Well, I have the idea we just lucked out not materializing in the middle of a crowded street.”

“You’re right. I should have headed for the outskirts and then nearjumped into some point I could see.”

“Yes. That would be preferable.”

“I just love making mistakes like that. I learn so much from them. What else?”

Gus sighed and shook his head at my take on mistakes.

“Well, one thing, maybe.”

“What?” I was eager to hear his advice.

“Don’t squeeze my hand so hard. You completely cut off my circulation.”

I punched him on his shoulder. He pretended it hurt. Maybe it did. I felt extremely powerful just then. I had to ask.

“I didn’t intend to really hurt you ... if I did.”

“I understand *and* you *did*.”

“How can that be? It’s the same old Tommy here that

you've been regularly pinning every night of my Calibrator lifetime."

"All *that* was before your 13th birth moment," he said.

"So?"

"In addition to increasing your *special* powers, all of your *regular* physical powers also increased."

"So, you're saying I might have a chance on our floor tonight?"

"Just let me say I will be very careful how I treat you in the evenings from now on."

Our smiles met. Regardless of how he treated me, I was determined that there *would* be a wrestling match on the big blue braided rug that night. My next smile was private as I wondered if perhaps I had caught 'the macho' from Ted and Jerry. I would know for sure if I found myself throwing Abby into the pool on Friday night.

"Any idea where this friend of yours might be this time of day?" Gus asked.

"He attends the high school. Let's fly around until we spot it."

I was immediately invisible and soaring high above the little town. As I leveled off at about 500 feet there was Gus waiting for me. It amused me. We found the school and, remaining invisible, were soon inside. Marty was in class so although I was able to see him, it seemed inappropriate to materialize. The entire plan had not been well-thought-out, but then, I suppose its purpose was really mostly just farjumping practice.

Gus motioned me to follow him. We entered the boys' restroom and he materialized. I followed his lead.

"This is a good time to practice a farjump through this concrete wall and out onto the blacktop behind the school," he suggested.

Well, I understood it really *wasn't* a suggestion. I nodded. It would be my first time moving through a solid wall on my own.

"I'll wait for you on the other side," he said and disappeared.

He clearly thought I could do it. I wondered if I were to fail if that meant I'd smack myself against the wall or get stuck

half way through it. I took a deep breath – there was no really good reason for doing that, I suppose. I visualized the back of the school. I gave myself an aerial view. I intended to jump there ... and ... *there* I was!

I had to dance. There was no controlling it. Across the asphalt. On top of the Dumpster. Along the rail on the fence. I eyed the roof, but Gus mind-spoke a big caution to me – others might be watching. He was right. I figured I would have come to the same conclusion without his help.

Five minutes later I seemed to have it out of my system. Gus had taken a seat on a low wall, resigned to letting my enthusiasm run its course.

“Finished?” he asked, not moving to stand until he had my confirmation.

“I think so, yes. Thanks for your patience.”

“Thank you for the entertainment. Not sure how we would have explained it to a casual passer-by, but I’m sure you would have thought of something.”

“I appreciate your confidence in me and, yes, I understand the intent was to point out to me I need to be more careful. Thanks for that as well. I’ve always had this impulsive bent, you know. I understand I need to control it.”

“Maybe to just delay it, or contain it, would be a better approach. Nothing wrong with your genuine, natural enthusiastic reactions to things. Goodness knows the world needs more honest reactions between folks.”

I felt better. I managed to get us both back to the Hall in time for lunch – after a couple of short, planned detours to the Sears Tower in Chicago and Independence Hall in Philadelphia. My brain had a chain reaction of tingles as I came to the realization that I could now travel to each and every place I had ever read about – and I would.

I sat with Abby, and as we ate we made plans for the party Friday night. She seemed excited and I soon caught her enthusiasm. While I had been back home, I’d thought about her in her bathing suit – often. I was ready! There would be a girl at the party for Gus – he preferred to go with a different one each time. I had taken care of that with a mind speak while I was talking with Kate that morning. My only concern was Andrew. I doubted if he’d try anything with all the other

kids around. He clearly needed them for some reason or else he wouldn't have enrolled in that school. He *wouldn't* blow it.

* * *

Ted and his father picked us up in front of the church at 6:50. It was clear Ted was genuinely happy to see the three of us again. That made me feel good. I was glad to be back with him as well. We were the last to arrive. Again, I was amazed at the huge amount of money that Mr. Hanson had spent on that mansion. I couldn't for the life of me understand why any family needed so much room or why they would spend money on something like that when there were hundreds and hundreds of hungry children and old people in the city who could have had a lifetime of food for a tenth of the investment.

We went directly back to the huge glassed-in patio that held the pool.

"Hey, guys," Kate said coming to greet us. We each received a hug that let us know she was happy we were there. I handed her the big sack of bagels. She ran her finger down the center of my T-shirt-covered chest.

"You seem to have really filled that out since you were here last. Looking good!"

I was aware that at my 13th birth moment, during my confirmation, by body had blossomed with muscles, but hadn't made a connection between that and the fact they might make me more attractive to the opposite sex. If it did, that was cool, of course, but I'd never want a great body to be more important to them than the real "me" that lived inside it.

We were soon in and out of the dressing rooms, sporting our swimsuits – far more comfortable than tight jeans and T-shirts to my way of thinking. Jerry and Marcus approached us.

"Come on. I want you to officially meet Andrew," Marcus said.

As one, Gus and I took a deep breath and followed him.

"Hey, Andrew. I want to meet three good friends of mine – Abby, Gus and Tommy."

I extended my hand, remembering the bone-crunching encounter he and I had when Susie introduced us down on the dock. This time it was just a regular shake, met with a smile and a "Glad to meet you. Marcus and his friends have

been really nice to me since I entered school here.”

It was clearly an attempt to appear friendly and cordial and all quite like a regular teenager. Ted’s usual skimpy, tight tank suit looked like baggy beachcombers next to the almost-nothing suit Andrew wore. I was surprised Kate’s parents allowed it. He was obviously there to make an impression. I had to wonder why.

The maid and butler arrived with tray after tray of food and juice. We were soon settled into having a good time. There were bowls of fresh fruit – oranges, apples, bananas. As was typical of such offerings, there were gnats hovering around. One of the nearly useless skills I had honed over the years was catching gnats, so I amazed the others by sending gnat after gnat to insect heaven. They all tried but, if *you’ve* ever attempted the feat, you’ll recall what an impossible task it usually is. You’re sure you got one, but then immediately discover it diving toward your face like a hawk in pursuit of its prey.

“How do you do that?” Marcus asked, openly bewildered.

For the next ten minutes I held class – *Gnat-Snatching 101*.

“Gnats are so lightweight and yet have so much surface area that the slightest air motion pushes them away before you can close your hand or slap two hands together. The secret, therefore, is twofold. First, move slowly to keep air movement to a minimum, and second, form your hand into an open tunnel. Then move one end of that tunnel around the hovering gnat. Being open at the other end, it pushes no breeze toward the gnat and it gets trapped inside. Then close up your fist beginning with the thumb over the inside end and then the little finger at the other end. Finally, squeeze tight and hold.”

I would have never guessed *that* particular skill could have become the centerpiece of entertainment at a party for teenagers, but it did. At one point Marcus called out to the butler:

“More Gnats. Bring more gnats.”

He was serious and everybody else cracked up. Gus just stood back shaking his head and smiling. He always

seemed intrigued by the useless trivia I had stored away in my head. Growing up with few friends, no TV and a thirsty mind, its acquisition had seemed like great fun to me.

Andrew kept his eye in my direction all evening.

“Can you swim the length under water?” he asked me at one point.

“Not sure. Sounds like fun to try, though.”

He had not suggested any kind of contest – just see if I could. I slipped into the water at the shallow end and took a dozen deep breaths. At the point, I began to feel lightheaded, I submerged and began swimming. As I approached the deep end I felt another body on top of me, its arms around my chest holding my arms against my sides. I could not move them in any useful way. The attacker’s legs had wrapped around mine and I couldn’t kick. I was motionless in the water with no way to move and virtually no air left in my lungs. I looked from side to side. There was no one there – well, it had to be Andrew, invisible. I didn’t dare go invisible myself with all the kids looking on and yet ... I blacked out.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Two Faces of Andrew

Gus performed a Time-X on the kids the moment I lost consciousness. He pulled me out of the pool, and brought me to. After I got my breath I reentered the pool and as the Time-X expired I surfaced at the deep end to the applause of the unsuspecting kids. Andrew, who had been timed out with the rest soon materialized and appeared at the back of the crowd. He was clearly enraged, but struggled to maintain a pleasant presence.

I spoke to him.

“That was quite an experience – swimming the length under water, I mean. Thanks for suggesting it.”

I turned and went back to Abby. Andrew soon made an excuse and left the party. The girls were clearly sorry to see him and his *almost bathing suit* go.

The incident made me believe he didn't know about Gus. He certainly had not expected I would have help available. I hoped he would believe I had handled the situation alone so he'd think twice about taking me on again.

I kicked myself for having fallen for his ploy. I've always been gullible. I believe the best about people and their intentions until they prove otherwise. I should have realized that Andrew seemed to have *no* good intentions – at least where I was concerned. I also should have thought quickly enough to have initiated the Time-X myself. I still had lots to learn and the fact I had centuries ahead of me in which to learn it didn't keep me from being impatient.

The downside of having him believe I had single-

handedly beaten him a second time was that he might call upon some more powerful approach on the *next* occasion. Before he left I used mind seep to deposit several options. One was that most of these kids really liked him – the *him* he had let them come to know – and that maybe he needed to consider the real value in becoming the kind of person they would continue to like. Neither bounced back to me so I was satisfied they stuck. He would be forced to consider them for at least the time it would take to dismiss them. I would continue my positive attack every day – every waking hour would clearly be best. I really wanted to help him become a good guy. I'd have Gus brainstorm with me to create a series of options to seep in his direction. I needed to find a way to get close to him so I could befriend him, talk things through and model the good life for him. With the barrier he had already established between us, that would not be easy.

Soon after Andrew left, the guys threw the girls into the pool. I asked Abby if she wanted to be man-handled that way and – surprise, surprise – she said, “Well, of course I do!”

Clearly, there was a lot about the boy-girl stuff I really didn't understand. I picked her up in my arms (which was pleasant, I found). She screamed and kicked as if fighting me every inch of the way. I just shook my head and carefully dropped her over the side.

Later, when several of us were standing together in the shallow end of the pool, Ted asked:

“What do you suppose got into Andrew tonight? He seemed to be having a good time and then he just left – like he was in a huff.”

“Yeah. That was really weird,” Jerry said.

The others nodded, all puzzled. I saw an opportunity.

“Could be he felt out of place, seeing everybody else relating to each other so easily. We all know the little in-jokes that he doesn't, like saying to you, Ted, ‘Next time remember to wear a suit’. He may have even heard that and thought we were putting him down for that swimsuit that he *almost* had on.”

“So, what can we do?” Kate asked.

I waited to see if somebody in the group would have a suggestion. It was Marcus.

“Well, I felt a lot like Tommy said when you guys first started including me here. I mean we barely spoke the same language if you’ll recall and I must admit I had a chip on my shoulder about you kids who seemed to have so much while I had so little. But you kept after me – kept doing nice stuff. Like when Jerry forced his English tutoring on me.”

The two of them exchanged shots to the arms and then high-fived, turning it into, an arms around the shoulders show of friendship.

“So, we could tell him how we missed him after he left,” Kate suggested.

“And, we could tell him if we said or did anything that made him feel bad it wasn’t intentional. That we want him to be our friend,” Jerry added. “I’ve not acted very friendly toward him, I guess.”

It seemed to me they were doing fine without my input. I smiled at Gus. He nodded. I decided to keep quiet – well, about *that* at least.

“Does he talk about his family?” I asked.

“I get the idea he lives with his mother. He never speaks about his father,” Ted said.

“His mother enrolled him,” Marcus added. “I saw her in the principal’s office that morning. She’s drop-dead gorgeous!”

“I guess I don’t know his last name,” I said fishing to verify the earlier information.

“Pathé. French, I think he said,” Kate answered.

That matched what the guys had said. My earlier search of the phone directory had not located a single Pathé in the entire city, so I wondered if he’d given the kids an alias for some reason. Maybe just no landline. I supposed Gus could follow his beacon and we could locate his home. I could enter the principal’s office invisibly and accomplish the same thing, provided they gave their real address.

The remainder of the evening turned back to just having all-out fun. At one point, all 11 of us raced from the deep end to the shallow end. It was more like a splash-a-thon than a race and we all but drowned as we laughed ourselves out of breath along the way. Nobody really won because we stopped before arriving at the wall. That way nobody really lost either. I liked that.

Eleven o'clock arrived all too soon. We dressed and said our goodbyes. At 11:15 we waved good-bye to Ted and his father in front of the church. Gus did his 'thing' and maintained the appearance of two people, Gus there at the car and 'my father' coming around the side of the church to meet us and waving from a distance. The car pulled away and we were soon into the woods.

Gus understood how it was for a boy and his girlfriend at 13. I suppose when you've been that age for a thousand years you'd get that figured out. He jumped on ahead to the Hall and gave Abby and me some private time. I felt like just standing there on the path, holding her close and kissing her all night long. I could tell she felt the same, but we knew better, of course, so eventually moved on up the path to the Hall.

Why that path was only there when I was with Abby or Jesse I didn't understand, but then, there were lots of things I still didn't understand about my new life as a Calibrator. I never let the unknown or the unanswerable get me down. Instead, I saw them as the source of wonderful mental tingles that let me know there were still fascinating things to learn and solutions to seek.

"6024 Regina Place," Gus said from his chair as I entered our room.

"Huh?"

"That's the address where Andrew and his mother live. Her name is Rachel Parker. Now we have a starting place to look into Andrew's past."

"I assume you've been snooping while I've been – well, down on the path. Thanks for that, by the way."

Gus raised his eyebrows, teasing me before answering.

"Yes."

"By his *past*, you mean where he was born, where they have lived, the missing father, previous schools, and things like that?"

"Exactly. And, if we can, of course, any recent contact with Antipathy."

As I undressed, I admired my new blues hanging there in the closet. Every time I saw them they filled me with pride and delight. They represented so much about me and the

long, long, journey I'd just begun. I had no idea where it would lead me, but I was eager to remain fully engaged in it. I moved to the couch.

"I thought the other kids did pretty well planning about Andrew, didn't you," I said.

"Yes. You've had an exceptional effect on them, you know."

I wasn't going to take credit for it, although I could see where he was coming from. I had modeled positive behavior toward everybody and probably preached a bit about getting by first impressions and outer appearances. If it had helped, I was very happy – for them, though, not for me. I knew they would find great happiness by approaching life in that way.

"I'm turning in," I said. "The breakfast hour will be here before we know it. The evening wore me out. Guess I didn't get enough exercise during my vacation."

Gus nodded. We moved to our bunks and lay on our sides looking out the big window, watching the wispy clouds play chase in the moonlight. From time to time, a lone, amnesia-plagued, sea gull spread its somber silhouette across the face of the moon. I was soon asleep dreaming of ... well, I guess *that* will remain private!

Saturday morning Abby slept in rather than going to the dining hall for breakfast. I had never been able to sleep in and felt some admiration for those who could. It would have been more normal at my age, but then, I had long ago given up thinking of myself as normal.

After pancakes, sausage and fresh berries, Gus and I changed back into our street clothes and were off to explore Andrew's home setting. He was still asleep. His mother was at the kitchen table downing her first cup of coffee. There were no signs of a man in the home. As Marcus had indicated, she was a beautiful woman and we soon determined she worked as a fashion model for local clothing and department stores.

From the pictures taped around the mirror above Andrew's dresser we determined that he had also modeled from an early age. The books in his library suggested a wide range of interest. One of the books on his nightstand was a history of dictators. The other was a small volume of poetry by Robert Frost. An interesting contrast – one I saw as promising.

Other documents suggested he and his mother had recently returned from France where they had been modeling swimwear. That probably explained the extra skimpy suit he wore to the pool party. I've read that the French wear little or nothing at their beaches.

All of that aside, Andrew's room looked pretty much like that of a typical teenager. I especially liked several of the posters of gorgeous girls he had arranged on the walls. I assume they were from France as well.

On the back of his door was a framed diploma from the junior high school he had attended. Interestingly on *it* his last name was Parker, like his mother. The use of Pathé must be recent. It suggested some strong feeling of connection with his father, I supposed, since that was the name Antipathy had been using locally.

The apartment as a whole was not lavish but neither was it plain. The furniture looked expensive and the clothes in the closets all bore classy, designer, labels. Apparently, his mother was doing well financially. I wanted to see Andrew interact with his mother – to see how they got along. I also wanted to look at his school records from *Thompson Junior High School*. Neither would be difficult. It was just a matter of timing.

As we were about to leave, his mother knocked on his door and, after pausing a few seconds, entered. Andrew didn't budge as he lay there on his back. She sat on the lower bunk beside him and brushed his long black hair back off his deeply tanned forehead, coaxing him into wakefulness.

"Andrew, honey. Time to wake up. You have a photo shoot at 10."

He opened one eye and eventually the other, rubbing them and stretching. He nodded and yawned.

"What is it today? I forget."

"Jeans."

"Oh, ya. A couple of hours, you think?"

"About. It's a woman photographer and they always seem to fawn over you longer than the men do."

"That kind of fawning's good!" he said, spreading a broad smile.

She slapped at him playfully and leaned down to kiss

him on his forehead. Pancakes in 20 minutes, okay?"

Andrew nodded. His mother left and closed the door. He sat up on the edge of his bed, looking longingly back at his pillow, clearly wishing he could catch another 40 winks. Presently, he stood and headed for the shower.

Gus and I had seen and heard enough so we went back to the park and got comfortable on a bench to make plans.

"What did you think?" Gus asked.

"Seemed like a loving relationship with his mother – very different from what I would have predicted. I take that as a pretty positive sign."

"Me, too. His room?"

"Looked pretty normal to me. Loved his posters."

"I noticed! Wondered if I was going to have to put your eyes back into their sockets!"

He laughed, clearly more amused by his little joke than I was. I'd seen him looking as well, but wouldn't mention it.

"We can probably get some ideas about his earlier life from school records," I suggested.

Gus nodded.

"They follow him from school to school," he said, cryptically.

"They, what?"

"His school records. They'll be at his present school, not back at his junior high.

"I didn't realize that. I'd have gone to the wrong place. I wonder what my school record shows from my one semester of classroom educational activities."

"Let's go take a look. I doubt if the office will be occupied this morning," he said.

We were soon there. As expected, the building was empty. We materialized in the principal's office. The file cabinets were locked. No problem for Gus. He reached right through the steel side and extracted the folders. I looked puzzled as well as amazed, I supposed. It left no hole.

"Like Farjumping through a solid surface, only on a smaller scale," he explained. "I'll be showing you how it's done."

We materialized and took seats at a table. I was

amazed at all the information a kid's school folder contained. On the copy of his birth certificate the line for the father's name was blank, indicating his mother had probably not been married.

"Andrew Thomas Parker," I said, surprised. "Seems we almost have one name in common."

His records were flooded with 'A's' from the time the information began in kindergarten. There were three IQ scores from tests given at various times: 140, 135, and 144 – showing him to be brighter than 99 percent of all other kids his age. Being that smart he had no reason *not* to make A's. He seemed to have been no discipline problem until after his 13th birthday. There were some two dozen serious incidents recorded at his previous school around that time. He was asked to leave and finished the semester with a home tutor. I suddenly understood why he had entered that school the following semester. There had been no repeat of the problems since he arrived there.

There was an interesting note about the one and only home home visit that a social worker made during that troubled period. Andrew reportedly pushed him down a flight of stairs, dragged him into the street and ran over him with the man's own car, breaking both of his legs. Andrew was placed on probation until his 17th birthday.

"I'm satisfied," I said handing the folder to Gus so he could return it to its place inside the file cabinet.

He handed me a second folder. Mine. The grades were all As, but then I knew that. What I didn't know was contained in a comment from the principal: "Tommy has been an extremely positive influence on the students and staff since he's been here. He is kind, helpful, and creative almost to the brink of the outrageous. We all love him and wish him well in his future – which is sure to bright and filled with happiness."

"How nice of her," I said. "Who'd have thought?"

With the files replaced we farjumped back to our room. It would soon be time for lunch – always a buffet on Saturday noon.

"I have an idea, you know," I said, standing there at the big window, looking out across the ocean.

"Yes, I know. Tell me more," Gus said, coming to stand

beside me.

“It’s clear that Andrew hates my guts. My reading of history suggests that so long as people don’t allow themselves to get to know the folks they hate, that feeling can’t be changed. I didn’t say it very well, but my point is that Andrew can probably never stop hating me until he gets to know me. As long as I remain a nemesis in his head, that’s what I’ll be. So, I have to find ways of letting him get to know me. I’d like to start right now. He’ll be returning from his photo shoot about one, I estimate. I want to be there on the apartment steps waiting for him.”

“Okay,” Gus agreed without discussion. “I’ll need to be close by. So far your encounters with Andrew have not been among your most shining hours as a Calibrator, you will remember.”

I nodded.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way. I’ll take a basketball and try to coax him to the school ground for some hoops. Marcus will be there.”

“Marcus will be there?” he asked.

“If this new long distance Mind Seeping works, he’ll be there.”

Gus smiled and put his arm around my shoulders.

“That’s your plan – your *entire* plan?” he asked.

“I like to improvise when it comes to interpersonal things. I’ve always done well in give-and-take situations.”

“In other words, you haven’t the foggiest idea how you are going to proceed.”

“Right, and I’m *proud* of it?”

We chuckled. Gus shook his head as I exaggerated my most confident expression.

* * *

I sat on the lowest of the eight concrete steps that lead up to the landing in front of Andrew’s apartment building. I bounced the basketball against the brick walk. The sun was unseasonably warm and I had shed my sweater, opting for the white T-shirt underneath. Before long a limo pulled to a stop at the curb and Andrew and his mother got out of the rear door.

Andrew’s eyes caught mine immediately. I stood.

“Hey, Andrew. Imagine meeting you here,” I began,

immediately realizing how dumb it must have sounded to someone who wasn't used to my strange sense of humor.

"A friend of yours?" his mother asked, looking from me to him.

"Tommy. One of the kids from the party last night."

His mother stepped to greet me, her hand outstretched.

"How nice to meet you, Tommy. It was really sweet of you kids to include Andrew. It's never easy to find your niche at a new school."

I could sense Andrew's displeasure with the goings-on. He made no effort to speak so his mother did (of course, she was a mother!).

"You guys hang out down here while I put some sandwiches together, then we can have lunch, okay?"

I jumped on it before Andrew could find an excuse.

"Sounds great! Thank you. You are very kind, Mrs. Parker."

The two of them exchanged a loving look. She climbed the stairs and entered the building. It left the two of us there alone.

"Seems you and I have not got off to a very good beginning, Andrew," I said. "I was hoping we could rectify that."

I tossed the ball toward him. He caught it and held it. I returned to a seat on the steps. He stood there, apparently enjoying the superior position, which forced me to look up at him. There had been an unexpected revelation in the conversation with his mother. Clearly, he had not mentioned me to her. That meant his vendetta against me was a private thing. That might also indicate any recent relationship with his father had also been kept private from her.

"So, you going to stand there, toss the ball back, or take a seat?" I asked, knowing that when people are given a choice they usually act on one of the options. Andrew chose two. He tossed me the ball – too hard – and took a seat on the far end of the step.

"What you doing here, *Calibrator*?" he asked in an angry voice.

"Like I said, I came to get better acquainted."

"Don't want to get better acquainted with you. So far

you've just been plain lucky, you know."

"So far? Oh, you're referring to the attempts you've made on my life. I assume your mother is in the dark about all that – the powers you acquired on your 13th birthday, what your father is, your recent association with him, and the fact that he's now missing."

Andrew snorted then looked over at me, glaring, and held my glance. I continued.

"I'm really sorry if you had to go through that 13th birth moment by yourself. It must have been absolutely terrifying. I know it was for me even though I'd been forewarned about it and was surrounded by people who loved me. Like I said, I can't imagine how terrifying it would have been otherwise."

He continued to look at me, but I felt his hate-filled glare mellow into a more attentive look. He hadn't attacked me so I felt I must have been doing something right. I muddled on.

"You know – or maybe you don't – we're the only two boys alive anywhere in the universe who've been through that. I suppose that gives us some sort of bond."

"Yeah?" he said. I couldn't tell his meaning.

"Yeah, what? You did know? You didn't know? It gives us a bond?"

He remained silent, but held his hands out as if ready to receive the ball. I tossed it to him with all the force I could muster. He managed a smile as it slapped hard against his hands. It was quick and slight, but it *had* been a smile. I just let the silence continue. He looked away and then back into my face.

"Antipathy says he's my dad. He says I have no choice but to follow in his footsteps. I'm not sure what his footsteps are. I know he hates the Calibrators. I must admit you're the only one I've met. I assume the others are older."

"Much older. Your dad is several hundred years old, you know."

"Really?"

I tried to explain further, hoping not to upset him, but he seemed at least willing, if not perhaps eager, to listen.

"I'm told that every five hundred years or so the Calibrator gene mutates and creates an Antipathy in error."

"And what do you mean by **an Antipathy**?"

“There’s only one way to say this and you won’t like it.”

“You going to tell me or just play word games?”

“An Antipathy is about as close to pure evil as a human can be.”

“He treats me great,” came his short, direct response. It was clearly an attempt to discredit and dismiss my assertion.

“I’m glad he does. My belief is that’s because he wants something from you. Antipathies aren’t capable of love.”

He threw the ball into the street and looked away. Apparently, Gus saw that it bounced back to me.

“You saying I’m a new, pure evil, Antipathy?”

“No. No! It’s not time for a new Antipathy to arrive – you’re hundreds of years too early. You seem to be part Antipathy, part Calibrator and part regular human. You’re more like a genetic mistake. I ...”

Before I could explain further he stood and looked down at me like a looming giant. The familiar red glow began to show in his eyes. Again, I seemed to be his target.

CHAPTER FIVE

Andrew 101

All quite unexpectedly he raised his head, looking up into the sky. The rage filled rays shot upward away from me and anything that could be damaged. I quickly got to my feet and moved several yards out onto the sidewalk in case his initial display of sound judgment might just as quickly deteriorate. I felt Gus's invisible arm around my shoulder. Andrew turned away from me and disappeared.

It left me in an awkward situation, for at that moment Mrs. Parker called from an open window several floors above.

"You guys want to eat up here or down there? It's all on a tray. No problem if you want to enjoy the nice day at the table out in the side yard."

She looked around, clearly trying to locate Andrew. Before she could ask or I could think of an explanation, her son appeared in the window beside her.

"I'll bring it down there, okay, Tommy?" he called.

"Sure! Fine! Great! Cool!"

I stopped spinning the list of superlatives before it became ridiculously excessive. When in doubt, I tended to talk, so I'd been in that situation many times before. I shut up and took a seat back on the steps.

Andrew soon appeared with the tray piled high with goodies. He hitched his head toward the side of the building.

"A picnic table in the lawn over there behind the brick wall," he said.

I nodded and followed, thinking what a nice secluded

spot that would be for some new attempt on my life. It was unlike me to think that way. I didn't like it. He appeared to have calmed down in a hurry – perhaps too much of a hurry. There I went again!

He placed the tray at one end of the table and we took seats across from each other on the attached benches. I looked around at the cozy garden complete with Maple and Pine trees, evergreen bushes and a fountain from which water cascaded down a pile of rocks into a small, round, red brick, pond.

“Nice spot here. Quiet. Secluded. Green.”

Again, I would have done well to just shut up. That strategy worked since Andrew had things on *his* mind.

“My inclination to hate you remains unchanged, understand, but we can talk – just this once.”

“That’s an honest, straightforward beginning,” I said. “I can deal with that.”

He placed a plate in front of each of us and pointed to the sandwiches and drinks. We filled our plates and glasses as he continued.

“It seems my powers have no effect on you.”

“It seems your powers are still WAY out of control,” I came back not wanting to deal with his competitive, power-based statement.

He shrugged, then, nodded, again looking me in the face as if to ferret out my intentions. It seemed to be my turn to speak.

“I don’t know how much you know about the Calibrators and Antipathy. You have questions or shall I just talk?”

“Talk.”

For the next half hour, I related to him things that I thought he needed to know, things I hoped would be helpful to him yet not enrage him.

“So, where do you suppose I fit into all that?” he asked at last, both anger and anxiety beginning to seep through his tone.

“I’m not sure. I want you to fit in on the side of us good guys. Unlike Antipathy, you have a complete *Integrity Path*.”

“You lost me.”

