OLD STONE FACE
Book #14 in the Wilizy Series

David J. Wighton
Old Stone Face

by David J. Wighton

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Smashwords Edition

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Wilizy Family Members as of January 2089

- Doc and Granny, about 77 years old.
- Hank (about 47) and Yolanda (about 43).
- Wolf (23), Mac (23), Jock Jr. (4), Emily (2), Jock Sr. (53).
- William (22), Melissa (22), Will & Izzy (4), MayaLou (1).
- Yollie (22), TG (23), Liset (8), Yo-Yo (5), Hank (3), Ivanika (2).
- Wizard (20), Dreamer (18), Wanda (58).
- Lucas (18).
- Theo (17), Nary (17), Marie (about 78).
- Mathias (15), Kashmira (16).
- Reese (14).
- Winnie (12), Patella (6), Scapula (4).
- EmmaGee (8) (i.e. Maddie and Karita), also Freya and Madison the wolves.
- Stu McKenzie (48), Momaka (44), Petro (2).
- Cassie (the ghost).

Main characters in Toronto

- Professor Thomas Richardson; Paula Allison (Swensen) Richardson, Lohla and Lylah Richardson.
- Professor Astrid (Lillian) Zewinsky.
- Madhuri Lee and her daughter Annika.

Characters in Colorado

- Howard Arnold Swensen, Padre Butterfly and Sheriff Stookenhap (Stook)

Characters in South Bend, Nebraska

- Sheriff Sonny Skies and his family.

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Books in the Wilizy Series

About the Author: David J. Wighton
Chapter 1

Winnie appeared unexpectedly in the Wilizy/Asia that was hovering over Toronto on January 5, 2089. Everybody in the family now knew what had happened in Zurich. Everybody in the family also knew how a motorcycle gang had tried to attack the Montana cadet camp and had been personally destroyed by five Wilizy women. But old news didn't bring Winnie to the ship where the Toronto students had resumed their studies. Something more important had prompted this visit, which was supposedly to see how Dreamer was doing after she had helped Bean snipe the leaders of the invading force. That wasn't the real reason.

The real reason for this unexpected visit was that Winnie had heard rumours that Bean and her sheriff friend were romantically involved. Such rumblings needed verification and who better to confirm that than Winnie? Other members of the family were pestering her for details. She owed it to them, if for nothing else than to quell any doubts that she wasn't still the Wilizy's chief snoop.

Winnie found Bean in the Wilizy/Asia's living room with a thick textbook in her lap and a furrowed brow hanging above it. Lucas was there too, but he was male and so would be useless when Winnie was on a snoop quest. Bean, on the other hand, had been part of the search party for the sheriff and she was willing to share.

Thirty seconds into that catch-up, Lucas grabbed his calculus book and relocated to the ship's hold where he could study in peace without having to listen to all the yammering about love. School had been back in session for two days. Lucas already hated calculus. He hated having to listen to people talk about falling in love even more.

"What did you just say?" Lucas asked Winnie who was standing next to him in the hold staring. He wasn't sure how long she had been there. The glare in Winnie's face suggested that she had been there for some time.

"I said that I managed to talk the Wilizy's ghost out of killing Lylah and Lohla's father. I don't know how long she'll hold off. I thought that you might want to warn them."

"Yeesh, Winnie. I'm trying to study here. Go prank somebody else."
Well below the flying invisible ship, in a somewhat seedy part of Toronto, a teenage girl was walking as fast as she could walk without breaking into a run. She was being trailed by three admirers of her butt. She knew that they admired it because they were telling how much they wanted to touch it. The two-bedroom apartment where she lived with her mother was three blocks away from the high school that she attended. She still had two blocks to go.

Speaking of still, Winnie was still going after Lucas.
"If I had said that a criminal was going to kill the father of your girl friends, would that be more believable than if it were a ghost? Wouldn't you want to hear more?"
"Leave me alone!"
"Don't you want to know why their father is going to die?"
"Nope. It's none of my business."
"Did the twins dump you? What happened with them anyway? First, you were with Lylah; then you were with Lohla and the whole family knows that the two of you went to Paris for the holidays. You and Lohla had sex, didn't you?"
"It's none of your business what went on between the twins and me. We were friends for a while; now we aren't."
"No hard feelings?"
"None. I'm completely over them."