I explained about the positive and negative potential of

human beings and that good guys lived on the positive end of their path while bad guys lived on the negative. I explained how Antipathies had no positive end to their paths and that in that basic way he – Andrew – was more like a Calibrator or his mother, or other regular human beings than like his father. He seemed satisfied, but gave no indication of any commitment one way or the other.

“Did you kill him?” came his next question – the one that suddenly seemed to be at the base of much of his animosity toward me.

“Calibrators never kill!”

It came out so forcefully that even I was impressed – and startled!

“But you did *something* with him.”

“Yes, and that’s all I can tell you.”

“He told me you didn’t have the power to stop him – that Calibrators had never been able to stop him or his kind.”

“Until now, I guess, that was true.”

“He did bad stuff, did he?”

I nodded, forcefully, unable to think of a word that adequately conveyed just *how* bad his stuff had been.

We sat in silence for the next several minutes. I finished the chips. He drained the last drops of lemonade more or less equally into our two glasses.

“After the stuff I’ve tried to do to you, why haven’t you come after me?”

“I did. Today. Now.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“That’s what almost everybody I’ve ever met has said to me at one point or another.”

I smiled. *He* didn’t, obviously troubled by the illogic he saw in my approach. He – like most everybody else I’d ever met – had been seduced into believing the *eye for an eye*, revenge-based philosophy – an approach that would surely, eventually, kill off the entire human race. I wasn’t ready to present my alternative at that moment – not until he was in a more receptive frame of mind. I had learned years before that in an argument no one really ever listens to the other person’s point of view because when they aren’t talking – rather than listening – they’re planning what they will say next.

“Want to shoot some hoops up at the school?” I asked. “I imagine Marcus will be there – the really cool black kid from the party.”

“I’m no good at sports. Always thought they were a waste of time.”

“With that super body of yours, I imagine you can be good at just about any sport you decide to work on.”

“Really?”

Again, I nodded, not wanting to overdo it.

“Maybe another day. I think it’s time I sit down with Mom and have a long overdue talk about her and my father.”

“I understand.”

“You and your old man get on okay?” he asked, as if an afterthought as we piled the scraps and other things back onto the big tray.

“I’m an orphan. Never knew either one of my parents. I’ve been raised by five wonderful, loving folks who had no obligation to take me in. I’ve been very lucky that way – a lot like you having the fine mother *you* have, I suppose.”

Initially he didn’t respond though was plainly working on it inside his head. After a moment, he said:

“*Two* things in common, then, it seems.”

I nodded. We held our gaze for some time as if hoping to encounter a glimpse of the truth inside the other’s soul.

As we stood he had a final message for me.

“I’m *not* your friend. I don’t want you get the wrong idea from all of this. I suddenly seem to need to be honest with you about it.”

“My honest reply is that I’m very sorry that’s how you feel and I thank you for this time we’ve shared together.”

He picked up the tray and left for a side door. There was no ‘good-bye’. No ‘see you later’. No ‘thanks for the information’.

After a few moments, I made my way around the brick wall and onto the sidewalk. Again, I felt Gus’s arm on my shoulder and heard his whisper.

“Best I remain invisible ‘til we’re out of sight. He is watching you from his window.”

I took that to be a positive sign. Perhaps I had intrigued him.

“How’d I do?” I asked.

“How do you think you did?” came his predictable response.

I thought back over it all for just a moment.

“Pretty good, I think. I didn’t convert him, but I sure whetted his appetite. I really wanted him to come to the playground, but what he has in mind is a lot more important. I hope his talk goes well.”

Gus materialized after we turned the corner, just before we came upon the playground. Marcus was there. He waved when he saw us approaching.

“Hey, guys. Somehow I had the idea you two might show up.”

I smiled at Gus.

“Ready to be trounced, run into the ground, left in my dust, etc, etc, etc,” I teased, pulling off my shirt.

“In your dreams,” he said – doing the same – then asked, “How we going to do this, guys? Can’t do one-on-one with three of us.”

“I’d suggest *three on three*,” I said.

Marcus held up his hands waiting for my explanation.

“I always wondered why there were only two teams in a basketball game. Why not three or four? We can each be a team.”

Marcus shrugged and looked at Gus saying, “It actually sounds like it could be fun.”

As we stood there bare from the waist up, Marcus pointed to us in turn, beginning with himself.

“Black Team Marcus, Tan Team Tommy, Pasty White Team Gus.”

“I’ve been telling Gus he needed to lay out in the sun more,” I joked.

It deserved and got a solid punch to my upper arm. We played hard for the next half hour, making up the *three-on-three* rules as we went along. I suppose somebody won, but through the fun we soon forgot about keeping score. It was a great time. More than once the game fell apart as we laughed ourselves onto the asphalt over some hilarious something-or-other.

As we rehydrated at the water fountain Marcus told us

they had moved his grandmother into an old folk's home the month before. It was a sad thing to him, but she needed more care than his family could give her. He had been to visit her that morning and was visibly upset by what he found.

"All there is for her to do is sit and watch TV or play cards. She's spent her whole life taking care of folks and all of a sudden, she don't have nobody to help no more. Something's gotta be done, but I don't know what. You two always got good ideas. Help me on this."

I didn't have a good suggestion. It was not something I had ever considered before – farming out a loved one to somebody else's care. I felt quite helpless.

"I don't have an idea – at this moment – but let me get to work on it. What home is she in?"

"*Shady Rest*. Isn't that the absolute worst name for a place to live you ever heard? Sounds like a damn cemetery – sorry about that, but the whole thing really steams me."

Neither Gus nor I was able to be of much help at that moment, but we listened, and Marcus said he felt better for getting it off his chest.

As Gus and I prepared to leave, two of the younger kids Marcus had taken under his wing jogged up.

"How 'bout some one-on-one?" the taller of the two asked him.

"How 'bout some three-on-three, instead?" he said.

The boys looked puzzled and Marcus winked at us. As we left the playground, he was carefully explaining the new game to his enthusiastic young friends.

"I'd like to be a mouse in the corner at Andrew's place right about now," I said, assuming Gus wouldn't think it proper to spy on their important, private time together.

Gus sensed my quandary.

"If your purpose – your intention – is just to spy, then I agree. If your purpose is to be helpful, then perhaps it would be the right thing to do. If you'll remain invisible, I'll let you go on your own this time."

I nodded, pausing to think through my intention.

"I have to admit there's a part of me that just wants to know, but then, knowing the facts will surely allow me to help Andrew better than if I'm flying blind."

Gus nodded. I went behind a large shrub and made myself invisible. Rather than Farjumping, I decided to fly. I loved to fly and at my stage of Farjumping, I'd likely be bounced right back into that thorny shrub within 10 minutes.

I entered through the kitchen window which his mother had opened earlier. They were in the living room. It was obvious that they had both been crying.

"I just need to be sure I have all this straight, Mom. I know it's hard, but please correct me if any of this is wrong."

She nodded as she dabbed at the corners of her eyes with an already damp tissue. I stood by the door to Andrew's room as he began recounting what he thought he had heard from her.

"You were 19 when you met him. He was handsome and charming and told you he was 22 and wealthy. You dated for about three months and during that time you got pregnant with me. You're sure he's my father because there was no other guy in your life at that time. His name was Andrew Thomas and the pictures in this envelope are of him, and him and you. He treated you well and saw you through your pregnancy right up to the day before I was born, when he disappeared leaving you a large sum of money in a bank account he had established in your name. You've never heard from him since."

He paused and she nodded. Andrew sorted through the pictures.

"I don't seem to look anything like him. Since your family disowned you, I've never met your parents or your brother. Do I resemble them?"

She shook her head and spoke.

"Honestly I must say that you don't. You've always been well built and handsome – that also describes my father and brother. Good looks is about all we ever had. We were poor. Every month I've shared some of the money with them. If I had handed them a large sum all at once, they would have squandered it.

"I used some of the money to go to college. I've never spoken with you about our finances. Perhaps now it's time. There is something very odd about my bank account. At the first of every month there is always a deposit made for the

exact amount I withdrew the month before. Our money never gets used up.”

Andrew looked puzzled. He had a question.

“So, you could take it all out and use it and the next month it would all be back?”

“I imagine so.”

“You never tried?”

“No. Why would I? We’ve always had all that we needed and most of what we wanted, haven’t we?”

Andrew nodded, but looked puzzled.

“So, you and I really never *had* to work, is that what you’re saying?”

“I suppose so, if you’re just referring to working for money.”

“You lost me.”

“Haven’t you enjoyed modeling, getting to travel, having people recognize you on the street as the boy in the ad or commercial, feeling like you were helping with the household expenses and contributing to your own college fund?”

“I guess. Yeah. What does that have to do with anything? Oh. I see. You’re saying that if you hadn’t had me work, I’d have missed all that.”

She nodded.

“Money’s not really all that important to you, is it?” he asked thoughtfully, reflecting on the things she had been saying.

I wanted to cheer, but didn’t. He continued to think out loud.

“You’re right, of course. I’ve always had what I needed and most of what I wanted. It’s hard to imagine ever having everything you want. You wouldn’t have anything to look forward to – nothing to plan for and work toward.”

He fell silent looking around the room.

“I love this place, you know. We’ve had a really good life here – except for when I went off the deep end when I turned 13. I’m sorry about that. I guess I’m just beginning to understand how it came about. Thanks for sticking by me through it all. I probably never said that before.”

“Some things don’t need saying out loud, Son.”

He nodded, got out of his chair, and crossed the room

to sit beside her on the sofa. He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to him.

“You’ve raised me just right. Having a dad with us couldn’t have improved one thing. Tommy’s never had a dad either. Everybody says he wins the prize for being the all-time greatest kid. I guess not having a dad isn’t an excuse, is it?”

They sat in silence, heads leaning against each other.

“Do you think I owe him anything?” Andrew asked.

“Him?”

“My father.”

“Well, he did help give you life. I suppose if you treasure the life you have, you at least have to be grateful to him for that. I’m not sure you *owe* him anything. Parents have children because they *want* them, not so they can *use* them.”

“So, you wanted me?”

“From the moment I first suspected I was pregnant, I was filled with a joy like no other I’ve ever known.”

“Sounds like I was an accident. That you and he weren’t really planning to create a new life.”

“Lots of unplanned things turn out to be wonderful, Son. I don’t recommend it as the way for you to become a father, but just because you weren’t planned doesn’t reduce your worth by so much as a single grain of sand.”

“I determined long ago – right after our first facts of life talk – that I’d never chance making a baby I wasn’t ready to love and care for, for as long as it needed me.”

“Sometimes I wonder how you’ve become such a wise and wonderful person, Son. I know you’ve had to do lots of it all by yourself.”

“Hey, whenever I’m not sure what to do I just ask myself, ‘What would Mom do?’ and the answer always comes to me.”

His mother began sobbing uncontrollably. Andrew patted her shoulder and smiled, speaking.

“Now, if you just have one more of those ‘facts’ talks up your sleeve that will help me understand why women cry regardless of whether things are sad or happy, exciting or boring, fun or scary, I will be *most* appreciative.”

She laughed through her tears and patted her son’s hand.

“I’m afraid you were born with the wrong set of hormones to *ever* understand that. My best advice is to just accept it as one of those facts of life and be patient as the women in your life act the way women act.”

Andrew raised his eyebrows and held his mother close. She had one additional thought on the subject before she allowed it to close.

“And you know, in the same way, *you* have to understand that girls and women are never going to fully understand the macho, risk-taking, bottled-up feelings, don’t-want-to-talk-about-it approach that you – as a male – take to life.”

“It’s a wonder males and females ever choose to live together, isn’t it?” he said, only partly in humor.

She looked up into his face and responded seriously.

“Maybe it’s the *differences* that help make it so exciting and wonderful. I think marriages that work best, understand that.”

“Oh, I’m *all* in favor of the differences I’ve seen up to this point – they *are* wonderful and *definitely* excite me,” he said.

His mother playfully pushed him away, pleased at his normal interests, and understanding that aspect of his life would – as it should – remain forever private from her.

“Thanks for the talk, Mom. I feel a whole lot better now. All my questions haven’t been answered, but I can see that I’m the one who has to handle them. You’ve given me a great start toward that.”

Andrew reached for a box of tissues sitting on the lamp table next to the couch and handed it to his mother. She wiped her eyes and sighed, taking his hand in hers.

“I’m sure that through the years I’ve learned more from you than you have from me,” she said, “But you’ll never be able to understand that until you have children of your own.”

“You’re right. I don’t understand, but later on I’ll let you know.”

“*Much* later on, I hope,” she said, as if teasing.

“Oh, yes! MUCH later on!”

I had learned several important things. His mother had no idea that Andrew had recently been in contact with his

father and he was not prepared to tell her. I assumed Antipathy had sought *him* out without tipping his hand to her. I had to wonder why? To serve some selfish purpose, no doubt. It also appeared that Andrew had not shared the onset of his powers with her. Again, why not? They seemed so close. Had Antipathy arrived in time for, or shortly after, his 13th birthday and pledged the boy to silence? For all that I had learned, many more questions had been raised. That was good. You had to find the *right* question before you could find the correct answer.

I understood that one of his unanswered questions had to do with figuring out just what allegiance he owed his father. Should his father's enemies become his enemies? Was it his place, as the son, to seek revenge against the one who vanquished his father? Should he set out to find his father and accomplish his release?

In the end, it really seemed to boil down to just *one* question: Was it to be *his* life's mission to find a way to kill *me*?

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CHAPTER SIX

Spy vs. Spy?

During those next several weeks it became clear that Andrew was following me on a regular basis. I couldn't be sure if he realized I knew or not. Perhaps part of his plan was to make it obvious and try to rattle me. I didn't get rattled, but was intrigued. My best guess was that he wanted to learn my routine in case – or, more realistically, *when* – he decided to plan another attack on me. As far as I could tell, I had no routine so that might prove frustrating for him. Perhaps he was trying to locate the Calibrators' home base.

On occasion, I really wanted to jump to his side and ask him if I could be of some help, but, as much fun as that would have been for me, its potential effect was unclear, so I didn't.

When he wasn't following me I often followed him. I chuckled thinking the two of us resembled the guys in the *Spy vs. Spy* comic books. He had a date almost every weekend – seldom the same girl twice. Whether that was his preference or the girl's I didn't know. I wouldn't pry into his private time with his dates. It was usually a movie, something to eat afterwards, and then time alone in some secluded spot.

I noticed that at school he remained aloof – distant – from the other kids. He treated them in a pleasant way when they approached him, but he seldom chose to be with them – except to arrange dates, like I already indicated. He was a brilliant student but, unlike me, seemed willing to put up with the traditional classroom teaching process. Although he seldom became involved in sports during the school day, he did hang around afterward as if hoping to be asked to

participate in a pick-up game of basketball or football. He improved rapidly – just as I had indicated to him I thought would be the case if he gave sports a try.

Abby had an interesting reaction to Andrew.

“He’s handsome, intelligent and even fun to be around – in a very reserved sort of way – but I’m not sure I’d let any daughter of mine date him. I get an uneasy feeling when I’m around him.”

I decided to tease her a bit.

“And that is a different feeling from the one you get when you’re around *this* handsome, intelligent, fun-to-be-around guy?”

She slapped at me playfully as we sat in the grass beside the pond watching the sun go down. I put my arm around her and she leaned her head against my shoulder. I kissed the top of her head.

“I love it when you do that,” she said.

“May I ask why?”

“It’s an unselfish kiss.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You do it because you want to and get nothing in return. It’s very different from a lip-to-lip kiss, you see, where you get kissed back.”

“Oh. I see. Well, I hope this doesn’t burst any bubble for you but I *do really* like those lip-to-lip kisses.”

“And you don’t like kissing me on my cheek or like you just did?”

“Oh yes. I do like that, also. Those are my ways of saying I love you as a very special person in my life. The lip-to-lip variety is my way of saying I love you as a girlfriend and that I want us to share those special feelings together. Can you see the difference?”

“Yes. That’s so sweet. You put into words my exact feelings as well. How about some of that two-way stuff, *now?*”

“You have to know I’m *always* ready for that. I have the feeling that’s more a boy thing. You’re not always *really* ready, are you?”

“Probably not as constantly as you guys seem to be. Girls need to be put in the mood more than guys, I think. When you hold me close and touch and kiss my hair and tell

me how nice it is to be here with me – things like that – I get in the mood, too.”

“Seems maybe I’ve done some things right, then,” I joked.

We lay back in the soft grass, close together, and kissed a little and talked a lot during the next half hour. Our earlier agreement about enjoying kissing and hugging, but nothing more, made times like that feel safe and wonderful. There were never questions about whether we would follow our urges any further. It was comfortable and although there were definitely urges to do more, our arrangement allowed us to think with our heads and not our hormones.

* * *

As I often did, I went to the school playground at 3:30 on Friday afternoon. There was usually a pick-up game of some kind and although I didn’t care a whole lot for the sports, I did enjoy being with the kids and trying to turn it into a good time. I was often chosen first even though it was a well-established fact my team usually lost. That wasn’t because I was all that bad at the activities. I just thought – for example – that it was far more fun to take the ball down to mid-court, turn around and try to make a basket over my head than to take it in for an easy lay-up. In football, I enjoyed throwing the ball high in the air, downfield about 20 yards, and then trying to catch it myself or when punting, taking the ball from center, turning around and seeing if I could kick it between the opponent’s goal posts. Like I said, I was more into a creating a good time than *winning* – a state that always left way too many of the losers unhappy as far as I was concerned.

Even though it was baseball season, it was to be football that afternoon. There were just six of us – three to a team. Andrew showed up to play. He took a spot on the *other* team by his own choice. I tried to make small talk with him, but he ignored my overtures. His delight of the afternoon seemed to be hitting me as hard as he could, as often as he could, and glaring into my face for as long as he could when I was down. I began to question whether my earlier talk with him at his place had made any positive impact whatsoever.

By 4:30 most of the guys had to leave for home. Andrew handed me a note, turned, and jogged off toward his

place. “Meet me at the bottom of the cliff at the gravel pit on Old Wire Road in a half hour.”

Since he did not wait around for a response or questions, my *instinct* told me he was up to no good. My *interest* compelled me to be there and find out what he was up to. Clearly, Andrew had come to know me pretty well.

I jumped, invisibly, to the appointed place and waited for Andrew to show up. A few minutes later he jumped onto a spot close to the base of the cliff. He carried a baseball bat which he immediately secreted behind a boulder, out of sight.

I materialized some distance away and walked to within several yards of him.

“Hey.”

I raised the knuckles of my fists shoulder high, moving ahead to meet his (the way guys my age greeted each other there in that city). He made no effort to meet mine so I dropped my arms and tried another tack.

“What’s up? We going for a swim? I’ll warn you that the water in the pit stays *really* cold, in case you’ve never tried it out.”

I remained on high alert assuming the bat would play some part in the meeting.

“Yeah. Swim. Cold water makes a man out of you. You scared of a little cold water, Calibrator Tommy Powers?”

“No. I find it invigorating.”

“Where’s the best spot?” he asked pulling off his shirt as if beginning to strip for a swim.

I turned around toward the small lake and pointed about 50 feet to the south of where we stood.

“The big flat rock there. A good place to dive from. Water’s about 20 feet deep. Some tall, slender, weeds at the bottom you have to watch out for so you don’t get tangled up in them.”

The next few minutes have to be reconstructed *after* the fact, the reason for which will become obvious. While I stood there facing away from him, Andrew bashed me across the back of my head with the bat. The blow knocked me out. He dragged me up against the cliff. Then he focused the laser power of his eyes some 30 feet up the high, sheer, wall of clay above me.

The cliff collapsed, allowing tons of dirt, rock and clay to fall and cover me. Andrew, however, had miscalculated the extent of the damage he would cause and had not stood back far enough himself. He, too, was immediately covered under 15 feet of debris.

My unbelievable powers of recuperation from physical trauma had me awake and thinking clearly only seconds after I had been struck. Andrew's plan certainly had merit; I'll give him that. If I were unconscious, he assumed I couldn't use my own powers. That, he figured, would last long enough so I would suffocate under the dirt. He had lots to learn!

Using my Farjumping skills, I flew out of the dirt pile high into the air to figure out what had happened. That was when I reconstructed the events just related. Andrew was nowhere in sight. I flew higher into the sky to search a larger area. Still, he was nowhere to be seen. Since he was limited to Nearjumping, I figured he should be in view. The second most likely alternative was, therefore, probably the reality. He, too, had been buried alive.

I performed a 10-minute Time-X directed at any living beings trapped within the dirt pile. That would keep him alive until I could find him. How could I move the dirt?

It had been the *wrong* question and as I contemplated it, precious time was lost.

"Other questions," I said to myself at last remembering how important it was to always consider as many alternatives – options – as possible.

"How can I find him in there? How can I remove him once I do find him?"

With the proper questions formulated, the task suddenly became easy. Using the version of my Farjumping skills that had allowed me to escape through the solid dirt pile, I reversed the process and moved myself inch by inch, yard by yard, back and forth through the mass of rubble. Five minutes into the search I came upon his limp body, lying on its back. Putting him in a bear hug from the front, I jumped the two of us out onto the beach area.

Andrew was unconscious and had stopped breathing. At the moment the Time-X expired, (it had to run its course before I could intervene) I began CPR. Within a minute, he

was breathing on his own and struggled himself up into a sitting position, pushing me away with his right arm and beginning to brush the dirt from himself with his left. We were both filthy. I took a seat a few yards away, assuming he'd be in a huff about it all and fully unappreciative of what I had done.

Always trying to see the light side of things, I figured I'd pull his leg a bit.

"I can go back into the dirt and recover your bat for you if it has some special sentimental value. Probably a little bloody but I'm sure you can devise a way to clean it up. You seem to be pretty creative."

He turned his head and glared in my direction. I prepared to jump out of the way in case he engaged his laser vision. He didn't.

I'd say one more thing and then leave, unless it induced a conversation.

"I assume this is what the note and meeting was about. If not, tell me now, because I'm ready to leave. You seem to be okay."

Again, he glared. I stood. He remained seated, pulling his knees up toward his chest and hugging them with his arms. He lowered his chin onto his knees and looked out over the water.

"I guess you saved my life," he muttered, low, maintaining his gaze straight ahead.

"I guess," I answered just standing there.

"I tried to kill you, you know."

"I know."

"I don't get you."

"I know that, too."

He turned his head and looked up into my face.

"You're not going to get a thank you."

"I'm not at all surprised. Didn't do it for thanks."

He shook his head, clearly not understanding my take on it all.

"I hate your guts," he managed after a while.

"And the *rest* of me as well, I assume," I said. It lightened the moment for me but clearly not for him.

He winced in pain each time he moved. Perhaps his

injuries were more serious than I had assumed.

“Can I take you home?” I asked. “Not sure you should attempt it on your own. Probably should see a doctor. Your ribs or some internal organs may have been damaged.”

He made no response. It presented one of those frustrating dilemmas for me. Should I leave him alone or go ahead and help him even though he didn't want me to and he certainly had not given me his permission?

I arrived at a compromise with myself. I'd walk away, but then wait around invisibly and make sure he got home safely.

Andrew was the kind that tried my patience. He would do whatever he could to make me hate him. I didn't *hate* so that was an impossible mission before it began. I didn't require people to like me; that was completely up to them. I was what I was and I understood that not everybody would like that. Since I liked me and I knew my intentions were always good, I didn't need anybody else's approval to convince me of my worth.

Andrew would never understand those things about me until he was ready to accept the fact that there is nothing more precious than having the grand opportunity to be a human being – the only life form in the entire known universe that has the capacity to love, be compassionate and thoughtfully plan for the welfare of our planet and our future generations. I couldn't possibly hate anything as precious as a human being. Now, I may not like how many of them go about living their lives – being hurtful and selfish – but that's just misguided *behavior*. I can dislike behaviors without hating the person who exhibits them.

Like the Sage told me soon after we met, “*A bad guy defeated, still remains a bad guy. But a bad guy turned into a good guy becomes a powerful, positive force that benefits mankind.*” Calibrators try to help hurtful people ‘fix’ themselves and join the good guy's team.

My family always believed that, so I grew up living my life that way. It was my intention to help Andrew turn his philosophy around. He seemed to have a great start except where I was concerned. It would take more special attention.

“I'll be on my way, then,” I said at last.

He did not acknowledge my statement. I walked around the nearest corner, became invisible and perched in a nearby tree to begin my vigil. Eventually he nearjumped to the top of the cliff and then in a half-dozen more jumps arrived in the garden beside his apartment building. He had not been careful; most of his jumps were right out in the open. Andrew was many things but careless was not one of them. I assumed it signaled that he was in great pain.

Once in his room he immediately lay down on his bed on his back and was soon asleep. He was covered with dirt and mud from head to toe. I wondered how he would explain that to his mother who was not at home. Remaining invisible, I pulled a blanket up over him and settled into the recliner by the window, convinced he needed a doctor, but not knowing how to go about getting him help.

After a half hour, he sat up on the edge of his bed, puzzled about the blanket, walked slowly into his bathroom, and took a long shower. He put on clean clothes and hid the others in a brown grocery bag, which he stashed under his bed. By then, his physical condition seemed to have improved remarkably. He moved without wincing; the pain seemed to have left. Evidently, he had at least some of the Calibrator's capacity for rapid healing. I hoped that was the case.

By six he seemed fine so I returned to my room at *Calibration Hall*. Gus was there, sitting crosswise with his legs flopped across one arm of his chair.

"Nice work, *Practitioner Calibrator Powers*," he said, smiling up at me.

"You were there?"

"Only as backup. Clearly you are needing less and less of that."

I nodded, acknowledging the compliment with the flash of a smile and not really surprised at the revelation.

"That boy bothers me," I said.

Gus smiled.

"He tries to kill you for the third time and you only see him as a *bother*?"

"Not that part. That he can't get his head on straight about it all. I need to know more about his contact with his father – Antipathy. How can I find out?"

“What would be the most direct route?” Gus said, cutting to the chase with a leading question rather than an outright suggestion.

“Ask Andrew, I guess.”

“I guess,” he repeated.

“I’ll wait until I’m sure his mother is home, then I’ll drop in on him. I doubt if he will try anything dumb with her there. It’s clear that he really loves her. They have a great relationship. I’m quite certain he has not confided in her about his contact with his father or his powers, however.”

Gus did the quiver-thing that told me he had farjumped somewhere and returned, all in a split second of my time.

“So, is she home yet?” I asked, assuming that was where he’d been.

“Not yet. Let’s eat dinner. By the time we’re finished, she’ll probably be there.”

I suddenly realized that I was hungry. Dinner sounded like a good idea. I’d get to spend some time with Abby, which made it a doubly good idea. We changed and walked down to the dining room.

After dinner, Abby and I went for our usual private walk outside. My mind wandered and I guess she could tell.

“That sure didn’t seem like *you* kissing me just then,” she said. “Things on your mind, I guess.”

“Yeah! Things. Sorry. I’ll gladly try again,” I said smiling down into her face. I did.

“About five on a scale of one to 10,” she joked. “That’s up from about *one* the first time, though. Go take care of whatever it is. We have lots of years ahead of us for kissing.”

Wow! *Lots of years*. It sounded like she was getting pretty serious. I wanted to dance. Later I would.

“Maybe it’s best if I do go get things taken care of. Like you said, we have years and years ahead of us for kissing.”

I had added the second ‘*years*’ to emphasize my commitment to her and our long-term relationship. She seemed to understand.

By 8 o’clock I was knocking on the apartment door. Mrs. Parker answered and seemed delighted to see me. I got the idea that Andrew had few, if any, friends who dropped in on him.

“Had supper?” she asked. “I have still warm pot roast in the oven.”

She was a nice and thoughtful person.

“Thanks, but I’ve eaten. It does smell wonderful. Maybe some other time.”

“Andrew. Tommy’s here,” she called in the direction of his room.

His door opened and he stood there staring, plainly surprised.

I walked toward him, hoping to arrive before he slammed the door in my face. I did and he didn’t.

“Great ball game after school, huh?” I began, loudly enough for his mother to hear.

She left for the kitchen, smiling. All quite unexpectedly, Andrew stepped back into his room inviting me in with a hitch of his head. He closed the door and locked it behind us – a more unsettling ‘*click click*’ than I had figured it would be.

“What?” he said standing there, back to the door, arms folded, and legs spread.

“It’s my impression that our relationship isn’t all it could be,” I began, again trying to seep some humor into the situation.

I turned his desk chair around and took a seat in an attempt to indicate I planned to be there for some time. He moved to his bottom bunk and sat back against the headboard, a pillow at his back.

He repeated his original question.

“What?”

“Well, I figure if you’re going to kill me you should at least clarify your reason to my face.”

He remained silent for a long moment, staring straight ahead. Then he spoke.

“You took my father away from me. I’d only known him for a short time.”

“Do you like him?”

Andrew threw a quick glance in my direction.

“Of course. He’s my father.”

“That probably doesn’t automatically make him likeable,” I said.

“We get on fine.”

“He’s a lot like your mother and you, then, is he?”

Silence. He mounted a pouty lower lip as he sat thinking about the obvious contrast I had forced on him.

I continued since it was clear *he* wasn’t going to.

“I assume he’s the one who told you bad things about me. Since most people like me, I’m interested in how he came to dislike me so.”

“You know. You ruined his business.”

“Do you know what that business was?”

“He distributed pharmaceuticals – aspirin, penicillin – things like that.”

“Why did he think I wanted to ruin his business?”

“Your father was one of his competitors.”

“But I have no father, so how could that be?”

More silence.

“He said you burned down one of his warehouses.”

“That’s not exactly what happened.”

“You wouldn’t admit to it.”

“Is that the kind of reputation I have among the kids at school?”

Again silence. He squirmed on the bed, lowering his head and refolding his arms across his chest.

“Even if all of that were true, Andrew, I can’t see why it would be cause to want to *kill* me.”

“Calibrators are all bad. He says those of us with powers must do whatever we can to get rid of you – all of you.”

“And you believe this man? Isn’t he the man who abandoned you before you were born?”

“He came back when I really needed him.”

“He did? For your 13th birth moment?”

Andrew nodded.

“I guess I drew the wrong conclusion a while back. I’m glad you had someone there for you. It would have been so terrifying not to have been forewarned and to have to go through it alone.”

“Glad for you, too?” he said.

I was taken by surprise at his apparent interest in my wellbeing, so just managed a nod. Our eyes caught one another for some time. He looked away first.

“The other day I told you about *my* conception of the Calibrators. I think you’re acting on false information.”

“That’s just what he said you’d say. He said I should keep my distance so you couldn’t brainwash me.”

“Brainwash? Come now. You’re certainly smart enough to realize that acting out of ignorance – I mean only exploring one possible point of view – is a dangerous way to go about living. It sounds to me like your father is just afraid that if you really get to know me you’ll begin to see *us* as the good guys and *him* as the bad guy. And, Andrew, that *is* the way it is. You must not make such huge decisions without first gathering all the facts and until you get to know us, you can’t possibly have *all* the facts. That’s as dumb as saying you hate everybody with red hair even though you’ve never let yourself get to know a good sampling of people with red hair.”

“You’d better leave now,” he said standing up and moving toward the door.

“Perhaps you’re right, since you seem to be so afraid of letting yourself really get to know me and facing the truth. I’d hate for the *facts* to interfere with your single-minded, misguided, ignorance-based mission of hate. I suppose it’s a lot easier to kill somebody you don’t know – somebody you haven’t let yourself learn to like.”

His eyes began to glow and just that quickly the red laser beams shot in my direction.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“The kid’s getting on my nerves!”

I ducked, just in time, and put Andrew and his mother into a 10-minute Time-X. He burned a quarter-size hole in the outside wall. His room overlooked the garden where we had lunch a few days before. I looked out the window but could see no damage down below.

The small hole in the green and red plaid wallpaper would not be easy for him to explain, however. I found an Exacto-knife in his desk drawer and cut a small piece of paper from just above the baseboard behind his dresser. Matching it to the design, I glued it in place over the hole. It would be very difficult to detect, thanks both to the busy design of the paper and my expert patching job (of course!!). I moved Andrew back to a reclining position on his bed and stood beside him waiting for the Time-X to terminate.

“What the ... ?” were the first words out of his mouth.

He was understandably confused about his sudden position on the bed, but I chose to ignore that.

“You got careless again with your eye-laser-thing. It put a hole in the wall, here.”

I pointed. Before he could speak I continued.

“I patched the paper so your Mom won’t have questions. Later, *you’ll* need to make more permanent repairs to the plaster and siding. As far as I can tell you didn’t damage anything outside – though I’d say that was due to just plain dumb luck. If you have a power it’s your responsibility to use it with care, you know. I hope we can talk again, but I’ll tell you, I’m getting tired of having to keep saving

your butt, this way. Hmm! I wonder! Would a ‘bad guy’ keep doing helpful things like that?”

Before he could consider the question, I left his room, made small talk with his mother, who was searching for the source of “that smoky smell,” and was soon back outside on the street in front of the building.

I had left Andrew with a multitude of questions – how did he come to be back on the bed, how had I had time to make the repair to the wall and others that I hoped would successfully attack the philosophic base of his self-defeating, hate-based, belief system. I had, of course, left him a verbal mind seep option: “Would a bad guy keep doing helpful things like that?” His mind would require him to deal with the question at some point.

I love verbal mind seeps. Ask a short question or make a short statement and then move on before the person has the chance to reject it or even comment on it. Later on it surfaces and they think it was original with them.

Amy was just closing down her bagel stand as Gus and I approached (he had been around, of course, and I appreciated that). She had two cinnamon-raisins left and insisted we take them. We were happy to oblige even though we truly had just dropped by to make sure she was okay. Her cough earlier in the week had given me cause for concern. She said she had used an old family remedy – coal oil, lemon and sugar – and had it cured in 24 hours. It sounded both disgusting and dangerous to me!

“Let us walk you home,” Gus suggested.

“That should cause gossip,” she said. “Escorted to my front door by two such handsome young men.

She lived on the third floor in a narrow, red brick, walk up apartment building several blocks away. After seeing her safely home, Gus went directly back to the Hall to take care of some Sage business. I decided to fly around over the city for a while. I loved to fly. I seldom had to think about how it was done anymore – Nearjumping through the air an inch at a time. Once in a while I’d feel myself falling back toward Earth when my mind wandered, but that was easily remedied.

I wished I could take Abby flying with me, but that kind of thing wasn’t allowed except in the most extreme

emergencies. I wondered if kissing at 5,000 feet would be any different than it was out behind the Hall or down by the pond. It was a strange wonder, but I loved strange wonders. Anybody could wonder about the usual. I enjoyed the unusual, like how would life be different if our eyes were where our ears are and our ears where our eyes are. I wondered how it would be if pets had to remain with their feet planted in flower pots (I suppose those would be 'pet pots') and plants could go galloping through the house on their roots. Like I said, *strange wonders*, but every one of them a great producer of mental tingles and I LOVED mental tingles.

Gus was still busy elsewhere when I returned to our room so I slipped out of my clothes, into my towel, and settled onto the couch with a new book – an Ozark ghost story* by Marc Miller. His stuff always sent chills up my spine! I'm not one who believes in ghosts, but I get a kick out of reading about them. I was well into chapter four when Gus finally returned. His sudden appearance in his chair fit right in with the eerie goings-on in at the old inn in the story.

"Looks like I'm going to need to be away for a while, Tommy. Don't know how long. You know all the cautions I have for you so there's no need for me to repeat them. I am going to reveal one new function on your star. (You will recall from Book One that the reference is to the rose-colored, many pointed, magical birthmark on the back of all Calibrators' hands.)

I sat up and extended my hand as he took a seat beside me.

"This point at 5 o'clock can be programmed to send an emergency beacon. The Calibrators nearest to the source of the transmission will respond immediately."

"It's like our own private 911," I said attempting an analogy.

"Who but Tommy Powers would ... Anyway, here's how it works. It has to be pressed five times within two seconds to be activated and it only transmits for one minute. After that it must be reactivated."

"And what constitutes a serious enough emergency to use it?"

"When a situation must be handled immediately and the

Calibrator realizes he cannot do that by himself.”

“So, I have to use my best judgment about it.”

“Yes. That’s right. By now your Calibrator judgment is very good – other than occasionally turning your back on a kid prepared to send you to Never Never Land with a ball bat.”

He smiled. I nodded and received his message. I needed to be more cautious around Andrew. My action to avoid his eye-laser earlier that evening told me I had already learned that lesson so I felt no need to pursue it.

“One more thing,” Gus went on. “As you press the star you can create a simultaneous mental message – Mind Speak – which will follow the beacon’s transmission. Use it to alert the others to the nature of the situation. Here, let’s practice. I’ll go first. Let me activate your star.”

He outlined the point between the V of two fingers laid on my hand, then brought it close to his face and blew on it three times. I felt the warmth building deep inside my hand.

“There! Now you are connected just to me. We’ll open it up for the others later,” he said. “I’ll jump someplace, send you a practice beacon with a Mind Speak and you come and find me.”

“Like hide and seek!” I said again seeming to need an analogy.

“If you say so, Tommy. See you someplace in a few seconds.”

He disappeared before I could ask how I’d know where he was. It wasn’t long before that question answered itself.

I felt the warmth again and saw the point at 5 o’clock blink. The accompanying message was, “Something fishy about this.”

A force overtook me – like a tractor beam from Star Trek. I initiated an invisible farjump with no special destination in mind – something I had never even thought of doing before.

In an instant I was sitting by his side – on a plank seat in a fishing boat moored along the dock close to my loft.

I materialized and we had a good chuckle about his message.

“Your turn,” he said. “And by the way, do I *a/ways* have to remind you to put your pants on before leaving our room?”

“Ooops!” I said looking down at the bath towel draped around my mid-section.

“I’ll be sure to stay away from crowds when I go hide.”

Gus thought my phrase was humorous and it evoked an extended chuckle and much head shaking on his part.

I zapped myself to the roof of the school and stood beside the massive, red brick chimney. I pressed the point of the star as instructed and sent a Mind Speak: “This ain’t no group of fish!”

Gus was at my side almost before I finished the process.

“I get it,” he said. Not a *school* of fish. Very funny.”

It was delivered with that kind of sarcasm that made me know he really had enjoyed it but wasn’t about to admit it.

I practiced several more times, the last jump being to Toronto, Canada. Gus was there in an instant. The physics of jumping still escaped me, but I’d look into that later.

Before Gus left on his Sage business, he activated my emergency beacon so it would reach all Calibrators.

I gave him a long hug.

He left.

I hit the sack.

I spent most of the weekend catching up on homework – *after* I finished the ghost story. EERIE!! Abby and I went for a few walks and played cards with some of the other kids on Sunday evening. It was a good time.

Monday morning I arrived at the school yard early and was shooting some solo hoops when Ted and Jerry arrived. They had gone with Marcus to visit his grandmother on Saturday and were upset at how her spirits had gone downhill during the short time she’d been there.

“So, what can *you* do about it?” I asked, having a dozen ideas myself, but knowing it would be better if they set *their* minds to it. They needed practice developing options and carrying through on them. What a wonderful way to prove your competence to yourself.

Ted began thinking out loud.

“My little brother, Mickey, went along. He’s eight. I was stuck watching him for the afternoon. She spent most of her time with him, actually. She talked to him, sang him songs

she'd learned when she was a little kid, she read him a story and in general just ignored the three of us teenagers."

"That's right," Jerry said with a confirming nod. "When we left, she took Marcus by the hand and told him to be sure and bring Mickey back next weekend. Outside Marcus asked him if he'd be willing to come back – he was prepared to pay him if that's what it took to make his grandmother so happy. Mickey said he'd really like to come back and began talking about making her a picture to bring along."

"Mickey probably doesn't really get enough private attention at home," Ted said, thoughtfully. "Mom and Dad both work and I've not been the best big brother, I suppose. He sure ate up the attention Hattie gave him."

I tried to expand their thinking.

"I imagine there are lots of little kids like that here in the city."

It was like a Mind Seep though I made no attempt to move on from it.

Kate and Tasha came across the school yard toward us. Ted gave Kate a gentle peck to the lips and Jerry lingered a bit longer with Tasha. Ted became our spokesman and caught the girls up to speed on the conversation.

"How about kids from the safe houses?" Kate said, not really intending it as a question.

"Safe houses?" Ted asked. It was a question.

"Shelters where abused moms and kids stay until things get worked out."

"Great idea!" Jerry said. "How do we go about it?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll get right on it," she said enthusiastically. "I still have contacts at City Hall from last semester's Civics class project."

I was privately pleased that I had let them work on it. I'd check back in the morning and see if there were things I could do to move it along. As I made ready to leave I dropped a verbal Mind Seep.

"I sure wish Andrew could get interested in some project. Might help him loosen up a bit."

Before anybody responded I said my usual good-bye – "Keep smiling. See you later!" – and moved off the playground and across the street. I was suddenly bored. Let me rephrase

that, "I was momentarily bored." Such states never lasted long. Andrew was making his way up the sidewalk on his way to school. I turned my route in his direction.

"Hey, Andrew. Good morning. How's it going?"

I thought I detected the slightest move on his part to cross the street before he would have to encounter me, but then seemed to change his mind and continued in my direction.

"Morning," came his crisp and somewhat unexpected response. I'd been ready for a world-class snub.

"Cutting a little close to first bell aren't you?" I said making small talk.

He looked at his watch.

"Later than I thought. My repair work took longer than I expected."

I just nodded for fear anything I might say would be misinterpreted.

"Been with the guys?" he asked nodding at the gathering across the street.

"Short game of hoops. A little conversation. A good way to start my week, I think."

"You like those kids?"

It had been a question delivered more like a statement – an evaluation of his observations.

"Sure do. They are good friends."

It was his turn to just nod. I figured it was in recognition of my response and not that he necessarily agreed with my evaluation of them. I continued.

"Sounds like they have some sort of project brewing. I had to leave. Home schooling takes lots of work."

"You're damn hard to figure out, *Powers!*"

"So are you, *Parker!*"

I met him emotion for emotion and then continued.

"And that's strange because, of course, the two of us do have a lot of things in common that we don't share with any of the other kids. You'd think *that* would draw us *closer*."

Andrew shook his head and crossed the street without another word. I was pleased with the encounter. If I recalled properly it was only the second time we'd been together that he hadn't tried to kill me. I wondered if his reference to "repair

work” had been intended as humorous. He and his mother seemed to have fun together, though I hadn’t seen him react that way anywhere else. The girls said he was fun to be around so perhaps it was my presence that dampened his jocular spirit.

The conversation had made me uneasy about his father – Antipathy – who, some months earlier, I had sealed in a watertight, self-sufficient, cement bunker at the bottom of the ocean. He had the power of Mind Speak, but I determined that didn’t work through water. I suddenly wondered if my beacon would, should that ever become necessary.

I became invisible in a nearby ally and flew to the spot over the ocean beneath which his eternal prison lay. It was at times like this I wished for the X-ray vision of Superman. Not having that, I would have to do it the old-fashioned way. I’d swim down to the bunker – like flying only through the water – and make sure it was still secure on the outside. Then, using a mini-Farjumping technique that would allow me to enter through the walls of the container, I’d materialize inside, using the secrecy of the closet for my point of arrival. I hoped that I remembered exactly where it was. In any event, I would be prepared to jump out immediately in case anything went wrong.

Fortunately, it was the closet into which I jumped. I peeked through the louvers on the wooden door. Antipathy was there, sitting in the big reclining chair, staring at the ceiling. Suddenly, his body snapped to alert. He frowned and looked around, then tilted his head this way and that like a robin searching for a worm. Clearly, he had somehow sensed my presence. I left immediately.

I hadn’t anticipated that if I remained on the other side of a wall – invisible, yet – that he would be able to detect my presence. Perhaps he had been prepared – anticipating that I would check in on him from time to time. I had no way of knowing. He appeared to be fit and well. The temperature inside was 74 degrees – a good thing since the surrounding water at that depth of 500 feet hovered close to 40. Although my cloak of invisibility somehow kept me both warm and dry, I still shivered at the thought as I sped along.

I shot out of the water like a missile from a submarine

and cruised around at about 2,000 feet playing hide and seek in the clouds. (I know; that game calls for at least *two* players, but such details never stopped me from having a good time!)

I wondered if I were being tracked on radar. My image would probably be too small to appear, but, still, I probably needed to find out about that. It wouldn't be a good thing to be the reason a squadron of fighter jets was scrambled to investigate some unknown object – a UFC (Unknown Flying Calibrator). Well, I thought it was humorous, at least.

I flew over the loft. Only a few minutes had elapsed in my Wharfies' Time-X zone since I had gone with Gus. Suzie was on the dock in front of her father's boat repair shop talking with a new boy. It caused me to wonder if she still saw Andrew. Probably not. I figured he had just used her to get to me. She and the boy were soon between buildings kissing. I guessed that meant they must have known each other for a while – say at least five minutes! She was a kissing machine, I'd give her that.

I was gradually coming to understand that kissing just for fun – when both participants knew that's all it was – could be quite enjoyable. But once you began kissing because you wanted to demonstrate your affection for somebody special, Suzie's variety just didn't cut it anymore. When I kissed Abby, it was one way of showing her how special she was to me – she knew I no longer kissed with anybody else. The same held true when she kissed me back. Even if Abby and I broke up, I figured it would be hard to go back to Suzie's fully emotionless way.

But enough of that mushy stuff! I had homework to pursue. At Facil's suggestion (my teacher at the Hall – they call them *Facilitators* there since they work a bit differently from most teachers) – I was studying leadership styles. I realized it had been his intention for me to investigate the topic in relation to governments – and I would do that. My true interest, however, was seeing how leadership styles applied to family life and success as parents. Eventually, I wanted to be the best parent that ever raised a child! I also figured that successful parents were responsible for successful societies. It made me wonder about the overall quality of parenting going on there in that city, rampant with crime and poverty and

requiring shelters for abused wives and children.

So far, I had discovered five or six main methods used by leaders. One was the *dictator* who imposed his will on others. Punishment was typically inflicted on dissenters. The second was the *democratic* approach where everybody, who was immediately concerned, had some meaningful say in decisions and planning. It didn't always work out that way but that was the basic idea. Third was *modeling* – living a life that demonstrated to those watching just how you felt things should go. Leading by modeling usually involved praising and rewarding others for moving in the direction of the 'ideal' citizen and experiencing the feelings of satisfaction that accompanied such growth. Fourth involved the use of *guilt* to keep people in line. It was much like that of the dictator since making another person feel guilty is actually a form of punishment.

It was my impression that most Western religions seemed to incorporate that approach – along with other more positive elements, of course. The fifth may not really be separate from the other four: leading by *fear*. Again, churches seemed big on this one, but it was an element in most of the others – less in modeling and democracy, I suppose. The sixth I called the *nurturing* approach. The leaders, or parents, set things up so their citizens or children could learn about their own skills, develop them and live a life based on love, helpfulness, and compassion. So far, I tend to like that last one the best. Couple it with democracy, and society and family life should be pretty fine. I'll be looking into all that further.

I had already come upon one insight related to family life. As a baby, life is always directed by dictator-like parents – it has to be. Babies can't know what is good or hurtful for them. In some homes, it stays that way forever – the parents (or one of them) dictates how all things will be.

In most, however, that total control by the parents gradually shifts toward a more democratic approach. As kids demonstrate they have become more responsible and capable, they get more say-so both in their own life and in general family decisions. Different cultures seem to vary a great deal in regard to this, however.

The parents are still the final authority, but the truly

helpful family, at least in our culture, provides the necessary kinds of experiences so that by the time a youngster leaves home he really never *needs* his family to run his life. It seems to me that kids who get lots of practice making decisions – good and bad, demonstrating both success and failure – and being responsible for the consequences of their own mistakes, usually have lots fewer problems adjusting to life later, when they're on their own. Like I've said before, *mistakes are great* if you learn from them. The Sage said the same thing in a slightly different way: Wisdom is a blending of knowledge and experience, well taken.

I think kids always believe modeling more than rules and lectures. They believe what they see their parents doing. When that's the same as the rules and expectations, then knowing right from wrong and what to do and what not to do is easy. When they are different, the rules tend to be ignored by the children in favor of the behavior they observe in their parents or those who are really important in their lives.

My, how I go on, sometimes!

At any rate, that's how it *seems* to me. Now I'll have a chance to study it and find out what's *really* true about it all. It's a pretty exciting assignment, really. What could possibly be more important than learning how to lead a family so it produces loving, well-adjusted, happy, children who can be successful on their own out in the big world? And, if great family life is really what produces a great society, then I think I'm onto something really important.

**The Specters of Carlton County*, by Marc Miller,
familypress.com

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Surgery?

That week Marcus invited me to go along to his grandmother's place on Saturday morning. His church provided a minibus that picked up a dozen children from several shelters. Ted, his little brother Mickey, and their mother, met Marcus and me at the playground. On the way, we stopped and picked up Andrew (the girls had worked that miracle), who joined Mickey and me in the back seat. Kate and Tasha were already at *Shady Rest* when we arrived.

It was on the far western edge of the city, nearly a half hour's drive from the school. The grounds – I estimated it to be on about 10 acres – were green from end to end, but only moderately well kept. There were dozens of huge old oak trees dotting the lawn and evergreens hugging the foundations of the generally dingy, faded, old red brick buildings. The main residence was four stories tall and looked to have 20 windows from left to right across the front. We entered the grounds through a black wrought iron gate, and arched up a circular, cobblestone driveway to the front steps. The little blue bus pulled in right behind us.

Several dozen elderly residents were gathered to greet us. They were clearly eager to spend time with the kids. The women gravitated toward the younger ones and the men to the older. Andrew, who had been there twice before, immediately moved to be with a man in a wheelchair.

Marcus introduced me to his grandmother, Hattie. She was polite, but impatiently ready to spend time with Mickey. It was pretty cool to see how they beamed at each other and

walked away hand in hand, chatting like long-lost relatives.

Kate and Tasha approached as Marcus left to do things with the handyman who apparently saved “ladder jobs” for the boy’s young legs and steady hand.

“Hey!” Kate said in a cheery greeting. “Glad you could come. Isn’t it great to see them all together?”

“Sure is,” I said. “Less than five minutes have passed and everybody’s already disappeared.”

“The residents spend all week planning activities. By noon the lot of them will be too tired to eat lunch.”

I nodded and smiled, feeling more and more like an outsider. Even though I knew it had all begun from a mind seep I’d left with them, I was momentarily sad that I hadn’t played a bigger part in making it work.

That feeling soon passed as I made the analogy for myself about chemical catalysts. A catalyst is a substance that makes other things happen without being changed itself – without really being a part of the process. I figured a good Calibrator was probably a catalyst more often than a participant. Give others ideas and then let *them* handle the details. I had always been long on ideas. This should be a perfect fit for me. And, I should be happy for all the others and not selfishly sad about my small role in it all.

With that realization, I felt better. Tasha excused herself and walked toward the recreation hall.

“So, what does an extra thumb like me do out here on Saturday mornings?” I asked Kate only half joking.

“I just roam around and help out wherever I can,” She said. “I always find plenty to do.”

“Great. I’ll become a roamer, too, then. Point me in a direction.”

“The little lake behind the main building.” She pointed.

“The boys are usually into the water knee-deep chasing frogs and such. It worries me. If anything happened they’d be hard up for assistance from the old people.”

“Haven’t chased a frog in years – well, not in several weeks at least. I’ll go check it out.”

Kate had been right; there they were: a half-dozen, barefoot, 7- to 10-year-olds with pants rolled up above their knees giving chase to a brigade of small, green, leaping

amphibians. The happy sounds from the boys and the sporadic applause and words of encouragement from the older folks was a symphony of words and emotion.

When the ladies would get splashed they'd giggle through their faint protests like young girls being chased by boys with garter snakes. I could feel the healing in the air – the youngsters beginning to trust again and the old folks sensing renewed purpose and happiness.

My wonderful moment was abruptly interrupted by a strong feeling of foreboding – intense uneasiness. I could not explain it, but was drawn immediately toward the south side of the main building. Invisibly, I Nearjumped, arriving only seconds later. The man in the wheelchair, who Andrew had taken under his wing, was sprawled on the ground beside his upset chair at the foot of a long set of steps leading up to the second-floor deck.

He was unconscious and bleeding from a deep gash across his forehead. Andrew was just descending the steps two at a time as I arrived. I put the old gentleman in a two-minute Time-X to stop the passage of time for him while I summoned help. A woman appeared on the deck and looked down at us. I called to her.

“911. Call 911 and get paramedics here on the double.”

She turned and hurried inside.

Andrew was shaken and tried to explain.

“He released his brake in order to move closer to the steps. I have no idea why. I was across the deck and cautioned him, saying I'd come and help him but it was already done. He rolled right down the steps. It all happened so fast. I should have jumped after him and caught him or something.”

“Then we'd probably be calling for two ambulances,” I said. “I have an idea – two actually. Can you control that eye-laser thing of yours when you're not all angered up?”

“Yes. I've used it to cut out model airplane parts, if that's what you mean by control.”

“What's the chance you can use it to seal up that gash in his forehead, if I press the open flesh together?”

“Like in laser surgery. Yes. I can do that, I'm sure.”

“Only one chance to get it right. Too much and you fry

his brain. Too little and he bleeds to death.”

“But the bleeding has suddenly stopped,” Andrew said referring to the Time-X condition, which I didn’t have either the time or inclination to explain.

“It’ll start gushing again in about 10 seconds; take my word for it. Don’t begin until the blood appears. (A person in Time-X cannot be affected in any basic ways by things in a different time zone.)

“Now?” he asked as the blood began to flow.

“Now!” I said nodding. I pressed the opening closed with my hands. I was tempted to caution Andrew to watch out for my fingers. I didn’t want them baked in the process, but gave him the benefit of the doubt. He was brilliant and I shouldn’t treat him like he was anything else.

The stench of the searing flesh was nauseating, but we both managed our ways through it. Within seconds the gash was sealed. The bleeding stopped. The gaping wound was closed and dry.

“So, what is your second idea?” Andrew asked, sitting back on his legs from his kneeling position, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Something that just came to me. I have no idea if it’ll work. Like you, I have tremendous healing power within my body. I want to try to get some of my blood into his system to see if my chemicals – whatever they may be – can be of help to him. There’s bound to be internal damage and bleeding from the fall.”

“Makes sense,” Andrew said. “How can I help?”

“Here at my wrist. Laser a small hole into my vein. I’ll hold it closed while you do the same to the man’s. Then, I’ll hold the two openings against each other and pump up my heart rate to force my blood into his body.”

The deed was soon done. I allowed my blood to flow into him until we heard the siren announcing the arrival of the ambulance. Andrew sealed both veins and the skin above them.

“His breathing seems more regular,” Andrew announced.

He had kept his hand on the other wrist monitoring the pulse rate.

“Pulse is back up to normal, too,” he said. “What a deal! This is fantastic! The coolest thing I’ve ever seen!”

During those few minutes, Andrew had left his hatred for me behind. I wasn’t sure if I should point it out or not – it seemed pretty obvious. Still ...

“We did well, I think,” I said nodding and looking into Andrew’s face.

His beaming face turned immediately somber. He stood and walked away several paces then turned back toward me.

“How we going to explain this to the paramedics?” he asked.

It was a good question. One I had wondered about also, but had laid aside in the heat of the activity. Before we could formulate a story, the paramedics were on the scene. The old gentleman opened his eyes and felt his forehead.

“My, oh, my!” he said. “I must have fallen out of my wheelchair. Is that what happened?” he asked looking up at Andrew, his own memory clearly clouded.

“Yes, sir, you fell out. I’m sorry. I should have been watching out for you.”

The paramedics began taking vitals and examining him as he continued to speak.

“Been takin’ care a myself fer 88 years, Sonny. Not your doin’ to start lookin’ after me at this stage a the game.”

“Looks like you skidded along the walk on your forehead,” one of the paramedics said, feeling the fresh abrasion. “You seem to have ... I don’t know ... like a floor burn above your eyebrows. Never seen anything quite like it.”

Andrew and I sighed as the other paramedic examined his wrist, apparently dismissing the laser-sealed hole as an old scar.

“Procedure is to suggest you check into a hospital for observation,” the first paramedic began, “but frankly, there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong – not even any signs of a concussion from what must have been a pretty good blow to have knocked you out.”

“Never been in a hospital in my life and I’m not about to start. Thanks fer your help, but I’ll be just fine. Get me up into my chair. Andrew here can take me back to my room. I’m a little tired.”

Andrew nodded and the others left. A small crowd had gathered and after wishing the old gentleman well, they dispersed and returned to their previous activities.

“Seems like we could be a pretty good team,” I said as an aside to Andrew.

“In your dreams, *Calibrator!*” he shot back. His tone was filled with anger – an unlikely reaction to the event we had just shared, I thought.

I didn’t press it. Not wanting to aggravate things further, I refrained from offering to help Andrew take the man to his room. I turned and walked across the lawn toward the recreation hall. Although I was sure I had transferred at least a pint of my universal donor type blood into the old gentleman, I didn’t feel woozy or weak. Hooray for the Calibrator genes! I worried that I shouldn’t have shared my blood not knowing how it might affect him in the long run. I’d have to talk with Gus about that.

Inside the Rec Hall I walked from table to table where I found mostly girls working on craft projects with the women. Their smiles wouldn’t stop. It was interesting. Smiles on young faces creased cheeks with wrinkle lines. Smiles on old faces pulled the cheeks smooth. Smiles were like a common meeting ground between old and young.

I couldn’t recall what happened with the Sage’s wrinkle lines when he smiled. Probably after a thousand years it really didn’t matter. In my experience, older folks were better at accepting things like that for what they were and seemed content to live with them. Younger people worried themselves sick over blemishes and such. Perhaps if young folks would worry less, they’d create fewer wrinkles for later in life. I do ramble on about the weirdest things sometimes!

I mentioned to Tasha that it would be nice to find more kids since there were so many more willing residents just sitting idle. It was a verbal mind seep and I let it go, knowing her head would keep working on it.

Ted’s mother picked us up at noon. The ride back through the city was punctuated by Mickey’s high-pitched voice recounting every event – every step, every breath – of the morning. *Hattie said this. Hattie said that. Did you know that when Hattie was a little girl black people and white people*

couldn't drink out of the same fountains or use the same public restrooms or go to the same schools?

He went on for the full hour, wide-eyed and appreciative of his special new friend. I could only imagine what Hattie was relating to *her* friends. *Mickey caught the biggest frog and I petted it. Can you believe that? I petted it! Mickey's reading Peter Pan and he updates me on the story every Saturday.*

Andrew and I remained mostly silent. We exchanged a few glances, but no words accompanied them. He couldn't figure me out. I couldn't figure him out. Well, I thought I understood *him* better than he understood *me*. He was blindly following his father's teachings about me without trying to really get to know me and my intentions. That's a dangerous way to guide your life – just taking somebody else's word for things as important as the worth of other human beings.

It seemed that when he saw me acting in ways that were contrary to his father's story about me, he either just dismissed them without logical consideration or turned them into some devious plot on my part to trick him into thinking I was something other than the evil person he already knew I was – the same lose-lose situation in which lots of other minorities find themselves.

Andrew exited the car thanking Ted's mother for the ride and telling Ted and Marcus he'd see them at school. He glared at me across the back seat as he high-fived Mickey. We continued on toward the school.

"Andrew isn't very friendly toward you, is he," Mickey said.

"We don't know each other very well," I said, trying to give Andrew an out.

"Seems more than that to me," Mickey went on, plainly wanting to continue.

"That's *their* business, Mickey," his mother said in an attempt to bring the conversation to an end.

He said no more on the topic. I could tell his intentions were well-meant. He liked me. He liked Andrew. He couldn't figure why we didn't seem to like each other. I appreciated his concern for our welfare.

It had been a strange morning – more good than bad,

but strange. I walked north toward the church at the edge of the woods and the cabin and pond beyond. I was in no hurry and took time to speak with many of those I passed on the sidewalk.

I had long understood that kindness multiplied itself. By that I mean I had noticed that when I smiled at people they, in turn, smiled at others on down the street. When I offered a short, cheery, "Hi! Beautiful day!" they were prone to do the same to the folks they met. *Kindness multiplied.*

I also understood that the opposite was true. Be rude or unkind to others and they tended to catch the negativity and pass *it* on. I was pleased to be responsible for making others happy, but was not about to be the one to make them miserable. When I was feeling down or upset, I kept it to myself. The others I came in contact with usually had no part in making my misery so it seemed fully illogical to risk passing it on to them. Also, when I forced a smile at them through my gloom instead of griping about it, my *own* spirits tended to improve. That was

a win-win situation if I'd ever seen one.

As long as I'm rambling on about it all, I'll say just one more thing. I've noticed that happy people are a whole lot easier to live with than unhappy or angry ones. So, I do what I can to help those around me stay happy. They feel better and, therefore, so can I. I never could understand why some folks were so dumb about that. They pick and yell and complain all the time at those they live with. All *that* ever does is make the others even more unhappy and upset. And like I said, unhappy folks tend to make everybody's lives miserable. It's like they are saying, "I'm going to *punish* you by yelling and arguing." Punishment never solves a problem. I mean it NEVER solves a problem, *really*. Neither does arguing, if you stop to think about it.

We never raise our voices at the loft. I suppose that's pretty unusual, but then, my Wharfies are a pretty unusual lot. It doesn't mean we don't have disagreements. Put that many independent-minded folks together and you WILL have disagreements. But we talk things out. More than that, we listen – really listen – and try to understand the other person's position. Nobody feels like they have to *win*. We just want to

understand and learn from each other. I think lots and lots of problems come up in families just because everybody thinks they have to win – period. It isn't a matter of finding out what's really right or what's inaccurate. It isn't a matter of learning why somebody thinks what he thinks. It is not a matter of being helpful to others. It's just a warped matter of needing to win. Some folks equate winning with gaining somebody's respect. I've always figured if I respected myself, I really didn't need anybody else's respect.

I've said it before. I can't understand why, for so many folks, winning becomes more important than cooperating or having fun. There was a boy at school when I was there last year I haven't talked about much – James. He took great pleasure in putting other people down. I think it's his way of winning. Rather than really being good at something, he just tries to make it appear other people aren't as good as he is; that way he never really has to work to become better at anything himself. By putting them down, he thinks he raises himself up above them. Pretty sick, I'd say.

Build people up so they feel good about themselves. They'll be happy and want to help make you happy. Put them down and you make them feel bad about themselves *and* you. It just makes no sense to me. But then, I suppose I still have a lot to learn about human nature.

I entered the woods to a chorus of bluebirds and cardinals against a lush green backdrop of pine trees and a colorful spectrum of wild flowers. The sounds of the city were soon left behind. It smelled fresh and natural there. I liked that. I wondered if the birds and little animals wished I wouldn't invade their private sanctuary. I hoped not. It wasn't my intention to harm them or damage the things they ate or the cozy places they lived.

I stopped at the pond and sat looking at the still water as it reflected the blues of the sky and whites and grays of the small, puffy, clouds. Life was always peaceful there. My serene surroundings were in stark contrast to the troubling problem in my mind – Andrew's intention to see me destroyed. His father had blinded him where the Calibrators were concerned. How could I change that? He'd never seen me acting in any way other than being helpful, thoughtful and

compassionate. Even that had not been enough. It was my most difficult challenge so far as a Calibrator.

Maybe time with Abby would help me get my mind off the problem. Even if it didn't, I had the idea it would be enjoyable!

CHAPTER NINE

The Fantastic Human Mind

When I awoke the next morning, Gus was in his bunk, back from wherever he had been. It was good to know he was there. I missed him when he was away.

When he finally rolled out, I filled him in on what I'd been up to and questioned him about the blood transfusion I'd given. He cautioned me against doing it often and suggested it would be best to keep it just to folks who were beyond their child-bearing years. Something about not knowing if it might interfere with the natural immune systems of the children. I figured he would have some caution and felt relieved after the talk.

"So," he began at last. "Does all this mean *progress* between you and Andrew?"

"I wish I knew, Gus. Just when I think things are looking up he tries to do me in again. He has a one-track mind on the matter if you ask me – and you did, of course.

Gus smiled. I chuckled out loud, thinking it was worth something more.

"One-track *mind*," he said far more seriously than I would have thought was a reasonable reaction to such a standard idiom. "What have we discussed about the human mind, so far, Tommy?"

"So far, not much. Just that all my – the Calibrators' – powers are natural extensions of the regular human mind. We've talked about the mind's *Integrity Path* and how living up to one's highest positive standards results in a state of integrity – knowing you are living a life that is in accord with

your values. We've talked about *Mind Seeping* – leaving a short statement or question with somebody and then moving on before they can reject it. That's about it, I think."

"It's time we go into depth about it. Are you free this morning?"

"Sure. Starved and irritable if I miss breakfast that'll be over in about 10 minutes because my best friend in the world chose to sleep in, but *free*, yes."

We dressed and went down to breakfast. Everyone was happy to see him again and clearly, he was genuinely pleased to see them. Gus cared deeply about his people.

After breakfast, we returned to our room and got comfortable. I perched on the couch as usual. Gus occupied his big chair – as usual.

"This is a discussion that needs to take place between you and the Sage," he said. "It is of great importance. Understanding certain things about the mind is essential for you – as it *really* is for every human being. But for you, who will be dealing with minds for the next ... well, for as far into the future as anyone can imagine ... it is absolutely mandatory."

During the next several moments Gus transformed into the Sage – the always-smiling Sage with the ancient-looking, well-lined, face and long arms and fingers. He was taller than most men by a head and his bulk filled the chair from arm to arm. His knees were elevated to accommodate his long legs. The brilliance of his robe – a swirl of dazzling colors – made my eyes narrow until they became accustomed to its intensity.

"Good to see you again, Sir," I said, feeling compelled to greet him even though Gus and I had just spent a half-hour together in the dining room. He was Gus and yet he was much more. The fact that he had materialized for this discussion highlighted its significance. I had pad and pencils at the ready so I could take notes.

"And it is good to see *you* again, Tommy."

His voice was always clear and steady – the mellowest baritone I had ever heard. There was an echolike quality to it – as if it were emanating from a cavern deep within him. When he spoke, a soothing calm pervaded those listening.

He began.

“The mind. The *mind* is not a *thing*. The *brain* is a thing. The mind is what goes on inside the brain. It is composed of all the processes that run their course there. The ones that let us feel, smell, see, hear, maintain our balance and so on. The ones that let us learn new things and remember previous learnings. The ones that keep our temperature at the right level and keep us breathing and salivating and so on.

“So, ‘mind’ really isn’t a noun, you see – the mind is more like a verb, which refers to all the *actions* that take place inside the brain. A better term would be ‘*minding*’ because it is a process, actually hundreds of overlapping processes, each trying to do its thing while staying out of the way of all the others.”

“I’d never thought of it that way,” I said. “This is great, stuff. Go on.”

I immediately felt a little sheepish for making it sound like I was giving the Sage permission to go on speaking, but I knew he understood that hadn’t really been my intention.

“It is useful to think of the mind as having three parts. One is the *Surface Mind*. It is in contact with the world. We think with it and do much of our remembering with it. It’s the part of the mind we know the best.

“Then there is the *Deep Mind*. I call it *deep* because it is hidden from the world. All it knows about things that are outside of itself it learns from the Surface Mind. The Deep Mind takes care of our automatic needs like breathing, feeling, heartbeat, temperature regulation, and such things. It has another, equally important function, however. It is the part of us that makes us behave the way we behave. I’ll talk more about that later, but just remember at this point that it is the *Directives* from the Deep Mind that makes us the person – the personality – that we are.

“Then, in between the Surface and the Deep minds is the *Filter*. Almost everything from the outside world has to pass through the Filter before entering the Deep Mind. During that process the Filter changes information into forms the Deep Mind can understand and use – much like an interpreter. The Filter is aware of what the Surface Mind knows and also much of what the Deep Mind knows. One of its jobs is to filter out information or data from the Surface Mind that does not fit

with what the Deep Mind has come to believe is true about things.

“For example, if from its years of experience, the Deep Mind has built up the idea that *men hurt people* (and therefore are dangerous and to be avoided), and yet the Surface Mind becomes aware of men that *don’t* hurt people, the Filter is likely to block that new information about nice guys so as to not disturb the beliefs already held by the Deep Mind. Those beliefs *can* be modified, but we’ll talk about that at a later time. This is both a helpful process and one that can clearly cause serious problems.”

I had to insert an idea.

“It’s like the Filter doesn’t want to rock the Deep Mind’s boat.”

The Sage nodded.

“The Surface Mind likes to use *words* when it thinks and prepares to communicate with others. It is *logical* – reasonable. The Deep Mind really *doesn’t* like words. It prefers *images* (mental pictures) and *emotions* (feelings). It is not logical, but instead it relies on *correlation*. Let me explain. If something takes place immediately after some other thing, then the Deep Mind figures the first thing caused the second thing to happen. A light switch gets flipped and the light comes on. The switch flipping caused the light. In *that* case, the process of correlation works fine. But how about this example. It gets dark outside and the lights come on inside. Correlation would conclude that getting dark outside *caused* the light to automatically come on inside. There, you see, correlation *didn’t* give a very good explanation.”

I needed to make sure I understood. “So, the Surface Mind likes words, but the Deep Mind likes images and feelings. The Surface Mind is logical and reasonable, but the Deep Mind is satisfied with mere coincidence or correlation.”

“Very good.” The Sage nodded.

I made some notes as he continued.

“The Deep Mind has one *Prime Directive* – one most important function that almost always takes precedence over everything else. That is *to keep its person alive and well*. When it thinks something is about to interfere with the person’s safety or well-being, the Deep Mind does whatever it

assumes is best to protect its person.

“A related function of the Surface Mind is to sense danger out in the world. It always has its radar scanning the world for things that *might* be dangerous. If it can't determine something is definitely friendly or harmless, it automatically goes ahead and classifies it as dangerous. It's a very handy and useful process although it also causes people terrible problems. For example, if it sees a car speeding toward you, it immediately does what is necessary to move you to safety, if it can. That's pretty useful. But, say it sees a stranger, and past experience has taught it that some strangers are dangerous, then it will try to protect its person from all strangers by avoiding them or, in some circumstances, even harming them. Of course, if we don't let ourselves get to know strangers, we have no way of really finding out if they are bad guys or good guys do we?”

I had to ask:

“So, when the radar of the Surface Mind finds something suspicious it has some way of letting the Deep Mind know?”

“Immediately. It is just about the only thing that goes directly into to the Deep Mind without being filtered.”

I nodded and made more notes.

“Listen carefully to this, my son. It may be the most important part of what I have to say today.”

I put down my pencil and looked directly into the Sage's wonderful old face as he spoke.

“The Deep Mind does not understand negative words like *no*, *never*, *don't*. Those are Surface Mind concepts. The Deep Mind only understands positive words like *do*, *yes*, *always*. In fact, when the Deep Mind hears a negative word it immediately translates it into a positive word so a phrase such as, ‘*Don't* go into the old house on the corner,’ becomes, ‘*Do* go into the old house on the corner.’

“Wow!” I said. “That really *is* something. So, that's why you taught me to always make mind seeps *positive* – present something for the person to do rather than not to do.”

“That's right.”

I tried an example.

“So, when a parent says, “Don't smoke,” the Deep Mind

may actually hear, “Smoke. Try it!” is that what you mean?” I asked wanting to make certain I understood.

“You’re getting the idea. What could that parent say instead that might actually be helpful down at the most important level of the Deep Mind?”

I thought through several possibilities, then suggested, “They could say something like, ‘I hope you’ll keep your lungs young and healthy and your body free from addictions.’”

He clapped his slow, single clap. It was reserved for very special events. I felt more than a little pleased and honored.

“Now, couple *that* idea with *this*”, he went on. “The Deep Mind doesn’t like to be told what to do – to be given commands. In that way, a 2-year-old, for example, functions on almost pure Deep Mind. The Deep Mind runs itself totally and completely, so commands from elsewhere make no sense to it. When it’s told something that is contrary to what’s already down there, the filter probably won’t let it in to begin with.

“Instead, *it loves to be asked questions* – short, to-the-point, clear questions. The Deep Mind is engineered to answer questions and is simply brilliant at doing that. There is another plus to using questions. Unlike commands or information that doesn’t fit, and so are likely to be filtered out, all the content of

a short, clear question gets through. The filter sees no problems with questions – most of the time, at least.”

“So,” I said, offering another analogy, “The Deep Mind is like a sponge where questions are concerned.”

The Sage smiled and nodded. I continued.

“Questions! I realize something now about the differences between the *mind seeps* I leave people and the ones Gus leaves. His are always short, positive questions. Like I might say, ‘Think about how your put-downs are driving your brother away from you,’ (which not only is not a question, but is really a command, I see, now). Gus would say, ‘How can you find words that will make your brother want to be with you?’ He always uses questions. Since a Deep Mind wouldn’t want to think about what it’s been doing wrong – driving a brother away – the filter probably won’t let my attempt in to begin with. WOW!”

“So, in the smoking example, what could the parent say?” Gus asked encouraging me to practice applying the idea.

“Well, let’s see. ‘How can you make sure that your lungs stay young and healthy? How can you make sure you won’t become addicted to anything harmful?’”

“Excellent! You even broke it down into two *short* questions. Short is best. Simple vocabulary is best. Remember, the Deep Mind doesn’t use words very well.”

I felt another analogy coming on: “It’s like you’d never tell your dog to, ‘take a prone position on your left side and then, making a 180-degree arc, switch from facing south to facing north,’ when you could just say ‘roll over’. The dog’s limited ability with words would let him understand the two words easily, but probably never understand that 23-word version.”

“Exactly. Good example, though I’m not sure your Deep Mind will like being equated with a dog, but then YOURS just might, Tommy!”

He smiled and chuckled. For some reason the Sage enjoyed my idiosyncrasies – the strange little differences that were unique just to me. Well, that made two of us. I was very happy with myself and was pleased to know that I was learning and growing and improving every single day. I was eager for the Sage to continue.

“It is handy to know that although the Surface Mind needs eight to 10 hours of sleep every day in order to keep functioning efficiently (it turns off), the Deep Mind never requires *any* sleep. It is always awake doing things. If it thinks you have given it a question to answer, it may work all night on the problem while you (your body and your Surface Mind) sleep. Have you ever been unable to recall someone’s name and then the next day, there it was, clear as could be? The Deep Mind hadn’t stopped working on it even though you and your Surface Mind had been off doing dozens, maybe hundreds of other things and then, later on, you’d been asleep all night.”

“Are you saying I can give my Deep Mind questions to work on before I go to sleep at night?”

“Yes. It *will* be doing something while you sleep, and if

it has no direction there's no telling what mischief it may get into."

That the Sage thought was worth a chuckle – a long string of tummy-shaking chuckles. I smiled with him and then tried to refocus his attention.

"So, what more were you going to say about those *Directives* in the Deep Mind – the ones that direct our lives and, taken together, form our personalities?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you for reminding me. It's a bit complicated, but let me give you the simple version today. We will go into more detail later. The Deep Mind listens to us and watches us – keeps track of our reactions and behaviors might be a better way to describe it. When it gets the idea we want to be some certain way, it builds a Directive – like a habit – and when situations come up that refer to the Directive, the Deep Mind pushes it into action."

"I think I need some examples, please," I said, scratching my head.

"Surely. Let's say that on several occasions you have done poorly on a test at school. The next test, then, may produce tension and anxiety in you. The Deep Mind makes the connection – correlation – that during tests you get nervous. So, every time you face a test it makes sure you are nervous – it thinks *that's* how you've indicated that you want it to be. There are specialized ways of talking with your Deep Mind to get rid of those inappropriate, unwanted, mistaken Directives but, again, that's for another time." (See Tommy Powers' Book Three*.)

"I see. So, kids who are afraid of dogs or heights have probably had experiences that taught the Deep Mind it was supposed to make them afraid of dogs or heights. And, kids who are confident and feel good about going into new situations – like being with a new group of kids for the first time – have had experiences that told the Deep Mind that being with a group of unfamiliar kids was a pleasant, safe, thing."

"Right on all counts. It is important to remember that there are *positive* directives, too – like your 'new kids' example. Unless the vast majority of our directives *are* positive we'll be in 'deep' trouble."

“How are those directives different from plain old *willpower*?”

“Willpower is a Surface Mind activity. It can hold things together for a while, but if there are Deep Mind directives that are saying the opposite from what one is trying to accomplish with willpower, the Deep Mind Directives will ALWAYS win out in the end, because ...”

I finished for him. “... Because the Deep Mind is always in charge of how we behave *in the long run*. Like when my Molly goes on a diet. Her willpower can keep her on it for a week or maybe even a month, but then, suddenly, powee! She’s right back into her old overeating habits. But what you are saying is, if she got rid of any Deep Mind Directives that were telling her that she was *supposed* to eat too much or weigh more, then she could lose the weight and keep it off.”

“If her overeating is caused by an ‘eat too much’ Directive, yes, you have given a good example. (Overweight can have other physical causes, as well, of course.) There is a book, *The Secrets of Deep Mind Mastery*, in Facil’s library. I believe the author’s last name is, Gnagey. I recommend you read it and reread it until you have mastered all of its concepts. There are few things more important than understanding yourself, and to accomplish that, an understanding of how the human mind works is essential.”

“I’ll get right on it. This stuff is mind-boggling! Excuse the pun. I love it, you know.”

“Oh, yes. I know.”

I guess I frowned or in some other way looked somber and overly serious because the Sage commented.

“Is there some problem?”

Of course, he’d have known from listening to my thoughts if there had been a problem, but, I suppose, just in case I wasn’t aware of it, he had posed the short question to me.

“Yes and no, I guess. I was just thinking about how so much of the suffering and unhappiness in the world would never have to take place if people just understood a couple of simple things about how human minds work. And, as far as I can tell, schools never even try to teach such things.”

“What would you include in that ‘couple’ of things?” he

asked.

“To develop great skill at thinking in terms of short, positive, questions when working on a problem, and coupling that with a constant search for options – other possible answers even after some good ones seem to have been found. And, of course, to approach yourself and others with positive words and phrases rather than negative.”

“I have to agree. Those things would certainly make life easier and more successful for most folks,” he said. “Do you have room in that head of yours for one more, *mind-related* procedure this morning?”

“Sure. Shoot. I’ll make all the room we need.”

“It has to do with forming those questions to yourself that you were talking about. Always avoid the ‘*Why*’ questions because they seldom give you the focus and direction you need. Instead, try to use ‘*How*’ questions. Here is an example: Rather than asking, ‘Why does he dislike me so much?’ ask, ‘How did he come to dislike me so much’. With ‘why’ you can speculate about all sorts of irrelevant things without ever having to refer to the actual facts and processes that are involved. ‘Why? Because he’s just an evil person. He runs with the wrong crowd. He has lousy parents. He hates everybody on this side of town. Etc. Etc.

“When you ask, ‘How,’ you direct yourself to look for *the specific process* that brought something about. *How* makes us think about the *actual* influences that formed opinions or behaviors. ‘How did he come to dislike me so much?’ ‘How was he influenced in his thinking against me?’ ‘How might his family have influenced him?’ ‘How might his neighborhood and his experiences there have influenced him?’ ‘How might he be misinterpreting some of my behaviors?’

“See how the *How* questions lead one to seek different sorts of information?”

I nodded as The Sage continued.

“So, you see: HOW, not WHY! With HOW you have to pin down the reasons for each of the possible answers you postulate (suggest). With WHY you can go off on unrelated tangents that are, unfortunately, often taken to be the truth, *and that is dangerous.*”

My head was spinning. It made sense, though. *Why*

questions really always implied, “Why do you *suppose*,” and *suppose* typically leads one toward *opinion* rather than *fact*. The *How* questions immediately require you to think facts and reasonable processes.

I would have to read and reread my notes before I really understood all he had said. But, it seemed to me it would be worth it. I would have questions about it all. I would use the book he mentioned to help answer them. It had been a wonderful morning. Every time I learned something new I became ... what? Overjoyed, I suppose. It was more than that. I felt fortunate that I had the privilege to learn something new. It was paving the way for me toward eventual wisdom.

It all harkened back to what the Sage had said to me. *Wisdom* is knowledge *plus* experience well taken – well-used. The basis of wisdom is knowing lots and lots of things so later on I will be able to make good – wise – decisions. Since I have no way, now, of knowing what I may need in the future, the more I learn, the more likely I’ll be ready for whatever comes my way. I’m so lucky that I have always loved to learn.

And then there are those wonderful, wonderful, mistakes I make. My Wharfies taught me to never just shrug off an error. I learned to always ask myself, “What do I need to know or to do differently *next* time so I’ll never have to make that same mistake again?” Then, I’d practice the new skill I needed or I’d find the information or answers the problem required. That, I now see, covers the second part of the Sage’s saying about wisdom – experience well taken or learned from.

The Sage excused himself, saying he had a few loose ends to take care of. He stood and left the room. I lay back on the couch, trying to recall all the things I had learned. I needed to find ways to share all that information about the mental processes with my friends. That meant I first had to make certain that I truly understood it so I would only be sharing accurate information. I needed to practice all those procedures every day.

My reverie (daydream) was interrupted by a sudden, eerie feeling. With a start, I sat up on the edge of the couch and looked around. I went to the window and looked out. There was a tanker in the harbor. More accurately it was tied

up at one of the smaller docks near my Wharfies' loft – a place tankers never moored. My bad feeling seemed to be about that tanker. I couldn't put my finger on it.

I dressed in street clothes, became invisible and flew directly to the area, circling above it for some time. I immediately spotted the source of my uneasiness. What else? It was Andrew up to no good, again. He had run a hose from the tanker to the dock in front of the loft, and fuel oil was gushing into the area. Clearly, he was waiting for me to arrive; then he'd drop a match knowing I'd risk everything including my life to save my Wharfies.

In some way, he had sent me the message – a negative, discomfoting mind seep of the kind Antipathys were capable of sending. Presently he looked up and searched the area with his eyes. I could tell he sensed my presence – invisible or not. He lit the match and dropped it as he nearjumped to safety. The wooden docks and old, plank-sided buildings were like tinder in a fire box. The entire area would go up in flames. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of people could be killed – including me, if I went to their rescue. What was I to do?

*Tommy Powers and The Sorcerer of Akmino Teeki,
The Family of Man Press

CHAPTER TEN

Andrew's At It Again?

My first reaction was to press the 911 point on my star and call in reinforcements – *lots* of reinforcements. My second thought was to seep Andrew's mind. "What if your father is being held captive in one of the buildings on these wharfs?"

I can't take credit for what I did next. I had seen Superman do it in a comic book years before. I flew out several hundred yards over the water in the bay and swooped low toward its surface. Then, I began flying in a small circle – faster and faster and faster. The turbulence it caused in the air began sucking water up as if into a small tornado – a water spout. I lifted it higher and higher and then moved it in toward the docks. I stopped my rotation and the water fell to the earth soaking the enflamed docks. It worked, but was far too little to put out the huge fire that was overtaking the wharfs all up and down the harbor's edge. I saw the flames leaping toward my loft.

My inclination was to leave the firefighting and rescue my family, but so many others were in danger. I made another trip back out over the water and dragged another funnel of water with me, this time dropping it on the loft and the dock in front. I turned to repeat it all a third time when, there before me, I saw a dozen water spouts all heading toward various parts of the blazing docks. My colleagues had arrived in time to help and had followed my lead. In minutes the fire was out. The damage was remarkably small since the wood was still wet from the recent rain and the fire was fueled almost entirely by the oil Andrew had spread on top.

“Hooray for Superman!” I called as the other Calibrators revealed themselves, touching down beside me on the dock. All of us were dripping wet. Gus was among them.

“Great call, my friend!” he said, patting me on the back.

At that moment, a host of fire trucks arrived. Gus looked puzzled.

“Andrew,” I said, then realized a one-word explanation wouldn’t be enough. “After he started the blaze I mind spoke to him about the possibility that his father might be in one of the buildings, knowing he’d take steps to protect him. The most likely means at his disposal was to immediately call in the fire department. It was like my backup plan in case you *old* guys were all napping or something.”

I got a series of sharp punches to the shoulder. They were delivered in fun, of course.

“None of us could have done better,” Gus said.

The others nodded and mumbled positively among themselves. A TV helicopter flew into view and hovered above us. It would be hard to explain a convention of oddly dressed, dripping wet, 13-year-olds huddling in the center of where the fire had been. (Remember, when Calibrators do their work they always return to their 13-year-old appearance.)

We disappeared from view in unison. I wondered how the TV weathermen would explain the sudden appearance of a dozen waterspouts at the exact moment the docks burst into flame – and on a beautiful clear day. More interesting, perhaps, would be what the ministers might have to say about it on Sunday morning.

Since neither group’s explanation could be accurate – though maybe more or less reasonable given their beliefs about things – it highlighted for me the importance of keeping an open mind and continuing to search for options even after some possibly reasonable explanations were discovered.

More important was the thing with Andrew! I doubted if he would believe *any* proof I might be able to dig up about his father’s unsavory life and criminal past. It was as if his Deep Mind had another picture of the man so his filter wouldn’t allow any such proof to penetrate it. My best, and perhaps my only, approach was to prove to Andrew through *my* behavior – model for him – what kind of person I was and therefore what

kind of people Calibrators must really be.

Gus and I jumped to Amy's Bagel Stand and stuffed our faces as if we hadn't eaten for days. She offered a dish towel for us to use in drying our faces, but didn't ask.

"You two can sure put away the vittles, you can," she said clearly enjoying our teenage appetites.

"I need a half dozen to go, but I insist on paying for them," I said. "They are a gift for a friend."

Before she could refuse I stuffed some bills into the pocket of her apron.

"And," I said playfully pointing to my cheek, "I need some change right here."

She grinned and administered a half-dozen staccato pecks to my face.

"I feel left out," Gus said putting on a pout.

"Change is for them that buys," she said to him, turning and winking at me.

Gus kissed her on the cheek.

After our good-bye hugs and with my sack of goodies in tow, Gus and I went our separate ways. He returned to Calibrator Hall and I flew to Andrew's street. Soaring high and fast, my clothes were dry before I arrived. Actually, I stopped and made a small purchase before proceeding to his place. I rang the bell at the front door of the apartment house and his mother's voice answered.

"Yes?"

"It's me – Tommy, Tommy Powers. Hoped to find Andrew at home."

"Of course, Tommy. Please come right on up."

The buzzer buzzed indicating the outside door was un-locked. I entered and made my way upstairs to their apartment. It was again his mother who greeted me as their door opened.

"Andrew! It's your friend, Tommy," she called in the direction of his room.

His door opened a sizeable crack and he peered out – *leered* out would be a better description. I had obviously put him in an awkward position. Clearly his mother was not aware of the animosity (dislike) he held for me so he couldn't refuse to see me or treat me badly in her presence. He swung his

door open and walked across the living room toward us.

“Hey!” I said in his direction and then returned my attention to his mother. I held out two sacks – the brown one with the bagels and the other, smaller and white.

“Snacks or aroma,” I said offering and withdrawing first the brown and then the white.

“Oh. I’ll go for aroma every time,” she said smiling and enjoying my little game.

It caught Andrew’s attention, but he wouldn’t let on he was enjoying it.

I handed the little white bag to Mrs. Parker. She peeked inside, like a child at Christmas.

“A candle!” she said, clearly pleased.

She removed it and put the bag aside. As she moved it slowly back and forth close to her face – as if to tease the aroma from the jar – I announced its name.

“*Bay Breeze*. I figured since you guys live so far inland from the docks you should have a bit of the *bay* here in your place.

Andrew screwed up his face and rolled his eyes, having caught the impish intent of my gift – its reference to the harbor and docks where he’d just caused such havoc.

“It reminds me,” she said looking concerned. “Your home on the wharf wasn’t damaged in that freakish fire this morning I hope.”

“No. It’s fine. Thanks for your concern, though. Rain or some such thing saved the whole area. Pretty lucky, I guess.”

“Well, I just want you to know that if you ever need a place to stay for a while you’re always welcome to stay here with Andrew. His upper bunk never seems to get used.”

“Thank you. You’re very kind.”

That’s just what I’d need. I could see him trying to suffocate me with a pillow in my sleep or drowning me in the shower. Thanks, but no thanks, I decided.

“So, Andrew, I got a sack of bagels – Amy’s best. Never known a kid who could resist them.”

Mrs. Parker herded us toward his room with long sweeps of her arms.

“You guys go have fun. I’ll bring milk.”

We went into his room. He turned and glared at me –

regular vision; no red rays, to begin with, at least.

“What you doing here?” he asked in a half whisper, bending his head close so his mother couldn’t hear.

“I came to share some bagels – didn’t you hear me?”

“Yeah. Right! Bagels and *Sea Mist* or whatever the heck that candle was.”

“*Bay Breeze*, if you’re really interested,” I said comforting myself into the dark brown recliner by the window.

“I hate you! Why can’t you get that through your thick skull? I don’t want you here. I don’t want to spend time with you ...”

He became flustered and couldn’t find more words so I finished for him. “ ... You want me dead. I suppose that’s the bottom line, right?”

He didn’t respond because his mother arrived with a tray at the still-open door. It carried two huge glasses of milk, a stack of paper napkins, butter, cream cheese, knives and forks. I wondered if that implied that in polite society you had to eat bagels with a fork. That would certainly be no fun!

“You sure do know how to serve a bagel,” I said smiling, as Andrew took the tray.

She nodded and left. Andrew closed the door with his leg and clicked it shut with a thrust from his backside. He sat the tray on the table between his bed and the chair and flopped backward onto the bed – arms folded, staring at the ceiling. I ignored the huff he was trying to demonstrate and began pointing out the various flavors on the tray.

“Blueberry, onion, chocolate chip ...”

He scooted himself into a sitting position, fluffing his pillow against the wall. He interrupted.

“I don’t give a crap about your bagels. I just want you to leave – NOW.”

“How would you explain that to your mother – such a good friend just up and leaving when he had announced he was here for a visit?”

Andrew bit at his lower lip growing more and more angry every time I opened my mouth – probably not a very sensible approach on my part. I changed tactics, fixing myself a treat and stuffing it into my mouth so I couldn’t continue irritating him with words. I put a generous portion of cream

cheese on a blueberry and sat it on a napkin at the edge of the table closest to the bed. I put one of the milks next to it. He glared and re-folded his arms across his chest.

“I won’t talk to you,” he said.

“I hadn’t noticed,” I replied without thinking. It had not been a friendly thing to have said.

“Hey,” I said. “Sorry about that. It was an uncalled for, sarcastic remark. Sorry.”

He frowned and shook his head once again indicating that he couldn’t begin to understand me and my behavior. I figured he’d never try the bagel with me watching him so I turned slightly in the chair and looked out the window pretending to be interested in what I saw. After several minutes of silence, I turned back toward the bed. Andrew was eating the bagel. I said nothing, but took a long drink of milk.

“Cows!” I said at last holding up the glass. “Among the unsung heroes of our time, I’d say?”

He snorted and shook his head – as close as he’d ever come to making an appropriate response to my offbeat humor. I smiled, faintly so as to not over stimulate things.

“How’s school this semester?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Sometimes I sort of miss being in a school,” I continued. “Some of the kids were standoffish there, but enough were friendly to make it a really good experience for me.”

“You’re not in school?” came his automatic question, surprising both him and me.

“Home-schooled – sort of. Hard to explain how we do things.”

The ‘we’ was intended to refer to the Calibrators and Andrew caught my meaning.

“Some big deal Calibrator hold brainwashing classes for you does he?” Andrew asked sarcastically, though I did feel a hint of genuine interest on his part.

“That’s an intriguing term – *brainwashing* – isn’t it,” I said. He frowned, a question on his face.

“I know what you meant by it, of course – to turn me against my former beliefs and accept some other set – usually assumed to be evil. But just looking at the term I sort of like it.

Washing can mean *cleansing*, and that could imply some kind of cleaning out the brain – getting rid of useless or bothersome or dangerous beliefs – *Directives* I believe they are called – like you thinking that I and my kind are the bad guys.”

I returned to deal with his original question before he could argue my point (a verbal mind seep of a sort).

“My teacher’s name is Facil. He and I plan my studies together, and then I’m mostly on my own to carry them out. When I need assistance he’s always there to help. He is a believer in the Socratic Method of teaching. That’s ...”

“I *know* what the Socratic Method is. The teacher asks leading questions and the student discovers the answers. You’re not dealing with an *idiot* here, Powers.”

“Excuse me. Again, it was out of place for me to assume something I didn’t know to be a fact. It’s just that most kids our age haven’t ever run across the term. I really like that approach to learning. How about you?”

“Not many teachers seem bright enough to use it, if you ask me,” he said.

Finally, it was beginning to seem like a conversation rather than a Tommy Powers monologue. I nodded to indicate my agreement with his basic premise. He had answered my question indirectly but I figured gently pressing it might keep things going.

“So, you like the use of questions?”

“Ya. I suppose so. I like to figure things out for myself.”

Again, I just nodded and went back to my bagel. I didn’t want to seem overly eager or demanding about keeping the conversation going. I was surprised when Andrew made the next move.

“What’s your favorite?”

At first I didn’t understand. He must have sensed my quandary, since he pointed to the plate of bagels with the one in his hand.

“Oh. Blueberry – hands-down winner as far as I’m concerned.”

“That’s the one you fixed for me.”

I let it go. What was there to say? The next few moments passed in silence.

“Onion comes in a close second,” I added at last. “They

need to be buttered though. Don't like them with cream cheese."

"This has to be the dumbest conversation two teenage boys ever had," he said, the crack of a smile breaking his cheeks.

My smile was immediate and unrestrained. It was full out, cheek-pooching broad. I laughed out loud, nodding my agreement. It was contagious and soon his stomach was jiggling right along with mine though no sounds accompanied his reaction. Had it taken place back in my room with Gus, I would have slid to the floor and laughed myself into tears. For some reason, I didn't feel free to do that there in Andrew's room.

"You just won't give up, will you?" he said at last.

"Not sure I understand," I answered.

"Not sure I do either. Something about wanting to be my friend even though I've made it clear I *don't* want to be yours. Don't you believe in letting others make their own choices about things like that?"

"Usually, but in your case, it's a whole lot broader than our friendship. You're determined to kill me, for goodness sake! That gives me some stake in our relationship I think."

He shrugged, apparently conceding my point, and I continued from another angle.

"The chance that you will ever be able to kill me is about one in a billion, Andrew. That's just the way it is. But, if you keep trying, eventually other people *are* going to get hurt – murdered even, by you. Like today at the docks, your hatred for me was so overwhelming you let yourself believe any collateral damage – dead innocent bystanders – was somehow justified. That isn't the real you. Deep inside you're one of the good guys, and if you end up killing somebody, you'll spend the rest of your life in prison. How can you use that brilliant mind of yours to help mankind if you're locked away – and you *will* be locked away if you don't get your head on straight."

I felt I was on a roll so continued.

"It would be about the coolest thing I can think of if we'd end up being friends, but that's not as important as making sure you find some way to put your misguided feelings about

me aside. I'll probably never be able to offer proof that will satisfy you about the atrocities your father reeked on this city when he was trafficking in drugs and ruining the lives of dozens and dozens – probably hundreds and hundreds – of kids our ages.

“I'll never be able to prove to you the havoc he caused in the Middle East over the past 50 years, stirring up hatred and triggering the deaths of thousands and thousands of people there. *But*, if you come to find out I'm *not* a bad guy, if you come to see that without a doubt I am in fact a *good* guy, then maybe you can find a way to save yourself. If you don't get to know me, you can't possibly change your beliefs about me. So, I just have to keep forcing myself – and Amy's bagels – on you.”

Again, he had to snort at my unexpectedly humorous finish. It was more than a snort. It was accompanied by the requisite tummy jiggles that indicated he appreciated my wit. When that died down, he spoke. It was to me, but he looked away at the far wall.

“If your father ever asked you to do only one thing for him and he said that one thing would be your only chance to ever prove your love for him, wouldn't you do it?”

“I'm sure I'd be tempted in the strongest way. I would ask myself several questions, however. Would a father who really loved me ever ask me to do some terrible act? Would I ever really be able to feel that I had proved my love for my father by carrying out such a terrible act? Would I be able to live with myself after having done such a terrible act that is clearly against my own basic values? Should I verify the facts of the matter for myself before carrying out such a terrible act? How would my doing something like that affect my mother and others who love me and who I love?”

My words were met by a long silence. Then he adjusted his position and sat on the edge of his bed.

“Want to play a game of chess?”

“Isn't that what we *are* playing, Andrew?”

He nodded and shrugged, but proceeded to get out the board and began setting it up on the bed beside him.

“It won't be a fair game,” I said. “My abilities to read others' thoughts are beginning to develop and often I get

strong impressions of what they are thinking. Even though it's not very reliable yet I may sense your strategy even before you make your moves."

"And what if I inherited some skill from my father that allows me to confuse such thought reading?"

"I've never felt it from you."

"Maybe I've never used it in your presence."

"It seems the new game has begun even before the pawns are all in place," I said taking a seat on the bed opposite Andrew.

After the first half-dozen moves it was clear that I could read him well enough to beat him handily. It felt like cheating and yet I couldn't avoid hearing what I heard. I had warned him. Should I beat him in 10 moves – like I was sure at that point I could do? Or, should I let him win to make him feel good about himself. It was a quandary.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

My Plan for Living My Life

The game lasted four more moves and Andrew found his board in checkmate. His reaction was interesting and not what I expected. It seemed I had just been given a test.

“You played it honestly. You knew my mind and you won, just like you’d warned me. You didn’t let me win. I respect that. Don’t go taking it as some big breakthrough in our relationship. At this point my goal for you has not changed – one in a billion or not, I have to keep trying to destroy you.”

“How is destroying me going to improve the world and if it isn’t – if indeed it could harm the world – what kind of man would require that of you?”

I walked to the door, opened it and left the room before he could respond. In the background, I heard the chess board splatter against the wall. Whatever point I’d made certainly hadn’t brought him peace of mind!

After a moment of small talk with Mrs. Parker I was on my way. The Bay Breeze candle, by the way, smelled good, but nothing like a sea breeze!

I had forced a number of possibilities – options – which, at some point, Andrew would have to deal with. If he would not find those possible alternatives on his own, I’d just have to keep feeding them to him.

Gus materialized beside me as I rounded the corner down the block.

“I sense mixed feelings,” he said, his arm settling in around my shoulders.

“*Big-time* mixed feelings! I really like Andrew. I really

like most of his value system – he’s a caring, helpful, loving person where most other people are concerned. I’m afraid for him though. Afraid he will throw all his potential away in his single-minded drive to do me in. I’d feel awful if he succeeded and ruined his life, you know?”

I looked up into Gus’s face. He was chuckling.

“Yes. I know,” I said, not finding my error nearly as humorous as Gus. “If he does me in I won’t be feeling anything at all.”

“Are you pleased with your conversation overall?” he asked. His questions always had a way of putting things into perspective.

I nodded. “Yes. *Overall* it accomplished most of what I set out to accomplish.”

“Confuse the stuffing out of him?” came Gus’s response.

“In a way, yes. Facing new options is often confusing and a bit scary as well. I suppose this is *very* scary for Andrew. He is forced to make a choice between his father and what he knows deep down inside is *right*.”

“Is it really a choice about his father?”

It seemed obvious to me that it was – until Gus asked that question anyway.

“I think I see what you mean. It’s more a choice between beliefs – the immoral ones his father uses to guide his life or the decent, helpful ones the vast majority of human beings – including Andrew – use to guide theirs.”

We walked on in silence for several blocks before I was able to appropriately form my next thought.

“It’s not the man – Antipathy – who is to be disdained, but his methods and goals. I suppose that’s where your questions were leading me.”

“Indeed ... I feel like climbing trees. How about you?”

It was an abrupt change of topic, but my tired mind welcomed it.

“Sure. The woods in Indiana where you taught me how to fly?”

“Are there any other really great tree-climbing woods in the universe?” he said, kidding me.

“My experience in such matters is limited. I’ll bow to

your expertise.”

He disappeared. I had no idea where that woods was. It was an *unspoken question* Gus had presented to me. “How can you find the woods knowing no more than you know?” What fun this would be!

I knew it was in southern Indiana so I far jumped to Bloomington, southeast of Indianapolis. I hovered high above the area figuring my next move. Much of the green below me was pine forest. We had been among oaks and maples. We had been near a creek that entered a deep valley by falling a hundred feet as a narrow, misty waterfall that wore rainbows and played happy chords as it cascaded from rock to rock, finally settling into the wide, deep blue basin below.

I looked and listened for the waterfall. I searched for the oaks and maples. I found the stream and followed it through the woods. There he was, climbing high, and then soaring back to earth only to begin all over again. Gus loved to climb trees like he had done back on the tiny island off the coast of Greece where he had grown up.

I perched high in a nearby tree and watched my dear friend playing as if he were 10 again. His recent time away from the Hall must have been taxing. This was his way of renewing himself.

I momentarily lost sight of him only to feel his arm around my shoulder seconds later.

“Four minutes. Not bad for an amateur,” he joked.

“It was three minutes, forty-four seconds and I’m certainly less of an amateur than the last time we were here.”

“That you are, my friend. Race you to the top of that oak. No powers allowed.”

“You’re on, *old man!*” I joked.

I gave it my best effort and was within two feet of Gus as he settled into a straddle of the highest branch and – as a put-on – raised his clasped hands above his head and declared himself the winner. Since neither of us cared who won it really didn’t matter. The view was great. He put his finger to his lips and pointed toward a clearing. A mother deer and two fawns were grazing. Rabbits hopped between their legs. I was reminded of *Bambi* and *Thumper*. I’d be willing to miss seeing *Flower!* (the skunk).

We played like little kids for a long time. I hope I never lose the ability to do that. I want that little kid to stay inside me forever. It's not that I have anything against growing up. That's certainly going to be a great part of life. But I've known some people that seem to forgot how it was to be a kid and I don't want that to happen to me. Those who haven't forgotten seem to be the happiest grownups, I think. They also seem to get along best with kids – not expecting too much, but seeming to understand what's coming next for us – what next important goal we're striving to achieve.

I wondered if Gus had brought me to the woods for another serious talk. It was where he had delivered the *Pillars** to me. I didn't have to wait long to find out. He hitched his head for me to follow, and we soared down to the base of the largest tree in the area. He sat up against it. I slipped out of my shirt and lay down on my side facing him, my head propped up in my hand. The cool of the soft grass provided pleasant relief from the heat my body had built up during the climbing.

I wondered if Gus would stay or if the Sage would appear. It would be Gus. He began with a question.

"How would you summarize *your plan* for living your life?"

"Glad you didn't begin with something difficult," I joked, realizing it was about the most important question anybody had ever asked me.

I had never taken the time to sit down and pull it all together like that. It was important that I did. I spent some time in silence organizing my thoughts before I began.

"Well, I try to do several things every day. *First*, I do the things I have to do – the things that are required of me just because of where and how I live. Things like keeping myself clean, eating, doing my school work, and when I'm at the loft, doing my chores – making my bed, taking out the trash, helping Tina with the sack lunches we sell, things like that. I guess it's really just following through on my responsibilities and feeling proud that I do them regularly without having to be reminded.

"*Second*, I do something nice for somebody else – something that is not required of me. Something I just want to

do that I think will make someone happy or make their life easier in some way. Whenever I can do it anonymously I prefer to do it that way. I get a real kick out of leaving folks wondering who it was. It can't always be that way, like when I help old Mr. Abernathy carry his groceries home from the store, or take the mail into Mrs. Stevens when there's snow on the ground or it's raining."

Gus interrupted with another question.

"Why anonymously?"

"It's how my Wharfies taught me, I guess. They believe something really can't be charity from your heart if you take credit for it or do it in order to get something out of it for yourself. If you stick around to take credit, it's more like it's all about *you* – how great you are and how the other person owes you – than it is a selfless act of love, you see."

He nodded and I continued.

"*Third*, I learn something new every day – something I didn't know the day before – something important and not just some piece of trivia or something I'll forget by the weekend. It's how I exercise my mind, stretch it and help prepare myself for when I will need to be a very wise person – like when I'm a parent or have some other position of responsibility. Since I love to learn, I almost never overlook that one.

"*Fourth*, I do something that's fun for me. I figure it's a way of taking care of myself – keeping myself fresh and renewed and happy. If I don't see to my own well-being, I'm likely not going to be much good at helping others improve theirs.

"Then *finally*, last thing before I go to sleep at night, I look back over my day and think about those four things. When I've done them all well, I can drift off to sleep with a fantastic feeling inside me, knowing I really did make a positive difference in the world that day. I believe that is the truest feeling of happiness. When I find I slipped up somewhere, I can make a plan so it won't have to happen again the next day. That makes me feel good, too – knowing I have the smarts to fix such things and enough love to want to.

"I guess that's the way I'd summarize how I go about living my life. If I had more time I'm sure I'd have some other things to include, like always building people up and never

tearing them down, not spreading my own problems to everybody else and making them unhappy. Probably some others.”

Gus nodded – quite a few more nods in a row than I was used to seeing from him. It either meant he liked it or that he was deep in thought about it. Impatient *me* had to ask.

“So, what do you think ... about my plan ... the one I try to live by every day ... the one I just laid out for you ...”

I was getting no feedback.

“Are you perhaps asking the wrong question?” he said at last, then became quiet, folding his hands in his lap.

I’m sure my brow furrowed as I tried to make sense out of his comment. Presently, it came to me.

“You mean I should be asking *myself* if it seems like a good plan to me, not asking *you* for your evaluation.”

He smiled and nodded and raised his eyebrows, holding them there indicating he was waiting to hear what answer I would give myself.

I nodded. “Yes. I’m pretty happy with it. I can see that I must take a look at it from time to time to make certain it’s still the plan I need as I grow and change, but for the time being, I’m pretty happy with it. If most everybody used that plan I think the world would be a pretty good place, filled with happy people who felt good about themselves and others. I’ll stand by it for now.”

“Very well, then. I suppose we need to be getting back to the Hall if we expect to make the tail end of the dinner line,” he said.

“One thing before we leave,” I said.

He cocked his head, waiting.

“Thanks for asking me about my plan. I need to be reminded sometimes that life needs to be more than just skipping along some path without any idea where I want it to lead me. I need to think about what part I can play in making the world a better place.”

He smiled and nodded.

We made it back just in time for dinner though Gus was still tucking in my blue shirttail as we walked through the dining room door.

Back in our room after dinner, just as I was about to

secure a towel around my mid-section, I was filled with a feeling of dread and the image of Antipathy. I shared it with Gus.

“Just had this awful feeling – about Antipathy. I think I need to go check on him – make sure he’s still safe and sound and contained at the bottom of the ocean.”

“Want my help?” Gus offered.

“It’s my thing, I guess. I shouldn’t be long.”

I slipped into my street clothes and was soon soaring high over the city on my way to the spot where the bunker had been sunk. I dived into the water and swam down to it, amazed again at how the tremendous water pressure there at 500 feet didn’t affect me in the least. I examined the outside surfaces of the large cement structure making sure it was still intact. Then, I entered into the closet through the exterior wall.

Antipathy was still there – of course, there was really no way that he could have escaped. Still, I felt relieved to see him there pacing back and forth. Like on my first visit, I could tell the exact moment when he suddenly sensed my presence. I left immediately and sped to the surface shooting into a high arch above the clouds, relieved things were okay. I played among the clouds for some time before returning to the Hall.

“Everything seems to be in order,” I reported. “He seems to know when I’m there. Is that a real possibility?”

“I imagine he does. He’s brilliant, you know, and what few powers he has are highly developed. I’m not sure we really understand all of them. Did you sense feelings?”

“An interesting question. The first time I felt his rage, but this time it felt almost tranquil – sort of arrogant even. Still, he was pacing back and forth like a father-to-be in a maternity ward.”

Gus frowned, but did not elaborate and I didn’t press him for an explanation. I worked on my studies and Gus read until it was time for bed. He was still in the shower when I fell asleep.

* * *

As we dressed for breakfast I could tell Gus was bothered about something. I didn’t have to ask.

“Last night while you were checking on Antipathy, I received a strange and disturbing ... message ... I suppose it

would be called.”

“Message?” I asked. “What sort of message?”

“It was from Antipathy, I’m certain of that. It gave directions to his location. I can’t fathom how he was able to send it through the water. That just isn’t possible and yet ...”

“You think it was intended for Andrew?”

“Without any doubt!”

“What are the chances the boy received it?”

“Pretty good, I’d say. It came to me clear as a bell and I’m sure I was *not* his delivery target.”

“But how could it have happened? It must have had something to do with my visit.”

“You left in a hurry, I assume,” Gus said.

“As fast as my little wings could take me.”

It had been an attempt at humor, but neither of us felt like reacting.

“You must have an idea since you asked that particular question,” I said looking him in the face.

“It’s just a possibility, but it’s all I have,” Gus began. “You say he sensed your presence the first time you visited. Assuming you would come again, he set to work on how he might be able to use that to his advantage. Like I said, Antipathy is a genius. I just imagine he figured a way to use the moment you exited through the wall to somehow slip out his thoughts with you. Once on the surface, they were set free.”

“I wonder why I didn’t receive them, too,” I asked, really thinking out loud. “Maybe it was because I immediately flew up to around 3,000 feet to play in the clouds. The transmission would have hugged the Earth, I’m sure.”

“You’re probably right about that. Good thinking.”

“So, what do we do? Can we somehow move the bunker to a distant spot?”

“That’s one possibility and maybe the best,” Gus said, scratching his head. “Regardless, we need to station Calibrators as lookouts to report any unusual activity in the area. Let me go attend to that immediately.”

He meant the Sage would attend to that immediately.

“While you’re tending to that, I’d better go check on Andrew.”

Within moments we had gone our separate ways. I rang the bell at the Parkers. His mother's frantic voice answered. I was soon up the stairs two at a time.

"Andrew left after supper last night and he didn't come home. Have you seen him?"

"No. I take it that's not like him?"

"No. Not anymore, at least. He went through a stage when he turned 13 when he'd do things like that, but not for a long time. I'm so worried. He seemed agitated – bothered about something. Did something go wrong between you two yesterday while you were here?"

I chose to think of her term "go wrong" as meaning something new. Since our problem was not new, I could honestly answer ...

'... No. I wouldn't say so. Does he have any place he goes when he's in a mood?"

"The police used to find him down at the docks. I'm not sure what part. I suppose I should call them, shouldn't I?"

"I can't tell his mother what she should do," I began, "but I'll go look for him. If I don't get in touch with you by 10, you probably should notify the authorities."

We held a long hug and I left with her calling after me, "Please be careful, Tommy."

In the privacy of the garden I became invisible and flew straight to the docks, flying low, following the streets, so I could search the walks for Andrew on my way. He was nowhere to be seen. Presently, I began sensing his homing beacon.

It took me right to the small dock Antipathy had used to import drugs from his fleet of small ships. Several were tied up there. I sensed movement onboard a 40-foot yacht. I lit on the wharf nearby, materialized, and walked toward it. At that point Andrew started the engine. I made no effort to hide myself and was certain he spotted me. As I approached, he pulled away from the pier and headed south – the opposite direction from where the bunker was buried. What could he have in mind? The yacht was some 500 feet out into the harbor and rapidly gaining speed when the worst of possible things happened – the boat exploded sending fireballs 50 feet into the air and scattering wood and steel over a 100-foot, flaming circle on

the water.

*See the final pages of this book to reread the *Pillars*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Black Rose

I accompanied the police when they went to deliver the news to Mrs. Parker. Both her agent and closest friend came immediately to be with her. I left after seeing she was in good hands. It was the first time I had been involved in such a totally heartbreaking undertaking. I felt empty. I felt sick. I couldn't begin to imagine what Andrew's mother must have been going through.

I sat on a bench in the side garden with my head between my knees being sick to my stomach.

"When you're finished there, we have work to do," came Gus's calm voice from behind me.

"Guess I'm done," I said, looking up at him. "Never had reason to feel this way before. Did I push him too far and set up a bind he saw no way out of so he blew himself up?"

"Surely, you can do better than that, my friend," Gus said.

I stood and we moved together to the sidewalk and headed for the harbor. I spun several more possibilities.

"Maybe Antipathy had rigged his boats to blow up if anybody tried to tamper with them and, not knowing that, Andrew had decided to take one out for a ride. Maybe it was just some kind of freak accident. Maybe in his rage, Andrew's laser vision ignited the boat's fuel supply."

The more possibilities I invented the less guilty I felt. It had certainly not been my intention to push him too far.

"*You* probably have ideas," I said giving Gus the opportunity to share them if he wanted to.

“I believe I have recreated the message exactly,” he began. “It went like this: *The black rose will awaken you. I’m at the bottom of the ocean just off President’s Point north of the city in a narrow trench under 500 feet of water. Get me out of here.*”

“What’s with the *black rose* reference?” I asked. The rest of the message seemed clear.

“I only have a hunch.”

“I’ll take *your* hunch over lots of so-called facts. Give! Give!”

“You are familiar with hypnotism.”

I nodded.

“A little.”

“And post-hypnotic suggestions?”

“That’s when a hypnotist plants a key word or phrase that activates some behavior in the hypnotized person at a later time – days, weeks, even years after it was planted.”

“Right. What characteristics would that key word have to have to make sure it only worked when it was supposed to?”

“Well, it would have to be a word or phrase the person would never hear until it was time to act. Oh. I’m beginning to see. *Black* rose. There are all colors of roses, but the likelihood he’d ever hear ‘black rose’ is mighty slim. That was a trigger of some kind; but I still don’t get it, I guess.”

“I believe that Antipathy’s hold over Andrew was more than just that from the father-son relationship. I believe Antipathy controlled the boy through hypnosis, and ‘black rose’ was the signal for blind obedience on his part.”

“But I thought you couldn’t be hypnotized to do things that went against your basic beliefs.”

“In general, that’s true, but there are ways around it. For example, if, under hypnosis, Andrew agreed that he wanted to be a good son and Antipathy went on to trick him into defining ‘good son’ as one who did whatever the father required of him, then Andrew would not feel he was doing something against his own beliefs because he *did* want to be a good son.”

“Sneaky and horrifying to think a father would use his own child in that way. So, you think Antipathy used hypnosis

to convince Andrew his job, as a good son, was to kill me at all costs.”

“That seems to make the most sense at this point,” Gus said nodding. “After your first checkup visit to the bunker, Antipathy began spinning a plan, the one he eventually used to get the message out to Andrew. He was just waiting for your next visit.”

“He must know a kind of physics that I don’t,” I said. “Apparently, there is some way for Antipathy’s thoughts to penetrate 500 feet of water and a solid substance – like the concrete wall – once its integrity has been breached by the process of Farjumping through it.”

“It’s a kind of physics I don’t know either. I imagine it was more a hunch on his part than it was scientific fact. I know of no scientists who are aware of the Calibrator’s ability to move through solid material so there would be no reason to study it. You can think of this whole thing as Antipathy’s way of testing his hypothesis.”

“So, Antipathy probably doesn’t know yet whether it really worked or not,” I added.

“Right. The only proof will occur when Andrew shows up with a battering ram or some such thing.”

“So, now, he’ll never know if he was right, I guess,” I said, a feeling of strange sadness washing over me.

Gus nodded.

We arrived at the dock. The flames from the fuel on the water had died out. Crews from the Harbor Fire Department were gathering in the remains of the wreckage. An assistant fire chief was standing at the end of one pier talking on a cell phone. We moved close to listen.

“No sign of a body. Probably blown into a billion pieces. Doubt if it will ever be located. We should have things cleaned up and open for traffic in another hour.”

I got sick all over again. There was nothing we could do to help, so Gus returned to the Hall. I perched, invisibly, on the roof outside the big window of our loft. It was my best thinking spot and I had lots of thinking to do.

Andrew was a bright guy. It was hard to believe he would have just gone off half-cocked like it appeared he had. For months, Andrew had been close to Antipathy and the

boats. He would have known if they had been rigged to explode. Antipathy would have made sure that Andrew knew how to handle a boat well, so the accident idea became suspect. Because of his accidental use of his laser eyes with me during the past month or so, Andrew had grown careful, and began exercising good control of that power. There had been no attempt to use it when I had been with him the day before. It was, therefore, unlikely that he had fired the boat's fuel tank in an impulsive rage. There was no need for rage. If he had received the message, he had learned his father was alive – supporting what I had told him. He would have been happy. He had a mission – a blind, trance-driven mission – to save him. Care and intelligent strategy was what he would have been about.

Suddenly none of it made sense! Add to it the fact that Andrew had set out in the wrong direction and it *really* didn't make sense. Could it have been a diversion of some kind – keep us occupied while the real rescue was attempted by someone else. There was no someone else. Antipathy was a loner – he trusted no one – and, anyway, Andrew would not have blown himself up as a diversion, unless the trance required it. The more I thought the more confusing things seemed to become.

I returned to the Hall. The stakeout of the bunker's burial spot in the ocean had been called off. The event should have put an end to the problem of Antipathy's possible escape, but I remained uneasy.

I had lost track of time.

"Nine o'clock on Sunday evening," came Gus's answer to my unasked question.

I nodded my thanks and lay back on the couch.

"It will be really hard on the kids at school," I said. "I suppose I should be there first thing in the morning to help however I can."

"Good idea," Gus agreed.

I moved to the big window overlooking the ocean and sat on the floor, legs crossed, watching the moonbeams dancing on the sea and tracking the clouds as they floated south to north high in the darkened sky. The peace that scene usually brought to me did not come. Was it sadness or was it

uneasiness? Was it guilt or was it anger? Should I have been able to have done something to prevent Andrew's death? I had all the wonderful Calibrator powers and yet I had been helpless to do anything. It was not my best hour. I lay down on my side, head on my outstretched arm. My eyes fluttered watching the waves rolling hypnotically out to sea. I was soon asleep there on the floor.

* * *

Gus had apparently moved me to my bunk the night before – at least that's where I was when I awoke the next morning. I lingered in the shower longer than usual, not wanting to face the unpleasant events the morning was sure to bring.

Some part of me felt I had failed as a Calibrator in my relationship with Andrew. I didn't want to face Gus or any of the other Calibrators so I left before Gus was up and around, and skipped breakfast in favor of a bagel.

Amy's cheerful face and easy conversation helped a bit. I hadn't planned on mentioning Andrew. She really didn't know him and I never unloaded my sadness or problems on others.

"I'm really sorry about that boy and the boat accident," she said. "I assume he was an acquaintance of yours."

I nodded. "I'm on my way to his school now to try and help the other kids through it. I have no idea what kind of things to say."

Amy put her arm around my waist and took my hand in hers.

"When I lost my husband a few years ago, I found it wasn't really what people had to say that helped the most. It was just that they made the effort to be there for me. The most important part of friendship is never words – it's just being there, regardless."

She patted my shoulder and I nodded.

"You are a wise lady, Amy. It's a shame you didn't have children. You would have made a magnificent mother."

Tears rolled down her face. There I went again making things worse instead of better.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ..."

“Shush your prattle, now. These are tears of joy. If you’re going to get on well with the girls, you’re going to *have* to learn the difference.”

I managed a smile down into her face and not having a hanky, handed her a paper napkin from the counter.

“I may need your help.”

“I’ll be here.”

It was a long and very special hug we shared. I sensed a sudden closeness I had not felt with her before. Amy had always been Gus’s friend and I was just the tag-along kid. Suddenly Amy and I had a bond as well. It was hard to explain. It was wonderful.

At school the girls were crying and the guys were clenching their jaws and looking at their shoes. I walked into the midst of them as they mulled around the playground. There were hugs from everybody. I was not prepared for that. Marcus, Kate, Tasha, Jerry – even macho Ted who held his the longest. There were others as well. Amy had been right. Words were not needed. In fact, they just seemed to get in the way. It was being there together that proved to be truly important. The principal appeared and announced classes had been called off for the day. I even received *her* hug and wore a well-dampened collar as a result.

It was then I made the connection and it all made sense. Emotions were Deep Mind functions – a place where words were fairly insignificant and feelings reigned supreme.

I learned there would be a memorial service at his church on Wednesday afternoon. His best friends were each asked to say something. His mother specifically requested that I speak. She had no idea about the true relationship her son and I had, and that was clearly not the time to disclose it. The words would be for her and the kids and not Andrew.

Just what did a guy say about the person who had repeatedly tried to kill him? I could list his good traits and talk about his positive values. That’s what everybody else would do, though. I could all quite honestly talk about how *persistent* he was. That brought a faint smile to my being, but soon got lost among the churning of my other feelings. More than anything I could think of at that moment, I DIDN’T want to make those remarks. I would, for the others’ sakes, but I

really, really, didn't want to.

I supposed it fell under that first item on my list of things that made up my plan for living my life – Doing those things I *had* to do. I would work on the talk later. The parade of parents' cars began and the students left. I figured it had been a mistake – calling off school. The kids needed to keep busy so they wouldn't have so much idle time in which to feel miserable.

* * *

As it turned out I was the last to speak at the memorial service. It was as if they all expected something special from me. It was a responsibility I hadn't sought and certainly didn't want.

I stood and walked down the center aisle. As I reached the front pew where Mrs. Parker sat, I leaned down and kissed her on her cheek, then turned and faced the gathering from there beside her. Hiding behind the podium seemed unfriendly to me. It was a sea of teenage faces that greeted me. Some familiar. Some strange. All desperately sad. I began:

"It's been hard to decide what I wanted to say here. I think that was the problem – what I wanted to say. It's probably more important to think about what Andrew would want us to say – about him and his life and our feelings about him and his death.

"Of all of us here, I probably knew him the least well. Still, I think I knew him well enough to understand the basic Andrew. I think he'd want to hear that we loved him – love was important in his life."

I looked down into his mother's face and managed a faint smile. She acknowledged it with the slightest nod.

"I think he'd want to hear that we enjoyed his company and that very dry wit of his. He was a quiet person so when he did speak we all tended to listen. He had good ideas. He wanted the world to be a good place for us to live and grow and raise our own families someday. I think he'd want to hear us say that we appreciated what a good person he was deep down in his heart and how that helped us all to become better people. We will all miss his presence among us. Because we have known him, however, we will all carry a little part of him with us forever. His mother raised a fine young man of whom

she can be proud. He was so fortunate to have her at his side.”

I hadn't cried. I thought I would. It wasn't that the tears weren't there ready to spill down my cheeks, but the group needed to see strength – an indication that life would continue for all of us. So, I waited until I was alone to unleash them.

Immediately after the close of the service I went in search of a young man who had slipped in late and sat in the back row. He cried quietly to himself, apparently more affected by my words than the rest had been. I had never seen him before and wondered how he and Andrew had come to know each other. A friend from a former school, perhaps. Of all of those present, *his* expression seemed to reach out toward me as if needing my help the most. By the time I reached the rear of the church, he was nowhere to be found. In the privacy of the restroom I became invisible and flew high in search of him. Not enough time had passed that he could have walked out of sight. Even so, he was nowhere to be seen.

He could have left in a car or cab, of course. For some reason, I felt a great need to comfort him. I was probably letting my imagination play tricks on me. I was upset and I didn't like being upset. I wasn't used to being upset. I didn't allow myself to become upset. It never helped. Still, there I was cruising over the city at 500 feet *being upset*. The pigeons better watch out!

I began my descent and scanned the area for an alley in which to land and materialize. I was drawn toward one near the school; something seemed wrong. I slowed and hovered overhead until I could grasp the situation. There appeared to be a robbery in progress. Three young men had a well-dressed man and woman cornered near a Dumpster.

One was holding a gun to the woman's head as the others gathered watches, jewelry, and the man's wallet. It was one of my first experiences in a situation involving a gun. The only other time, I'd been shot in the stomach, so I proceeded with extreme caution. They spoke with foul mouths and were making indecent advances toward the woman. A Time-X would buy me time although I couldn't actually do anything to them when they were in that state – or could I?

I put the couple into a two-minute Time-X and put the

teenagers away for five. I pulled the couple several feet to the west and stood them up against the Dumpster. Then I gathered the stolen items from the boys and deposited them in the woman's shoulder purse.

With my hands under the man's arms from the rear, I pulled him to opposite end of the alley and sat him against the back wall of a building. I then repeated that process with the woman. I knew they would be confused about the unexplainable turn of events when they returned to real time, but it was the best I could do. I returned to the bad guys. They were out of the couple's sight behind the Dumpster. I wanted to make a point with them about their terrible behavior, but wasn't sure how to do it.

I searched their wallets for names and addresses and memorized them. As I was replacing their possessions an idea struck me. More confusion couldn't be a bad thing, could it?

The couple came around and immediately left the area. I could only imagine the story they'd have to tell.

I placed the wallets, necklaces, watches, and rings from two of the boys into the pockets of the one holding the gun and then turned him so the gun was pointed just behind the head of one of the others – I wouldn't want it to fire by accident and hit the kid. I made sure one of the boys' necklaces was draped out of a shirt pocket so it would be seen immediately.

I hoped it would insert a problem of trust among the three of them. Once the covenant of trust is broken, it can never, really, fully return. A good reason to *never* do anything to compromise it – friends, brothers and sisters, parents.

I moved to a ledge some 30 feet above and behind them, waiting to see what happened. I didn't have to wait long; their Time-X expired.

"Hey! What the? Watch where you're pointin' that gun, you fool."

"What happened? Where'd they go? Why do you have my necklaces hangin' outta your pocket?"

There was immediate shoving, which soon led to flying fists and wrestling each other to the ground. I moved in, invisibly, and picked up the gun from where it had fallen. Later I'd drop it into the ocean. Its oily smell sent chills up my spine.

Also, later, I would investigate the three of them further – determine their living situations, circle of friends, school and such things so I could begin a plan to put them on the right track. Continuing as they were they'd surely end up in jail – or dead – not to mention all the problems they would cause for others. I felt sorry for them. At last I had the kind of upset feeling I could do something about. That was better – much better.

I left before the three boys had beaten each other to a pulp, but felt quite certain they would. I really wasn't in favor of punishment as a means of changing behavior, but in this case I wouldn't intervene. It seemed all they understood.

I flew with the gun several miles out to sea, unloaded it, and dropped it all safely to a depth of several hundred feet. It was only one gun out of the hands of one small set of hoodlums, but if that saved just one life or prevented one robbery I would be proud that I had removed it from easy reach of the bad guys.

As I headed back across the wharfs I noticed a number of police cars, lights twirling, parked several blocks north of my loft. I brought myself to within easy listening range.

"The owner of the salvage company reports he was knocked out from behind," a uniformed policeman was telling a plain-clothes detective.

"Has he determined if anything is missing?"

"Still going through his inventory. May take another hour or so."

The detective nodded and dismissed the squad cars. Criminal activity was one of the few things that really made me angry. I'd had my share of it that day. Since the detective seemed to have things under control I left for the Hall, speeding in a perfect high arc directly onto my couch.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Not Such A 'Grave' Situation After All

Several weeks passed. I continued to learn about the human mind – *minding* as the Sage preferred to think of it. I practiced giving my Deep Mind “assignments” to work on while I slept at night.

In one of the more interesting of those assignments I asked: “How could someone’s thoughts follow me through a solid wall?”

When I asked the question, I didn’t really expect much help because I couldn’t be sure how much about my Calibrator powers my mental Filter had let my Deep Mind come to know. Apparently, plenty.

Several mornings later I awoke with an interesting explanation on the tip of my mind. It went like this: At the moment, I left the bunker through the solid cement wall, Antipathy sent me *the* message as a mind seep aimed at the positive end of my Integrity Path. It couldn’t *take hold* in my mind because it was from Antipathy who can only deposit negative seeps. By the time it bounced off me and back toward Antipathy, however, I was already outside the bunker and heading for the surface. Since it couldn’t bounce back to him through the wall and water, it was sucked along in my wake as I sped upward. At the surface, it was freed into the world.

Apparently two people received the message. Andrew whose biological connection with his father allows such seeps to be deposited within him, and the Sage whose powers can accomplish things none of the rest of us can.

I would keep searching for other options, of course, but the event certainly demonstrated everything the Sage had said about the capabilities of the Deep Mind. I nicknamed mine TDM for *Tommy's Deep Mind*. Suddenly "he" seemed like one of my best friends.

* * *

The program at the retirement home – *Shady Rest* – grew to include over two-dozen kids. It was written up in a social workers' magazine and similar programs began popping up all over the country. Young people and old people were naturally healing each other. What a wonderful thing to have helped start – and all from a simple mind seep, well-planted.

I dropped in on Mrs. Parker several times a week. In fact, she's just now buzzed me upstairs.

"Morning, Mrs. P." I said as we lingered over our usual hug.

"They'll be sticky biscuits out of the oven in two minutes. You timed things pretty well."

She attempted a smile that hardly worked. She sighed.

"Milk or juice?" she asked as I took a seat at the kitchen table.

"Milk, thank you."

"The past several nights I've had strange ... dreams, I guess you'd call them," she said testing the biscuits by inserting a broom straw to make sure the center had baked through.

"Dreams? Strange how?" I asked.

"It's like I feel Andrew's presence here in the apartment. It happened last night and this morning the door to his room was shut – I always leave it open. It helps me feel closer to him. I'm just as sure as I can be that it was open when I went to bed last night."

Ideas began to spin in my head, but I didn't offer any of *them* as possible explanations.

"A draft, perhaps. It was windy last night," I said. "Have you noticed anything missing from the apartment – like if it might have been a burglar?"

"No. And, I actually don't go into Andrew's room often so I couldn't say about things in there. Would you take a look for me? It's still really hard to go in."

“Sure. I doubt if I’ll know if anything’s missing though. I really wasn’t in there very often.”

I went to his room as Mrs. Parker drizzled icing on the biscuits. As I assumed, I had no way of knowing if anything was missing. Well, there was one thing, but I would not share it with Mrs. Parker. Not yet, at least. The small piece of wallpaper I had pasted over the hole Andrew had so carelessly burned through the wall with his laser vision had been removed. I searched the floor to see if it had come unglued and fallen. It wasn’t there.

I pulled out the dresser from behind which I had originally cut the tiny piece to use in disguising the damage. It had been reglued in place. I replaced the dresser. Only two people in the entire history of mankind knew about that – I was one and Andrew the other – well, probably Gus, also, but he was strictly an observer. What was going on?

I thought back over my visits those past several weeks since Andrew’s accident. I had been in the room only once. It had been a particularly chilly morning and, having been in a hurry, I had flown, invisibly and therefore comfortably warm, in my short-sleeve shirt. Mrs. Parker insisted I select one of Andrew’s sweaters and made a present of it to me. I specifically remember the patch was in place at that time because I smiled about it. That meant Andrew had not removed it *before* his death. Like I said, *What* was going on?

I returned to the kitchen.

“Nothing missing that I can tell. You do keep the apartment doors locked, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes. This is the city. Locks have to be a way of life. I hate that but it’s how things are here.”

“I’ve heard that dreams like that are not uncommon after losing a loved one – seeing them, feeling their presence and such,” I said. “They’ll probably soon stop.”

We enjoyed the treat together – my three to her one. They were delicious!

“About Andrew’s clothes,” she said. “I’d like you to take whatever you want. What’s left I’ll give to The Salvation Army Store.”

“Maybe you should delay that a bit. Like you say, you still get some comfort from being able to look in and see his

room as it is. Why not just leave it alone for a bit longer. Next month I'll come up and help you. I imagine that by then you'll be more ready to go through his stuff and make those kinds of decisions."

She nodded and patted my hand. I left after another lingering hug and walked the several blocks to Amy's stand.

"What'll it be this morning, Tommy?" she asked.

Just wondered if I could look at your paper. Just had breakfast."

"Sure. Going to read about that drug lord killing last night I suppose."

"Drug lord killing? I guess I hadn't heard."

She handed me the paper, pointing to the headline on the front page. I read on. The death had been gruesome – not a typical hit. Somebody had been out to either take revenge or make a point to the other suppliers. I put in a mental call to Gus who strolled up a few seconds later.

"Hear about this yet?" I asked.

He took the paper and nodded.

"And that's only half the story. Since that paper went to press there has been a second murder of a second major drug dealer."

"Let me guess; both had been working Antipathy's old territory."

"Exactly," Gus said, proudly surprised at my response.

Although Amy had not followed our conversation she understood enough to offer her caution to us.

"Now you two kids be careful!"

We were soon flying along at over 100 miles an hour headed for the bunker. It was somehow humorous to see Gus nibbling on his bagel as two Calibrators sped at top speed on their way to check on the world's most evil villain.

It was immediately obvious; Antipathy *had* escaped. A hole had been cut – probably with a jack hammer – in the south wall.

"How could he have withstood the tremendous water pressure?" I asked as we surfaced, hovering there to put our heads together about it.

"There were pressure suits in the bunker, remember, in case the integrity of the room was ever compromised by an

earthquake or some other natural phenomenon.”

I remembered. Someone who knew *that* had come to Antipathy’s rescue. There was, of course, only one answer – Andrew – and yet I saw him blown to smithereens in the boating accident. Unless it was, as I had once thought, a diversion. The difference would have been that he had somehow escaped before the explosion. He wanted us to think he was dead so we would relax our guard and he could rescue his father. If that had been his plan, it seemed to have worked. It had bought him two weeks after receiving the message from his father to research the bunker and formulate a plan. I imagined the robbery at the salvage company had been committed by Andrew and was for the purpose of getting the deep diving equipment and other tools he needed.

What I couldn’t understand was how Andrew could put his mother through such a terrible ordeal. Unless, she was a part of the diversion. I doubted that, but it was an option we had to consider.

“So, how do we proceed?” I asked, then began an answer before giving Gus a chance. “I’d like to see who has been going through the records about the bunker at the National Archives. If it was Andrew it’s a whole new ballgame, but at least we’ll have a better idea of what we’re up against.”

“Good plan. You look into that and I’ll scout the city for signs of the two of them.”

We parted.

By noon I was inside the library directing my boyish charms toward the librarian who had helped me gain access to the records months before. Her name was Miss Tome and again she proved to be very helpful. I got the idea she had an eye for teenage guys. She disclosed that someone else had been interested in the records and described him in greater detail than I could have possibly wanted to hear. Ten minutes later I was satisfied it was Andrew.

That sent my emotions on a roller-coaster ride. He was alive and *that* was wonderful. He was aiding Antipathy and *that* was terrible. He was probably doing so because he was in the clutches of some mind-control method used by his father so that might let him off the hook in the long run. On the other hand he had earlier convinced me of his devotion to Antipathy,

and of his thorough hatred of the Calibrators in general and me in particular. His poor mother, but I would deal with that later. I needed to focus my attention.

I seeped Gus and got his location. We met on the roof of City Hall. I told him what I had learned. It was how we both knew it had to be. It also just might explain the mystery of the wallpaper in Andrew's room. *Explain* may be the wrong word. What purpose would have been served by doing it? There were only the two of us who knew about it. To change it after his faked death either had to be some sort of signal to me, or just setting up some huge mystery to pester me from beyond his "grave." It most certainly could be the latter – one more way of getting to me – upsetting me – making me more vulnerable.

If it had not been designed for *that* purpose, then it probably had to be a signal or sign of some kind. What? Just to let me know he was alive? Why and why *me*? It should be his mother he was telling. Again, unless she really knew. It was a mystery.

I just couldn't believe that Andrew would be a party to such grisly murders. His contention to me had always been that his father was an honest businessman and the ruthless Calibrators had it in for him. Antipathy had certainly been able to convince him of that. He would now just need to keep the boy sheltered from the actual nature of his business and the violence. It made sense that Andrew would not have known about the murders unless he had been convinced those men were working for the Calibrators. Under those circumstances, Andrew just might have become his willing partner.

Gus agreed with the options I had spun and had a suggestion of his own.

"We need to get that bunker repaired immediately so it will be ready to receive Antipathy again when we catch him."

I liked his optimism!

He put in a mental call to several Calibrators who immediately set about rebuilding and reinforcing the bunker. I wasn't sure how we would get Antipathy inside but figured Gus had a plan. And what about Andrew? Was he to be bottled up down there forever as well – if we found him to be

an actual co-conspirator?

"I hadn't thought of it before, but we can follow Andrew's homing beacon – the one you implanted some time ago," I said. "Thinking he was dead I've had no reason to listen for it recently."

"Antipathy may have discovered it and taken steps to deactivate it," Gus cautioned. "But, give it a try."

"Loud and clear. Follow me," I said lifting off in a northeasterly direction.

It took several slight course corrections, but we were finally circling a warehouse on the dock a mile or so from where Antipathy had originally worked.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Let's try to get a peek at what's going on in there. I'd recommend we remain invisible. It's always possible that Antipathy discovered Andrew's homing signal and he's using it *now* just to lure us here."

"An option I hadn't figured," I said, very glad Gus was there at that moment."

We tried to look in the windows but they had been painted on the inside so we couldn't see in. We tried the doors; they had no windows. Gus pointed up and we met on the roof.

"Skylights," he suggested.

There were a dozen and three were open to let the heat escape. We soon determined how things were laid out inside.

"You take that skylight," Gus said pointing. "I'll enter through this one. Once inside remain invisible. We'll stay on opposite sides of the building in case Antipathy has some way of finding us. Clearly, he can sense you – he did it in the bunker. Since that may be in some way connected to the process of Farjumping through the wall, we'll do this the old-fashioned way."

So it was that we entered through the skylights. Andrew was sleeping on a cot in the office at the rear. Antipathy was speaking with three rough-looking men near the front at the truck entrance. They soon left in a car that had been parked inside.

There were stacks of boxes along both sides of the huge, open room that comprised the major part of the building.

I assumed they contained drugs. I motioned to Gus that I was going down to take a look. I lit out of sight between two large stacks and counted on Gus to warn me if danger approached.

They were marked "Gift Products" and had Indonesian origins on the labels. I cut one box open with my pocket knife. It contained vases. I cut the hole large enough to remove one for examination. I hefted it. It was too heavy and, looking in from the opening, the inside was too shallow. I was sure that indicated a hollow area toward the bottom filled with some heavy substance. I slid it inside my shirt and flew back toward the ceiling indicating the bulge to Gus.

Antipathy had sensed my presence and moved immediately to the office where he picked up a flame thrower. He didn't light it. He looked directly at my position on a beam – although he couldn't actually see me. Then he aimed the device at Andrew's head and nodded in my direction, an arrogant sneer overtaking his face.

Gus indicated we needed to leave and leave fast. Once outside Gus continued on several blocks before landing on a roof. I was soon standing beside him and we materialized.

"I didn't want to leave any doubt with Antipathy that you were really gone. I have no idea at what distance he begins being able to sense your presence."

I understood and took out the vase indicating to Gus my hunch.

"Hollow bottom filled with drugs, I imagine."

"We'll take it to Calibrator Chem. He's the expert on such things. Antipathy has upped the ante, you know," he said.

"The threatening gesture toward Andrew, you mean?"

Gus nodded. "And don't think for a second he would not carry through and harm the boy. This one time his ruthless reputation works in his favor. I do not doubt his intention and his willingness to carry it out. Knowing of our reverence for life, he has figured exactly how to play us."

"Didn't it seem odd to you that Andrew was sleeping?" I said.

"Very odd unless he was out all night bumping off his father's competition."

"You don't believe that, do you?" I asked.

“It’s an option we have to entertain even if it may seem remote. The boy’s a good actor – we saw that at the first pool party he attended – all outgoing and fun-loving until his attack on you failed and then he grumped about and left.”

I remembered. All along it had been Antipathy’s strategy to keep Andrew on his side by building himself up as the good guy and making the Calibrators out to be the bad guys. He understood the good heart his son possessed and that only by subterfuge would he be able to maintain his loyalty. Andrew clearly loved his father, an emotion – interestingly – that his father was incapable of experiencing. Surely Antipathy knew that sooner or later Andrew would find him out. At that time the boy would become as disposable as a used tissue during flu season.

“Antipathy could be keeping Andrew doped or in a trance when he doesn’t want him around,” I suggested.

“Sound possibilities,” Gus said nodding. “Let’s get this sample to Chem. We need some time to strategize.”

“Antipathy will soon discover that my sample here is missing,” I noted.

“He feels invincible now that we know his intentions for Andrew,” Gus said. “That’s probably why he hasn’t tampered with the homing signal – if he can, in fact, do anything about it.”

“You mean he *wanted* us to find them so he could show us what he’d do to Andrew if we were to move against Antipathy. It was his way of demonstrating that he was now capture-proof.”

“Right. He wanted to establish that he suddenly has the upper hand, and it certainly gives him that.”

Within a minute, we were back at Calibrator Hall. Chem was in the lab and within minutes knew what the vase contained. He drilled a hole, tapped a little out into his palm, rolled some between his fingertips, smelled, and tasted it.”

“Pure opium from Afghanistan by way of Indonesia, I believe.”

“It’s probably from poppy fields Antipathy paid farmers to grow in the first place,” Gus said.

“They’d do that?”

“It is one of the poorest countries on Earth, Tommy,”

Chem pointed out. “They can make 10 times what they could growing any other crop. They have to do whatever it takes to be able to feed and clothe their families. Many of them hate us here in the States to begin with, so they certainly have no moral issue or no matter of conscience about helping to provide a substance that will contribute to our death as a society.”

I knew there were lots of folks around the world who didn’t like us. I wasn’t sure why. I needed to research it. Some was about religion. Some was about foreign policy. Some was probably personality conflicts among leaders. I felt just terrible that people in other places disliked us so much. I would have to redouble my efforts to be the best Calibrator *and* human being I could possibly be.

I wanted to go to Andrew’s mother and let her know that her son was alive and well, but circumstances wouldn’t allow me to do that – not yet. It disturbed me that she had to go on grieving needlessly. So many people were being hurt. It was impossible to believe Andrew would have willingly been a participant in such a horrendous deed. At that point it was impossible for me to figure how Antipathy had been able to convince, cajole, or command Andrew to cooperate in his plan.

Several things *were* clear, however. Andrew loved his father – as it should be – and believed without any doubt Antipathy’s story about the evilness of the Calibrators. Convinced of my part in the plot against his father, Andrew had been willing to kill me to protect him – not a totally unnatural reaction, I suppose. Andrew loved his mother and would not intentionally hurt her. It was between those last two sentences that something went terribly wrong. If Antipathy had convinced Andrew to do me in, could he not just as well have convinced him to murder the two drug dealers? It made me shudder.

I understood that intense emotions could sometimes override a person’s basic beliefs and values – like mobs of good people doing terrible things that none of the participants would have ever allowed himself to do under other circumstances. Perhaps it was some emotional trigger that Antipathy was using to force his son to commit acts that surely

went against his basic beliefs of right and wrong.

It seemed that Antipathy was a master at manipulating the Deep Minds of others – manipulating them with no regard for the welfare of anyone, but himself. Like I said before, *I believe selfishness is the most the powerful evil force in the universe.* This only reinforced my opinion!

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

On the Move

During the next several days Gus and I took turns keeping Antipathy in sight. He never allowed himself to be more than a few yards away from his son. Andrew had made no more visits to his apartment and seemed a virtual prisoner of his father – although it appeared Andrew judged it to just be good, quality, father-son time. There was no indication from Andrew that he felt constrained in any way.

They ate at the best restaurants in the evenings and a supply line of fast food was always at the ready for Andrew during the day. They set up an apartment, of sorts, in part of the warehouse with beds, a couch, TV, shower, microwave, a weight set, and other conveniences that made it very livable for a couple of guys. Andrew spent his time there, sometimes helping load and unload trucks as they came and went.

We arranged for the police to begin taking over the trucks once they were loaded and left the warehouse. At first, in order to see how Antipathy would react, only every 10th truck was stopped. We felt pretty sure he would not play his big card with Andrew over something like that, but needed to make certain. He could only use it once so needed to save it until his own safety or freedom was threatened. Soon, none of his trucks were getting to their destinations. Antipathy was clearly enraged at the turn of events. It was a situation he had not envisioned when he formed his “upper hand” plan, which used Andrew’s life as his ace in the hole.

Early Thursday morning a limo carrying Antipathy, Andrew and two other men – bodyguards I assumed – left the

warehouse and headed north out of the city. I was on watch and alerted Gus while I followed from overhead.

The car entered the wooded preserve and turned onto a little-used side road that ran through the thickest part of the forest. Although I would lose track of the car for a second now and then, I had been able to stay with it. Once out of the woods it turned north again and followed the highway along the coast. Two hours passed and still it headed north. Something made me suspicious.

I descended, invisibly, so I could see into the car. The chauffeur was alone! The back seats were empty. I had been tricked. I backtracked at high speed, alerting Gus to my problem. He was soon at my side.

“It happened in the woods,” I said, having thought through all the possibilities. Somewhere in there when they were out of sight for a few seconds they exited the limo. They undoubtedly had another vehicle waiting and took off in another direction. I’ve tried to read Andrew’s homing signal, but I get nothing. I guess you were right about Antipathy being able to tamper with it in some way. I feel terrible.”

“Don’t kick yourself. Anyone of us could have been fooled,” Gus said trying to reassure me.

“If I’d only kept track of the homing beacon I would have known when things went wrong – either when Antipathy turned it off or when I could tell that it was no longer coming from the limo. I feel so dumb! Dumb! Dumb! Dumb!”

“When you’ve beaten yourself up sufficiently, we need to put together a plan to find them,” Gus said, bringing my focus back to the real problem. I felt sheepish about my own self-centeredness in the matter.

“I’m back. Sorry!”

“So, where do we begin?” he asked, thinking out loud and pointing to a park below.

We landed and materialized. As we walked the grounds we talked.

“Since the warehouse plan fizzled, how else might Antipathy proceed?” Gus asked. “Regardless of where he lands, eventually we’ll find a pattern of truck movement in and out and locate him. Maybe the plan is to move the operation often. That would involve a huge amount of manpower,

though, and Antipathy's approach has always been to involve as few as possible. The fewer lips, the less likely there will be leaks."

Suddenly, I had a strange mental image from a very unlikely source – TV. I almost never watched, but during one Christmas season I slept over at a friend's house – I was probably 10 – and we watched a movie titled something like *Robin and the Seven Hoods*. In it, a small-time criminal (with a good-natured streak) used a large semi-truck for his office. He had it all set up with carpeting, chairs, couch, tables, beds – just like a mini-apartment on wheels. By always being on the move, the authorities were never able to get a fix on him. It was a very clever ploy, I thought. Apparently old TDM (Tommy's Deep Mind) thought so as well. He sent me the memory in response to my questions about how Antipathy might try to hide on the run. I shared the possibility with Gus, who liked it well enough to offer a long series of nods.

"Why don't you pursue that option, Tommy, while I look into some other possibilities? We'll compare notes back in our room this evening."

I nodded. Gus disappeared. I followed suit, needing to devise a search plan. I hovered high above the city to get a feel for the general traffic pattern. One thing soon became obvious; trailer trucks stayed on the main, wide thoroughfares for as long as they possibly could before having to turn off onto the narrower, harder to navigate, side streets to make deliveries and pickups. That gave me my plan. I'd watch for a semi that didn't follow that pattern – one that circled or wove its way through the area in which Antipathy had been operating. I could expand that to the areas of the newly deceased drug lords, if I needed to.

Of course, it was all a hunch and might just be a wild goose chase. I wondered what ideas Gus was following up on. I noticed Antipathy's old warehouse was being raided by the police – half a dozen squad cars surrounded it. He undoubtedly had other stashes and had probably found some way to move out what had been there. Without a central warehouse, I figured that the supplies would have to go directly from the ships at the dock to the distributors. That would be harder to trace, but also harder to organize.

Antipathy was less in it for the money and more just to inflict the long-term devastating effect drugs had on the people of the city. Addicts became single-minded in their efforts to obtain the drugs. Their work was affected, riddled with absenteeism. Their families were affected by the loss of income. The communities became less safe – more dangerous, really – as young addicts without work took to robbery and mugging to obtain the money they needed. It may have been the motivation behind the robbery attempt I foiled the day of the memorial service.

Presently, I spotted a truck that looked suspicious. It had six skylights across the top. I followed it for some time as it circled the area never stopping to make deliveries or pickups. If I'd been a betting kind of person, I'd have bet that I had found what I was looking for. I seeped a message to Gus who joined me immediately. I pointed out the truck and told him what I'd observed.

"Well, skylights were good to us at the warehouse," he said. "Let's see if we can get a look inside through these. On second thought, let *me* go down alone. If it *is* Antipathy, I don't want him to get a sense that you're in the area. I don't want him to know we're onto his plan."

I agreed, though my impatience showed. It seemed to take Gus forever. I paced back and forth on a low-hanging cloud. When he returned he approached with a thumbs up. I had mixed feelings about being beholden to a TV program, but they passed. The trailer had been remodeled into two rooms. The one at the front was living and sleeping quarters and the smaller one to the rear was Antipathy's office. It was Gus's hunch that the dividing wall served to shield Andrew from the phone conversations that would have made his father's dealings suspect. How the truck thing had been explained to Andrew – in order to make it seem reasonable – remained to be determined. Perhaps something about the vicious Calibrators making an all-out assault on him.

I often wondered what Andrew really thought about *me*. Certainly, he must have mixed feelings – some doubts about his father's accusations. I treated him kindly and had never made an unfriendly move toward him. I had saved his life. I had demonstrated my confidence in him when I enlisted his

help in saving the old man's life. He had witnessed the positive way in which I interacted with others. Even though he had repeatedly tried to kill me, I had never retaliated – sought revenge. It was hard to figure how such a bright kid could possibly not understand that I was a good guy. AND, if I was a good guy, then the Calibrators as a group would have to be good guys.

To believe that would define his father as a liar, I suppose, and his newly found relationship with his newly found father was so precious to him that some part of him (perhaps his Deep Mind) would not let him believe the obvious. His mental Filter must have been working overtime.

We would continue surveillance on Antipathy, but in case we lost him a second-time Gus had wedged a piece of his own fingernail into a crack in the roof and activated its DNA to act as a makeshift, short-distance beacon we could follow. I continued to be amazed at everything I still DIDN'T know about the Calibrators and our abilities. It was fantastic!

I was also amazed at how much I missed Abby. It seemed I hadn't been spending much time with her.

It was going on the dinner hour by the time Gus and I were relieved and returned to Calibration Hall. I was quickly into my blue silks and down to the dining room. Abby was clearly as happy to see me as I was her. I gave her a quick peck to the lips, really wanting much more, but we tempered such things in public. Kissing – I mean *really kissing* – was a private matter between us.

After dinner, we went for a walk to our private place among the trees and did some real kissing, but mostly we sat in the grass and talked. I held her close and we leaned our heads together. We liked it that way. It was just close enough and easily allowed for both conversation and occasional kisses.

We had a comfortable *two-way* relationship. By that I mean we each worked hard to make our relationship wonderful for the other one. I figured that was how it should be between friends and especially between the kind of boy-girl friends we were.

If I had any problem about things between us it was that I couldn't share my Calibrator life with her and I could see

that most of my life was going to be taken up with Calibrator activities. Because of that, I tried to make our times together fun and meaningful, memorable and personal. We talked about life and how we wanted to live it. She was aware of Andrew's "death" and it prompted some long discussions about how we would each want to be remembered and how we had to go about living our lives each and every day so we would, in fact, be remembered in those ways.

We talked about how we had each been raised and how we would do things the same and differently with our own children. It was probably the most important understanding a couple needed to have between them. Sometimes those talks made it appear we were planning for the time after we were married, though we both realized it was unlikely we *would* marry. We each had lots of people yet to meet and learn about before it would be time for us to consider settling into a permanent, man-woman relationship.

I have to admit I think about how it would be to be married to Abby. Not just the physical stuff, which I also have to admit I think about, but just planning and living our lives together. About how it would be when she grew old and I didn't. It was frightening to think about losing her. I tried to take the Sage's view on that and concentrate on the wonderful experiences we would have together. Memories that could never be lost. I would have the opportunity to make whatever years she had to live, wonderful ones. It would be hard to ask for more than that.

By 9:30, I was back in my room into my towel and studying on the couch. Gus had been elsewhere and appeared in his chair an hour later.

"Out courting the pretty ladies?" I asked, giggling to myself.

"That's for me to know and you to find out," he came back quickly, spreading his cheek-to-cheek smile. "You were with Abby, I assume?"

"Yup. Abby and her lips."

Again, I giggled, closing my book.

"The details would probably be boring to such a worldly man as you," I added, turning onto my side so I was facing him.

“I can’t recall ever having been bored by kissing,” he said, putting his index finger to his cheek, pretending deep thought.

His eyes twinkled. I liked that about him. He had not forgotten how it was to be learning about romantic things for the first time. That it was exciting. That it presented new sets of fantastic feelings and reactions. That it required a new kind of self-discipline that often strained the limits of my self-control when I was alone with Abby. I loved growing up in those ways. I was proud of how I was handling it all.

I knew there was nothing about it that I couldn’t ask Gus. Every kid needed somebody like that. I felt fortunate I had such a reliable and knowledgeable friend. All that lots of kids have are other kids who *really* don’t know any more than they do. Worse still, many of them have downright incorrect information to share and that can be dangerous – deadly, even.

I brought my thoughts back to the mission at hand – recapturing Antipathy without endangering Andrew.

“Any ideas about how we can proceed?” I asked.

“Divide and conquer would seem the best general plan. We have to separate the two of them if we are going to have any chance at Antipathy without endangering Andrew.”

“I’ve been thinking along those lines, too. That won’t happen easily now that Antipathy has set things up the way he has. The two of them even go into the restroom together at restaurants.”

Silence ensued. We both seemed at a loss. I had an idea.

“We could slip something into their food that would make them so sick they’d have to go to a hospital. Then we might be able to rescue Andrew and trap Antipathy.”

Just as soon I dismissed the idea.

“Their self-healing powers are too great to allow that to work. They’d never need that kind of care.”

Gus nodded.

“I suppose the same would happen if we used some kind of knock-out drops.”

Again, he nodded.

“And,” I continued, “Even if we get them separated, how

are we going to actually capture Antipathy?"

"I may have that covered. Chem has been working on something I think should work, provided we can keep Antipathy distracted for just a few extra seconds. In the past, with only himself to consider, he could jump himself out of our grasp. Now, since he has to also deal with Andrew, we should gain that extra time to achieve a capture. Chem's device should cinch it."

"What is it?" I asked sitting up and twirling my finger, hoping to speed up Gus's delivery.

"It's a metallic net-like bag. It can be dropped over him and the opening then closed with a metal belt."

"Strong enough, I assume," I said. "Antipathy is very strong."

"Strong enough. Chem is using an alloy that was developed for use on the most advanced aircraft and space vehicles. It will even survive his laser vision."

"Sounds like it should work, all right. Andrew won't just stand by and let us abduct his father, though, you know. He'll put up a fight, and with his own laser eyes as weapons it could turn into a disaster."

Gus nodded, but said no more on the topic.

"I'm going to shower and hit the sack," he said. "I have the feeling sleep may become a precious commodity during the next several days."

As I stretched out on my bunk I began thinking about the three kids who had attempted the robbery. I'd been so busy I hadn't got back to them. If I could siphon off a few minutes the next day, I'd look into it. I had forgotten one of their names and address. I put my new pal, TDM, to work on it and was soon asleep.

* * *

"Billy Cortez, 921 East Hampton," I said aloud as I awoke the following morning.

"What? Who? Gus asked. Uncharacteristically, he was up before me and had just finished dressing for breakfast.

"The name of one of the boys who tried to mug that couple the day of Andrew's memorial service. Forgot his name so put TDM to work on it last night."

"TDM? You're full of strangely coded verbiage this

morning.”

“TDM – a nickname I gave *Tommy’s Deep Mind*. He’s become like a real person to me.”

“He *is* a real person, of course,” Gus said. “He *IS* *Tommy Powers*.”

“Oh! Yes! Wow! Interesting! Fascinating, even!”

Gus shook his head at my enthusiastic reaction to his revelation. Then he spoke, referring back to my first words that morning.

“Sounds like unfinished business.”

“Yeah. I want to see what can be done to get them out of the antisocial rut they’ve cut for themselves.”

“Be careful!”

It sounded like an order filled with concern for my welfare. I didn’t dwell on it, but it would re-invade my thoughts several times that day.

As it turned out, I had several hours right after breakfast to begin my investigation of the three kids. Abby’s father was on Antipathy watch until 10 when Gus and I would take over.

I flew to Amy’s stand and “forced down” a blueberry bagel with cream cheese. Then it was off to the boys’ neighborhood, about a mile south of the school. I looked in on each one briefly to get a sense of how they lived. At seven in the morning they all were still sound asleep. Al lived with his single mother and younger brother. They were clearly poor as church mice, as the saying goes. Billy and his dad shared two rooms in a rundown tenement. From the collection of bottles there, I assumed there was a drinking problem. Carl lived with his older sister and her husband. I couldn’t immediately determine why.

The boys were all 17 and had dropped out of school at 16. None had a job. All had drug paraphernalia (equipment) in their rooms. It was hard to find any positive things in their lives to use as starting points.

The fact that Carl’s sister had taken him into her home suggested some positive family bond there – *how* strong was yet to be determined, but perhaps that would be a start. He also had a picture of a girl on his bedside table. That also held possibilities. I figured that having one girl stick with him long enough for him to get an 8-by-10 color photo meant he had

more than a few positive qualities.

I was interested that there wasn't a single book in any of the three apartments. I had noticed it before. Homes that produced kids in trouble often had few books. There were dozens of possible reasons, but I figured there was some connection to reading. I had also seen equally poor homes that *did* have books and *did not* produce troubled kids, so it was something more than just the economic status of the family. The ability and desire to read in order to gain information – literacy – played some part in it all.

So, I had three unemployed dropouts from broken homes, who had problems with drugs, and perhaps alcohol, and who chose not to read. Had I really said that I *enjoyed* challenges? I returned to Amy's Bagel Stand.

"Do you know the old gentleman who runs the paper and magazine stand at the corner of Hampton and 69th Street?" I asked.

"Charlie. That's probably why it's called Charlie's News Stand," she answered, her eyes twinkling as she teased me. "Don't recall I ever knew his last name. Nice guy. In his late 60s. Gets an onion bagel – split and toasted – on his way to work every morning."

"He ever hire help?"

"Can't say. I don't recall ever seeing anyone else there, but then I'm here all day and his place is well out of sight. Why are you so interested, if I may ask?"

"I know a kid or two that could benefit from a job in a place like that. *Charlie*, you say. May I use your name as a way of introducing myself?"

"Of course, you can, honey. He and I have known each other for years. He talks some of retiring. Not sure if he's serious. Has no family. He'd probably be bored to tears if he didn't go to work every day. Believe me, I know all about that."

I felt sorry for Amy when she said that, although she had not intended it that way. It just seemed such a shame that a relatively young lady, like her, should be spending her life alone.

I kissed her on her cheek and left to meet Charlie.

There was a surface gruffness about him that was immediately transparent. Underneath beat a soft heart. I was

honest with him about my proposition. Offer Carl a job and if it didn't work out let him go. I'd be good for anything the kid might steal or damage.

"Been thinkin' about retirin' someday. Be nice to have somebody to pass it all onto, you know. This Carl kid has problems I take it."

"You take it right. He'll mess up for sure at the beginning. Probably never had a job. May not trust you. He'll need some slack and lots of patience on your part, if it's to work in the long run."

"You know him well?"

"Not at all, in fact."

The old man giggled and wiped his nose, shaking his head.

"And yet you're here trying to help him out?"

"I'm known for doing odd things."

"Me too, by golly! The kids call me Crazy Charlie, ya know. On Christmas and the Fourth of July I give away my papers. Been known to chase cabs three blocks to return change to folks who rushed off without it. Sure. Why not? Nothing to lose and who knows what there may be to gain."

I liked his attitude. He could have been a Wharfie!

"I have no idea how I'm going to get him to come by. Even less idea how I'm going to get him to apply."

"I got a 'help wanted' sign around here somewhere. I'll have it ready and when I see the two of you coming I'll hang it up. Maybe that'll get him in the mood or give you a starting line."

"You're a gem, Charlie – crazy or not. If my plan fizzles and I can't get him here, I'll let you know."

"If it fizzles. maybe *you'd* be interested."

"Thanks, but I'm still busy with schoolwork and saving the world."

"I can see both of those things in you – just in the short time you've been here."

"Later, then," I said.

He nodded. We shook hands. I left.

Carl had a job! Of course, Carl didn't know he had a job. Carl might not want the job. Carl might be unhappy with me for rocking his boat by finding him a job. Nonetheless, Carl

had a job!

I supposed it was time Carl and I met – officially, that was.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Crazy Charlie, Meet Crazy Carl!

“Carl. You mean *Crazy Carl* down the hall?”

Those were the first words out of Mrs. Lippart’s mouth when I asked her about the boy. As a prop, I had borrowed a broom from the entryway downstairs, and was sweeping the hall when she entered the floor on her way to her room – a bag of groceries under her arm. I leaned the broom against the wall and offered help. She accepted it with some obvious suspicion as to my motives.

Within minutes, however, we were having tea at her kitchen table. I asked her about Carl and his family, telling her that I wanted to get to know the folks in the building before I decided whether or not to take the cleaning job.

“As a little kid – that’s when he lived with his mom upstairs – he’d do anything on a dare; eat insects and worms, run naked through the building, climb the flag pole on top of city hall. Once he even jumped off the third-floor fire escape – broke a leg and three ribs. He’s crazy – plain and simple.”

“He’s in school I suppose.”

“Dropped out along with his two good-for-nothing friends. Bums, the lot of ’em. Into bad things now, I’ll tell you that. Dope, guns ... bad stuff!”

“His sister and her husband?” I asked.

“Good folks. Both work steady. He’s a mechanic and she does nails at a beauty shop around the corner on Thompson Street. Going to Beauty College, I think. About eight months’ pregnant, now. She didn’t need to go and get pregnant. Marriage alone is tough enough at that age. They’re

just kids. Neither one's seen 20 yet."

"I missed why Carl lives with them instead of his mother."

"She had a stroke. In a charity hospital now. Lays there like a vegetable. She don't know nobody no more. I went to visit her a couple a times, but she don't respond, so I stopped goin'. Probably should. Just one a those things I oughta but don't."

"So, Carl's a rotten apple, is he?"

"He's always been strange but never really bad, you know – not until his ma got sick and he dropped out. It's like *bad* is all he's got now to occupy his time."

I asked about a few other tenants to make my initial story seem legitimate, then thanked her for the tea and excused myself.

I determined that Carl was finally up for the day and then put my plan into action. Mrs. Parker had also left her place for the morning so I flew the several blocks to her place. I let myself in – through the wall – and borrowed a suit and white shirt from Andrew's closet. I'd never worn a suit before and once into it could not for the life of me understand why anyone would choose to remain trapped inside such an uncomfortable garment all day long. The suit was brown – Andrew's color of choice – so I selected a blue clip-on tie to complete the outfit. Although my arm movements were severely restricted and I was being slowly strangled by the tight shirt collar, I had to admit the reflection in the mirror looked pretty fine.

I returned to the door of Carl's apartment. He was alone and answered the door in bare feet and boxers, as if expecting someone else.

"Who are *you*?" he asked frowning, looking up and down the hall.

"Powers is the name. I have a job for you."

He quickly ushered me inside and closed the door. An odd thing to do with a complete stranger, I thought.

"I misplaced my gun so ain't takin' jobs right now, unless you furnish what I'll need."

No. You misunderstood. I work for the city (not at all a fib, since I *did* volunteer my time). My responsibility is to get

jobs for dropouts like you. I assume you need money and I'll just forget what you've said up to this point."

"You look *younger* than me. How can *you* be workin' for the city?"

"Do you need a job or what?" I came back, putting on an irritated air and doing my best to appear older.

"I could use some dough. What kind of a job?"

"What kind of jobs have you had?"

"Never had one – not the kind you're talkin' about."

"It won't take long to write your resumé, at least."

Carl had no idea what I meant, but I thought it was hilarious. I controlled my urge to laugh and proceeded through a grin.

"No experience. Then, we'll have to find one that requires none. Probably won't pay much to begin with – that's how first jobs are. Do well at it though, so you can get a good recommendation – to include in your resumé – and your next one could be a lot better."

"This some kind a put-on? You show up here outta the blue and offer to get me a job."

"Do you want my help or not?"

I returned to my irritated approach. It seemed to have worked before. He shrugged.

"Sure. I'll look at it at least."

"Clean up. Comb your hair. Get dressed. Do what you can to make yourself look good."

"I got some really tight black leather pants?"

"Clean jeans would be better. We're going to a job interview, not an orgy."

He smiled. He didn't know *résumé*, but clearly, he knew *orgy*.

"You're okay, ya know. Give me 10 minutes. Coffee in the pot. Help yourself. May have to wash out a cup. In the sink, somewhere."

That was certainly my idea of the ideal way to start a day – endure the discomfort of a suit and stomach a revolting cup of coffee while ingesting germs of an unknown variety. I moved a pile of laundry and made room for myself on the couch in the cluttered living room. I could see into his room as there was no door on it.

When Carl next appeared, I was amazed. He looked *more* than acceptable. I suppose I was *most* amazed because he had actually been able to find clean, neat clothes in that hovel he called his room.

“So, do I pass inspection?” he said, turning around as if to make a joke about it.

“You look great. Let’s go. I’m on a short schedule this morning.”

The fact that he had not asked me to clarify the nature of the job could be taken several ways. Maybe he really wasn’t serious, but didn’t want to ruffle any official feathers. Maybe he was so desperate for work he’d take anything. Maybe he intended to shove me and my fancy suit into the nearest alley and mug me like he’d done the couple weeks before.

It was less than a five-minute walk during which I laid out one of the ground rules.

“There is a fee of sorts you have to pay if I get you a job.”

Carl slowed down and turned, looking me in the face.

“A fee? How much?”

“One a week for as long as you stay.”

“One? A hundred bucks is a lotta money. What ya tryin’ to pull?”

“Not money. One *book*.”

“What? You’re makin’ less and less sense, man.”

“You do know what a book is, right?”

“Of course, I do.”

“To keep the job, you have to read one book every week. The first week you get to choose any book you want to. The next week you read what your employer gives you. Then it’s your choice, then his. You alternate weeks like that.”

“I hate to read. I’m no good at it.”

“You any good at basketball?”

“Yeah! I can hold my own.”

“Were you always good at basketball?”

“Not when I was real little, I guess.”

“How did you get better?”

“I practiced. Oh. You’re a sneaky devil.”

“Been called worse.”

I smiled. So did Carl, but his seemed less genuine.

He cut to the chase.

“How you gonna know if I read ’em?”

“A one-page book report every Monday morning or you can’t come to work that week.”

“Do you know how long it’s gonna take me to read a book? I won’t have time to hang with my friends.”

“The friends you *mug* folks with? The friends who are going to lead you directly into juvenile hall? *Those* friends?”

He gave me a look but didn’t respond. I continued.

“Remember, every other book is *your* choice. I’ll set a 50-page minimum for the length. How many pages would that be a day?

“A little over seven,” he snapped back.

“My, you figured that in a hurry. Seems like you’ve been wasting all that gray matter recently.”

“Grey matter?”

“Brain power,” I explained. He nodded and shrugged. I hadn’t said anything he wasn’t aware of.

“Math was always easy. Readin’ and English was always hard.”

“I have a friend I want you to meet later on. His name is Marcus. In lots of ways he was in your same shoes this time last year, and he’s turned his life around. I’m sure he’ll do whatever he can to help you – if you’ll play straight with him.”

Again, a shrug. It hadn’t committed him to accepting the help, but neither had it rejected it.

We were at the news stand. The ‘Help Wanted’ sign was still swinging, indicating it hadn’t been in place very long.

“Charlie!” I said in greeting. “This is Carl. He’s looking for work and needs a break – no job references.”

Charlie looked him over like a woman selecting produce at the grocery store.

Carl grew visibly uncomfortable. He turned to me and spoke.

“I don’t think this’ll work out.”

“What?” I asked, hoping to hear more.

It was Charlie who answered, however. He spoke to me while looking into Carl’s eyes.

“He thinks there’s a problem because he robbed my place about a month ago.”

“You *know* that?” Carl said, puzzled.

“It was early morning, just before I got here. He took the change bucket under the counter. It’s the only money I ever leave here.”

“Change bucket?” I asked interested in the term.

“Folks toss their change in it – coins mostly – after they make a purchase. Once a week I take it over to the children’s hospital on Blair Street and give it to the head nurse in the cancer ward. She buys treats for the kids with it. I suppose they wondered why there wasn’t no treats that week.”

“If ya know’d it was me why didn’t ya turn me in to the cops?”

“Now that’s just what your sweet sister needs isn’t it? A mother in a coma, eight months’ pregnant, an ungrateful brother to take care of and then you carted off to juvenile hall. Believe me, it wasn’t fer *you*, Sonny! It was fer *her*.”

An uneasy, but apparently fruitful silence followed. Carl picked up several magazines and thumbed through them. He looked at the stacks of newspapers. He looked at me and pointed to the single rack of paperback books.

“Suppose there’s any little 50 pagers in there?” he asked.

He grinned faintly. It was Charlie’s turn to look puzzled. I explained the arrangement about reading. The old man nodded and flashed me a private wink as he selected three books from the display.

“Muscle cars, a miniwestern and a mystery – this last one’s a few pages over your limit of 50, but I really liked it.”

Carl took them from Charlie, first paging to the end to see how long they were.

“Not much into cars. I’ll try the western, I guess.”

“Sounds like you’ve decided to take the job without finding out what your duties will be,” I said.

He looked at Charlie and raised his eyebrows as if asking him to explain further.

“To begin with you’ll work 10 to 4 every day but Sunday.”

“Thirty-six hours a week,” Carl said, quickly figuring it. “Okay.”

“It’ll be minimum wage first three months. If you’re

doing good by then, we'll talk about a good-sized raise."

"Like another dollar an hour?" Carl asked.

"You gonna be *that* good, are you?"

"Can be if I decide ta be."

Charlie extended his hand.

"Start tomorrow?"

"Sure. I could sort of hang around today to see what I'll be doing."

"That's up to you. Pay don't start 'til tomorrow though."

Carl nodded.

"By the way," Charlie added, another wink in my direction. "That book's two bucks. I'll deduct it from your first week's pay if you want."

"Oh. Sure. Hadn't thought about that. 'Fraid I'm flat busted today."

As their conversation continued, I made my exit. I stopped half a block down the street and looked back. I could just hear the neighborhood gossip: '*Crazy Charlie hired Crazy Carl.*' I couldn't be certain how sincere Carl really was about it, but he seemed to be. I wondered how his "friends" might influence his decision and performance. I had the feeling that both Carl and Charlie were suddenly in good hands, however.

I could tell it was going to be a two-bagel morning for me. Gus was already at Amy's when I walked up.

"One to go, if I'm allowed a second," I said feeling the grin spread across my face – the grin that others referred to as my impish charm.

"Afraid you'll have to settle for blueberry and cream cheese," Amy came back, putting on a long face, joking, of course.

Gus stood back, obviously enjoying our banter. I could tell he was pleased to see our relationship growing into something more than just casual acquaintances.

Gus and I delivered a double whammy – a kiss on each of her cheeks at the same moment – and were then on our way across the park.

"You cut it pretty close," he said pointing to the clock on the nearby bank.

"Yes I did, which, of course means I *did* make it here in time – with a good 66 seconds to spare. You sound like you're

worried about me.”

“You need to realize that right now you are Antipathy’s number-one target. He knows about you, for sure, but not the rest of us – that is, he doesn’t have the specific information about us that he has about you. You’re the youngest – the least experienced. In every way you rank at the top of his hit list.”

“I’m aware of that. But with both of them under constant surveillance, I figured I was safer *off* duty than *on*.”

“Unless he’s devised some diabolical plan in which his henchmen will be able to do you in while *he* acts as the diversion.”

“Must admit I hadn’t thought of that,” I said. “I do believe I had a successful morning, however. Hitched up two crazy people who really need each other. I’ll fill you in later – or have you been tailing me all morning?”

“Me? Your Mentor. Tail the young Calibrator I’ve sworn to protect and teach. Whatever might make you think I’d be looking out for your safety?”

“If I look dumb it’s because I feel that way. Sorry. You swore to protect me? I didn’t know that. Thanks.”

It was a pretty shallow thing to say – *thanks* – but I was moved beyond words. I’d deal with it later. I went back to a topic I thought I could handle as we became invisible and flew to meet Abby’s father, who was just finishing his watch.

“How did I do? I know you’ll ask me how I think I did and I’ll say, ‘I think I did pretty well, thank you’.”

“So, do I. I’m proud of you. I’m sure you realize it’s a hundred to one shot that it’ll work – Carl keeping the job.”

“I had it at a thousand to one. I appreciate your optimism. Without the opportunity, he’d have *no* chance at all, though. I selected Carl from the three because I thought he had the most going for him – a loving sister, a long-term girlfriend, an independent, inquisitive, streak others mistakenly call ‘crazy’, and the most unbelievable red, white and blue boxers you’ve ever seen. I figured a little patriotism couldn’t hurt.”

Gus put his arm around me and chuckled as we flew.

“I certainly am glad you’re in my life, Tommy Powers.”

“Me too – well, you know what I mean.”

The report was the same as it had been at every change of watch since Antipathy and Andrew had engaged the truck as their home base. Nothing had changed. Antipathy was establishing a regular routine as if he had nothing to hide from us *or* was setting us up for something – perhaps planning to catch us off-guard at some point. Early mornings they stopped in a park, hooked onto a water hydrant and took showers in the truck. An on-demand water heater quickly took the chill off. They then re-filled their water tanks for the day and received breakfast from a fast-food place delivered by one of his men. From time to time they would stop and someone would enter the office in the rear, soon leaving the same way. Sometime lunch was eaten in and sometimes out at a restaurant. Dinner was always at one of the finest places in the city.

“What do you think will happen,” I began, “if we move on Antipathy as they come out of a café – drop Chem’s special net over him, institute invisibility and whisk him away?”

“I take Antipathy at his word – he has some plan in place to harm Andrew if we try that.”

“Why hasn’t he shown it to us?”

“A *very* good question. I suppose he knows that we understand he’s a man of his word in such cases. Still, now that you mention it, I do have to wonder. Maybe we’ve just missed it.”

“I still haven’t had the chance to go down and be in the room with Andrew. I know him best. Maybe I can discover something the rest of you have missed. We need a diversion to keep Antipathy from sensing me.”

“How about having the truck stopped by a squad car for a speeding violation?” Gus suggested.

“That should do it. Or will the two just nearjump to safety?”

“I imagine Antipathy will wait to see what comes of it. He’s cautious, but not careless. A ticket would be no big deal to him. I’ll set it up.”

A few minutes later the squad car pulled the truck over and the policeman kept the driver busy for 10 minutes as Gus had requested. Invisibly, I entered Andrew’s quarters. Quite plainly he wasn’t aware of the problem outside. He was

working out on a weight machine in one corner. He'd stripped down to his shorts – *and* his fanny-pack. Why would he wear a fanny-pack while lifting weights? Why would he wear a fanny-pack *at all* there in that 8- by 20-foot room?

When he turned onto his back to begin benching, he shifted the pack around over his stomach. I took a chance and carefully opened it up – for safety purposes his eyes remained on the weights above him, of course. A 10-second peek inside was all I needed. It was filled with plastic explosive and a tiny receiver, which, I assumed, would detonate it from a remote signal transmitter in Antipathy's possession.

I re-zipped the last zipper as Andrew sat up and began toweling off. I should begin spending more time in the weight room myself. He looked great and by comparison, I looked just so-so.

I left immediately. So, did the policeman; and the truck resumed its endless journey.

I related my find to Gus.

"Antipathy wanted us to find that, of course," he said, thinking out loud. "It only proves his point to us and strengthens his position. We nab *him* and Andrew becomes space dust."

It made me sick to my stomach to think a father could plan such a terrible thing. It wasn't a father in the true sense, of course; it was an Antipathy – a completely self-centered being, fully incapable of love or compassion.

The Calibrators were intercepting all his calls – in and out and the codes he used were child's play for our specialists. We were again taking out all of his delivery trucks and had shut down his operation on three of the wharfs he was using.

"I think we need to get him out of that truck," I suggested. "There's just no way we're going to achieve a capture with the two of them in there never more than 10 yards apart – especially now that Andrew's wired to be blown to Kingdom Come."

"Got some great idea as to how to accomplish that?" Gus asked.

"My handy-dandy pocket knife."

Gus looked confused. I had seen the expression many

times before when I would begin presenting one of my ideas to him.

“I’ll fly down and slit several tires. The driver will fix them and the truck will be on the move again. Next block I do the same thing. I can keep it up for – well, let’s just say that I once repeated the word supercalifragilisticexpialidocious 1,000 times in a row – I imagine it was a world’s record. I forget what I was trying to prove to myself.”

“It will certainly provoke him into making some kind of a change” Gus said, then pointed out, “It might be for the worse, you understand.”

“There’s a second part to my plan. We need somebody on the inside.”

“Let’s see that would be either Antipathy himself or Andrew, since I believe they are the only *inside* there is here.”

“Precisely,” I said.

Gus frowned. I continued.

“I’ll confront Antipathy in Andrew’s presence and force him to show his real colors in front of his son. If the proof comes from his father’s own mouth, I know Andrew will do the right thing.”

“And maybe get killed in the process?”

“If Antipathy’s safety or freedom isn’t threatened, he won’t play his Andrew card at that point.”

“I agree,” Gus said, with some reluctance still showing in his tone. “It is certainly worth a try. When our relief comes, we’ll go back to our room and solidify the plan.”

I loved it when Gus called it *our* room. I knew he probably wouldn’t be living with me there for much longer, but until that time I wanted him to think of it as our place.

The major problem I found with the plan was that if Andrew finally saw his father for what he really was and rebelled, Antipathy would make him a more obvious prisoner in some way. It would probably involve an even more debilitating trance state than he had used before. In his right mind, Andrew could just jump himself to freedom. Antipathy probably had a beacon of his own on the boy so any such freedom would be short-lived in the event he wasn’t blown up in Antipathy’s rage.

I would have to proceed with wisdom and caution. The

confrontation could not be rehearsed since I had no way of knowing what Antipathy might have up his sleeve. My wits would have to be clearer and more focused than ever before in my life. I *had* to be up to it – for Andrew’s sake; for the sake of the world.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Confrontation!

Gus was called away and had to be absent during the first several days of the following week, so my plan had to be put on hold. It gave me a chance to check in on some of my projects – the retirement home and the news stand. I also began twice-a-day tire punctures on Antipathy's truck. Each time I stuck around long enough to make sure he would sense my presence.

I'd been taught by my Wharfies not to hate people – to focus on their behavior instead of on them. It was often hard to keep to that teaching especially when I was younger. The thing with Antipathy was even more difficult.

His evilness was beyond anything I had ever known and yet it was the only way he could be. He had no positive *Integrity Path*, which meant it was impossible for him to choose to do loving, helpful compassionate things that would improve the lot of the human race, either in the short or long term.

I once read that the impaired brains of some habitual criminals are that way. They are incapable of caring about other people. What a frightening life they must live – not being able to trust, not understanding when others try to help them, always on the lookout for ways to take advantage of others, placing no value on human life – and, all the time not really being able to understand why their behavior bothers the rest of us so very much.

Well, I *did* value lives. I wondered how I would react if it came down to a choice between my survival and my taking

another's life. I shivered at the horrible thought and hoped I would never be faced with such a decision.

Out at the retirement home – *Shady Rest* – things seemed to be looking up. The residents had taken it upon themselves to keep the grounds looking nice. The men mowed the grass and trimmed the trees. The women planted flower gardens and weeded. Marcus and some of his young friends from church had begun painting the trim on the old brick buildings. It had been black. The residents voted for red, so red it was. The whole place suddenly looked alive. Grumpy complaining had evolved into smiling, solution-focused conversation.

The old gentleman that Andrew and I helped had certainly found a second wind. He was able to leave his wheelchair and had gained a reputation as a lady chaser. I smiled to myself, wondering if at his age, he'd remember what to do with a lady if he actually caught one.

The kids from the shelters continued to come every Saturday morning and more teenagers managed to inveigle invitations. They spread themselves out during the after-school hours during the week, playing cards and table games, helping with chores and packing away cookies by the dozen and guzzling milk by the gallon. It was such a heartwarming sight that I had to fly 10 extra laps around the city to expend the exuberance that overtook me.

At the news stand – against all odds – things seemed to be working out pretty well, too. Sometimes I'd appear in person. Sometimes I'd watch invisibly. The two clearly liked each other. Oh, Charlie, in his mock gruffness, referred to Carl as "the young punk" and Carl countered with "has-been Charlie", but it was evident that it had become their way of expressing affection for each other.

I happened to be there when Carl got paid the first time. Charlie counted out the money in bills into the boy's open palm and handed him a statement that itemized how much had been deducted for taxes and such. Carl immediately slipped a 10 dollar bill out of the stack and deposited it in the change bucket that Charlie kept for the kids at the Children's Hospital.

"There was 120 dollars in that jar the day I stole it from

you. I'll pay it back 10 dollars out of every week's pay, if that's okay with you."

"Ain't a matter of being okay with me. It's strictly a matter between you and your conscience, the way I see it."

Carl nodded as if he understood. He still had a lot to learn about living the good life, and I could tell he had a great teacher. Charlie kept his stand neat as a pin. No magazine was allowed to be out of place. The stacks of newspapers were kept orderly. Leaves and trash that blew down the street to the stand were immediately picked up and deposited in the trash container.

Carl's shirttails began being tucked in. He started carrying a comb to keep his hair in place. His expressionless face came to wear a smile. The "who cares" tone in his voice became downright cheerful. The regular customers took time to chat with him. Plainly, they liked the young man – and he them.

Reading was hard for Carl, but he used the down time at the stand to practice. He read the papers. He read the magazines – and not *just* the swimsuit editions. He continued to read his books. It became easier. I introduced him to Marcus, and they planned a double date for Saturday night.

Things could still fall apart, of course, but I felt positive about Carl in the long term. He saw less and less of his old friends after they refused to buy into his new life. He had offered to try to help them, but they'd have no part of it. I'd have to look into their situations in more detail once the Antipathy thing was finally put behind me.

On Thursday morning when I checked in with Amy, she had a note for me. She said a kid about my age from a big truck had left it – nice-looking, black hair, brown eyes, polite.

"Andrew!" I said out loud as I opened it and read to myself. The note was clearly from Antipathy.

30938 Ocean View. Rear door. 2:00 sharp this afternoon. Be there alone or else.

Gus and the majority of the other Calibrators were off trying to prevent a disaster along the Pakistani border so going alone would not be an issue. Antipathy had likely started whatever it was over there to leave me here unprotected. Even knowing that, I had little choice. The "or else" referred to

Andrew's continued well-being. I understood that even though I was sure Andrew hadn't a clue.

During the rest of the morning I made several quick passes through the building at 30938 Ocean View. Too fast, I hoped, for Antipathy to sense my presence. That also meant, however, that I was unable to take in all the details of the set-up there.

They had abandoned the truck for what appeared to be a vacant garage where trucks had once been repaired. There were several, oversized, mechanics' bays with hoists and oil-changing pits. In the center of the floor was a large, round metal grate covering a deep, circular hole some 6 feet across and, I estimated, 12 feet deep; its walls and bottom were cement. The floor sloped, gently, toward it so I figured it was a collection basin of some kind, for water maybe, when it was scrubbed down at night. Maybe a place where water and oil were separated for some purpose.

Their "recycled" apartment was set up in a rear corner. It had a more temporary appearance than the other recent living arrangements. Perhaps this was strictly for our 2 p.m. meeting. I smelled a trap.

I contacted Chem. He and one of his assistants would be inside the building with the new metallic net, waiting invisibly near the high ceiling. Chem made it clear this was my mission and they would therefore make no move until I gave the signal. *My mission!* That sounded serious in an ominous (scary) sort of way.

Two o'clock arrived and I entered through the back door. Chem and his assistant were in place. Antipathy and Andrew were standing just on the other side of the deep hole in the center of the large room. The metal grate had been removed. It was the only area of the room that was well lit from lights above. The air was heavy with the disagreeable smell of oil and diesel fuel.

For a split-second I contemplated the probability that, to a child raised in such a place, the odor would probably be pleasant and reassuring. I let it drop immediately. I needed to be fully focused.

I stopped 5 feet in front of the hole. It had been filled to within 4 feet of the top with diesel fuel. No wonder the odor

was so potent. I wondered about its purpose.

“So?” I asked offering my arms to emphasize my question and readiness to get started.

Antipathy got right to the point.

“You will destroy yourself within the next few minutes. I will light the fuel oil in the pit. You will jump in.”

“I doubt that,” I said, feeling certain I knew what he was up to now, and wanting to bait him a bit.

“You know what will happen if you don’t”

“I’m sorry, old man, but I have no idea what you’re referring to.”

It was a lie, but I figured under the circumstances I was allowed.

I continued: “If you’re just going to play games I’m out of here.”

I made a move to turn as if going to leave. Antipathy became enraged. He had every reason to believe that I would have discovered the explosive arrangement in Andrew’s bag. Yet, if I played my hand right, I could instill at least some doubts.

“The boy’s bag?” he said as if a question.

“His fanny pack? I must say I’ve wondered why he’s been wearing it.”

I could feel the rage building within the man.

He took a small device from his pocket. It resembled a cell phone – somewhat smaller.

“One press on this button and you *know* what will happen.”

“It will dial 911?”

I had pressed things a bit far but, still, it *was* hilarious. Even Andrew’s face suggested that. I had to force Antipathy’s hand in front of his son. His rage began pouring out as he took several steps in my direction.

“You and your precious Calibrators, out to save the world. You’ve been nothing but trouble for me since the time I came into my powers. I’ve found your Achilles heel – it’s your misplaced idea that all human beings have worth. You should have killed me back when you had the chance, Calibrator.”

Andrew frowned and took a step toward his father.

“What are you saying? I don’t understand.”

“Shut up and just stand there like I told you to.”

Andrew was clearly not used to having Antipathy speak to him in that way. Good! Antipathy just might be losing it. I'd press a bit more.

“You're making no sense. This seems to be a waste of my time.”

Again, I turned, that time taking several steps toward the door.

“Stop, demon,” he yelled, the tone of a madman in his voice.

I stopped and looked back over my shoulder not wanting him to think I had given in completely to his command.

“You Calibrators seem to be more incompetent than I had given you credit for. The boy's pack is filled with explosives. This remote transmitter will set it off and he will be blown apart where he stands. How could you have missed that? I made it so obvious.”

I looked at Andrew. He was looking at me, his suddenly pale face painted in pain, confusion and desperation. I winked at him, trying to communicate I really knew what was going on. He nodded, almost imperceptibly, and moved to unbuckle the pack.

“Touch that buckle and you'll never draw another breath, brat!”

Andrew stopped in mid-motion, looking in my direction. Antipathy took several steps backwards so he could better keep us both in view. He lit a match and tossed it into the pit. Flames leapt up, turning the hole into a blistering inferno. I got the idea, but turned and waited for Antipathy to verbalize it.

“You will now jump into the pit or else I will detonate the explosives in the boy's fanny pack. If you make any attempt to communicate with your fellow do-gooders, I'll press the button. If you jump out of sight, I'll press the button. If you do anything except enter the pit and become ashes, I'll press the button.”

He moved back another 10 steps, I figured to protect himself from the blast if it had to occur. I spoke.

“Now that your son knows your true colors, Antipathy, he will be of no use to you unless you keep him prisoner to use as a similar threat in the future – the most cowardly of

ways to protect yourself. What's your plan – more comalike trances for Andrew? A ball and chain or a cell with iron bars?"

"None of your business. He's my son. He will do as I tell him to do."

"No! I won't!" came Andrew's powerfully defiant response. "You are every bit as terrible a person as Tommy has tried to tell me you were. I won't be a party to your plans. Blow me up. The world needs Calibrators more than they need the half-breed son of an Antipathy."

He began walking toward his father, one, slow, deliberate step after another. It was as brave an act as I had ever witnessed. Antipathy began backing up, not having expected the turn events were taking.

In the seconds that followed – taking advantage of Antipathy's confusion as Andrew distracted him – I mind spoke to Andrew, telling him I was about to come to his rescue. Then, I attempted Gus's trick of appearing to be two places at once – something which I had not really ever practiced. Even beyond that, mine was a bit more complicated than his. I remained still and visible where I was, but I moved invisibly behind Andrew and with my pocket knife cut into the belt that held the explosives. It took hundreds of split-second long position changes and I was close to losing the necessary concentration as the belt finally yielded to my blade. I hurled the pack toward the pit. Antipathy realized what was taking place and pressed the button just as it was engulfed in the flames.

I signaled Chem and the net was dropped and secured.

Antipathy unleashed his laser beams onto the metal netting. The material withstood his most potent volleys. I grabbed Andrew from behind and jumped him to safety, fearing Antipathy might attack him with his eyes in some sort of final twisted act of violent retribution. Chem knew how to proceed and soon Antipathy was soaring, invisibly, in the net, out to sea, toward the bunker. He would be farjumped back inside where he would live out the rest of his long life – the world safe from his wickedness once and for all.

* * *

I figured Andrew and I had a serious heart-to-heart coming. I clouded his mind and jumped with him to the woods

in Indiana. The wind was blowing. It whistled through the treetops high above and bent the branches in ways I had not seen there before. The birds settled low, away from the breeze, as if bringing their songs for us to enjoy there on the floor of the forest. I imagined it would blow up a rain later, but for the time being we were presented with a wonderfully cool and fresh-smelling setting.

When Andrew's head cleared, he found us sitting face to face on the ground, our backs against trees, which were several yards apart.

Neither of us knew how to begin. I tried to make that okay.

"Silence between friends is all right, you know."

He stared at me and then nodded, accepting my premise. Eventually he spoke.

"I feel so empty – dumb – you know?"

I nodded but could only really guess at how he felt.

"My poor mother. I can't believe I let him talk me into doing this to her."

Again, I just nodded, thinking it was best if he had his say.

"I have no reason to expect your help after the way I've been, but I know I'll get it if I ask. Probably even if I don't – that's been your track record."

"Just ask," I said quietly.

"Help me through this with my mom."

"Of course. By the way, she gave me one of your sweaters – which I must admit I really like – and I borrowed one of your suits – which I *really* hate. I'll get them both back to you."

I detected a faint smile and the slightest twist of his head.

"Keep the sweater and we'll burn the suit together. I hate them all."

He looked me directly in the eyes.

"I need to say I'm sorry. It doesn't begin to make up for all the stuff ..."

I nodded. He knew I understood and that no more would ever need to be said.

"May I ask something?" I said.

He nodded.

“You referred to yourself as a half-breed. Help me understand.”

“Half-good human being and half-bad Antipathy. My father’s half suddenly frightens me. I wonder if I’ll always have to fight it.”

I spent the next half hour explaining how as a human being he has been blessed with a positive end to his *Integrity Path* – the part that encourages us to live as good and helpful, loving and compassionate beings. I helped him understand that with constant vigilance on his part, he would never have to spend another minute of his life on the negative end – the only end his father possessed.

Near the conclusion of our talk he attempted to summarize what he thought he had heard me saying.

“So, my father is a terribly evil being but he can be no other way because of how he is put together. I suppose I shouldn’t hate him then, but I’ll tell you, that isn’t going to be easy.”

“Probably not.”

“Can I ask what happened to him?”

“He’s alive and well and will remain that way for the rest of his life. He will remain isolated from the rest of us forever.”

“Back in that overgrown cement casket?”

“Do you really want the responsibility that goes with knowing where he is?”

“Put that way, I suppose not.”

Silence.

“I want to thank you for what you said at the memorial service,” he said at last.

“You were the elusive young stranger in the back row, I suppose.”

He nodded.

“It seems I have some of my father’s power to take on the appearance of others – for short times at least. You still knew it was me, though?”

“Your eyes. When you looked at me. It was like when we were working together on the old man at *Shady Rest*. When you looked at him, it was a look of ... love ... I guess. From then on, I’ve had no doubts about the *true* nature of

Andrew Parker.”

“You *did* know about the explosives in my fanny pack, I suppose.”

I nodded.

He nodded.

I moved to change the subject.

“So you have *laser vision*, you can become *invisible* and *nearjump*, and now I learn that you can *transform* your identity. Any other powers you’re aware of?”

“My father and I seem to have some mental connection. He can contact me. I’m not sure if he receives from me. I have the idea I also get messages from you – probably more than I realize, now that I’m thinking back on things.”

I raised my eyebrows confirming his general supposition. He nodded and flashed his first genuine smile of the day.

“May I ask a few more loose-end type questions?” I said.

He nodded.

“How did you come to always wear that fanny pack?”

“My father said it contained papers. Some that would prove the Calibrators’ evil intentions and some that would see to my financial well-being for the rest of my life and he wanted me to have them in case anything happened to him. Since you’d be trying to steal them from us, I needed to keep them on my person at all times. It seemed to make sense to me at the time.”

“What about the wallpaper?”

He smiled again.

“I did that in a moment of weakness – at least that’s how I saw it by the time the next morning rolled around. Part of me has always really liked you, you know. No other person, except my mother, has ever treated me like I was really important to them. I just wanted you to know I was okay, but couldn’t risk doing it in a way Antipathy would understand.”

“It worked in exactly that way. I guess it means we know each other pretty well.”

He looked me in the face and nodded.

“Ready to deal with your mother?” I asked.

“How? I have no idea what to say. Where do I start?”

What I did to her was about the most terrible thing possible. I can't understand how I let him talk me into it."

"My associate and I believe he had you in a trance state so you weren't fully responsible for your actions."

"Really? Can you believe that? My own father!"

"Time to move on, Andy. Can't change that part of your past. Time to build your future."

"During one brief period in my life I was known to break the arms of people who called me *Andy*," he said.

"Sorry. I slipped."

I held my two arms out in his direction.

"Here. Take your pick, I guess."

He chuckled and shook his head.

"I suppose Tommy Powers has earned the right to call me anything he wants to."

"I'll have to admit that your general formality and stiffness does fit Andrew better than Andy, but be prepared – I have plans to work on loosening you up a bit."

"It's hard to believe that you want to be my friend after all I've put you through?"

"You don't think I'm going to let all those hours of work just go to waste, do you?"

He got to his feet.

I got to mine.

He approached me and administered a lingering bear hug. I was happy to return it.

"Off to see Mom, then, I guess," he said at last, releasing me with a sigh.

"How about if I go into the apartment first and lay the groundwork? Then I'll bring you in and the two of you can begin the work you need to do."

"Sounds like a plan. I've never been so scared in my life, you know."

"I know."

He sighed.

"Let's go, then. By the way, where are we? This is a beautiful place."

"Southern Indiana."

"Really? Wow! Your powers amaze me."

"To be all quite honest about it, my friend, they amaze

me, too.”

“I suppose I’m one of the few regular people who knows about you and the Calibrators.”

“The *only* one – other than Antipathy.”

“You going to remove that from my memory some way?”

“I don’t have the power to do that. I can arrange for it to be done if that’s what you want.”

“You and the others trust me with your secret?”

“Should we *not* trust you?”

“I don’t know. Can I ever trust myself after what I allowed my father to do to me?”

“He’s out of the picture. You’re a good person. Make your decision with him removed from the equation. Personally, I can see us working together now and then. That couldn’t be if you had your memory erased.”

He smiled and nodded.

“I’ll sleep on it, okay?”

“Okay.”

I was certainly *not* prepared for what happened next. His eyes began to glow. His face quickly changed from happy to somber – terrified, perhaps. His laser rays shot in my direction.

EPILOGUE

I threw myself on the ground, although I realized that had Andrew been aiming at me, there would not have been time to move out of his line of fire. I smelled smoke and heard the thunderous sound of splintering wood crashing behind me. Andrew ran toward me as I rolled over onto my back ready to defend myself.

There, on the ground, not five feet from where I had been standing, lay the huge, smoldering, trunk of a long-dead, just-fallen, tree.

I quickly reconstructed what had transpired. Andrew had seen the tree falling in my direction – probably caused by the strong wind. With his laser vision, he burned the trunk in two so half fell behind me and half to my right side.

I understood that I would have survived such an incident, but could imagine the monumental headache he had helped me avoid.

“Pretty quick thinking, Andrew. Thanks, pal.”

He offered me a hand up.

“All in a days work for us *super heroes*, you know,” he joked. “And, by the way, I sort of like the *Andy* thing and what you have planned for me. I’ve never been real comfortable around other kids. I can use some ... *loosening up* ... did you call it?”

I nodded and continued brushing myself off. We then headed back to the city. I held onto his belt so he could soar right along beside me. He giggled like a little kid. So did I. Apparently, the loosening up had begun!

* * *

“Ready?” I asked as we stopped in the hall near the door to his apartment. (He had used his key downstairs.)

“No! But I can see that I *never* will be. Go on in. What are you going to say?”

“I’ll send you the transcript as it takes place. Just open your mind.”

I hadn’t answered his question. I had no idea what I was going to say, but there I was, knocking on the door. Andrew stood around the corner out of sight.

“Tommy,” came Mrs. Parker’s cheery greeting. It was different from the forced smile that she had been wearing recently. Even her hug felt more genuine. I entered and closed the door.

“You seem upbeat today,” I said. “That’s great if it’s sincere.”

“I’ve had this feeling that something wonderful was going to happen today. Maybe it’s your visit. You always have a way of leaving me feeling better.”

There it was. I had my opening.

“Well, I think it’s more than my visit. Let’s sit in the living room. I have some news for you – news that certainly fits that feeling you’ve been having.”

She took a seat, leaning back into the softness of the couch. I sat forward on the recliner, my hands folded across my knees. Her face assumed a puzzled expression. She waited silently, her head cocked to one side.

“The news I have is wonderful but it will take a whole lot of explanation that needs to come from someone else. It will probably be the biggest, greatest shock of your life, and I know of no way to really prepare you for it.”

“Andrew?” She said as a question, though clearly already putting several pieces of the puzzle together.

I nodded.

“You found him?”

Her tone reflected a combination of relief and deepest sadness. She was referring to the finding of his body. I hurried on to get past that misunderstanding.

“Andrew is alive,” I said realizing it was tactlessly blunt, but I needed to get it said to contradict her disturbing assumption that left her shoulders slumped and her

expression somber.

“Alive? Badly hurt?” she asked slowly and deliberately.

She leaned forward, straining to read my face.

“Alive and *well*, actually. Like I said, *he* will have to offer the explanation. He feels terribly guilty about it and ...”

“None of that is important. Take me to him ... please!”

She stood. I stood. I walked to the door and opened it. Andrew was standing there, tears breaking across his smile. They were soon sobbing together in the embrace of all embraces.

“Mother, I am so sorry,” he began.

“Shush!” She said, pulling herself back, her hands on his shoulders as she looked him over. “Nothing can be more important than that you are alive and here ... *home* where you belong.”

He pulled her close again.

I took advantage of the moment of silence and excused myself.

“I’ll check back later this evening. You need your privacy right now. I love you guys, you know.”

They nodded. I let myself out.

I felt a twinge of ... I suppose it was envy or jealousy. Andrew knew *his* mother. The two of them could demonstrate their love for each other. They could care for each other and protect each other. They could grow together and work through life’s toughest problems together. For the first time in my life I sensed a tiny empty spot in my heart.

I made my way to Amy’s Bagel Stand. Without a word of greeting I reached out and pulled her close. She patted my back and let me have my quiet moment with my head on her shoulder. A few tears flowed. I couldn’t be sure if they were tears of sadness because of the emptiness, or tears of joy because Amy and so many other caring folks were part of my life.

I had my loving, altruistic Wharfies. I had my mentor and best friend Gus. I had my precious Abby and my maturing relationship with Amy. There were the kids from school and now, I had my new friend, *Andy*. The emptiness would remain, but I would not let it interfere with the wonderful life that lay ahead for me as *Practitioner Tommy Powers*, and someday,

Sage of all Calibrators.

THE END