_I need to wear a sign on my forehead that reminds the family that I can see what they're thinking._ "Cassie is going to kill their father. Would you like to know how she's going to kill him?"

"Nope. What I want to know is how to solve the derivative of a squared function. Go away."
"Your girlfriends will be heartbroken when their father dies."
"They aren't my girlfriends. Stop trying to match make."
The young girl with the admirable butt hurried by the new tenant who was sitting on the top cement stair of the entrance to her apartment building. Her admirers helped her on her way with air kisses and a number of gross remarks about what admirable butts could be useful for. They saw the new tenant looking at them.

"What'cha looking at, Cowboy?" This western-based reference by the trio leader was not all that remarkable seeing as how the tenant was wearing cowboy boots, a checkered long sleeve shirt, a cowhide jacket with fringes, and a braided leather bolo tie. All of this western appearance was topped by a head with a Stetson hat on it that was covering some long blonde locks of hair.

"Cómo està," the new tenant replied in Spanish, the equivalent to How's it going? In Canada, that greeting would be more properly translated as How's it going, eh? The Spanish form meant that the cowboy was more likely to be an US cowboy. This was a reasonable conclusion given that you would be hard pressed to find any Canadian male dressed in such finery. Certainly not in urban Toronto.

One air kisser made a two word comment in reply which when translated into non-vulgar English indicated that he didn't think much of this Spanish speaking man whose personal preference for amorous encounters would not likely include girls. The target of these hurtful words winked back in reply. As the trio slouched away, the winker looked down and to his right where he saw a scared light brown face looking out of the window of a ground floor apartment at three departing backsides. We don't know whether she thought those backsides were admirable or not. Probably not. Seconds later, the descending blinds on those windows closed off any view into the apartment.
Chapter 2

Later that evening, the teenager in the basement apartment heard a knock on her door. She looked through the peephole and yelled through the door, "What do you want?"

"I don't want you to open the door," the cowboy on the other side of the door said.

"Relax."

"What do you want?"

"I'm the new guy that lives on the third floor. I'd like to borrow some things. I was wondering if you might have them? Screwdriver? Big screws? Fast drying cement?"

"Screwdriver, yes. No on the others. What's the rush?"

"Can I talk through the door with your mom?"

"Why don't you want to talk with my dad?"

"I've talked to a few people in the building. You don't live with a dad. What about it? Can I talk to your mom?"

"Go away."

"Do you know somebody in the building that you can stay with tonight?"

"Why?"

"The bars covering your outside window can be ripped off with one determined yank. I thought you might feel safer if I fixed them tonight. But I don't have any tools or supplies. The local hardware store is closed."

... 

"Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"I take it from your silence that you have no friends in the building that can help you."

"No."

"When will your mom be back?"

"In five minutes and she carries a gun."

"Good answer, but the neighbours say that she's in the hospital getting tests on whether she'll be able to walk again. She's in a wheelchair and that's why you're on the
ground floor, which is very dangerous for two women living alone in this part of town. I'm not a threat to you. My name is Jim. What's yours?"

"Get lost."

"Nice name. A little unusual, but still nice. I used to be called Jim-Bob but my girlfriend said it wouldn't go over too well in the big city. Do you know how to use a gun?"

"Point it at what you want to shoot and pull the trigger."

"That'll work for most guns, but not if it has a safety. The gun that I have with me right now does not have a safety. It's fully loaded and yes, you just point and pull the trigger. I'm putting it on the floor in front of your door now. I'm going to walk outside the building and tap three times on your window. When you hear the tapping, open this door, grab the gun, and then close and lock the door. There's no way that I can be hiding in the hallway and be outside tapping on the window at the same time."

"You could if you had a friend outside."

"I'll call out to you through your window. What do you want me to say?"

"Yippy-yi, yippy yay."

"For the record, cowboys don't actually say that. In case somebody is already here with me when you open the door, have a big kitchen knife in your other hand. Do you want me to wait while you get it?"

"No. I already have the knife."

"I'm leaving now. I'm going to feel like a fool saying the password."

_The clothes you were wearing this afternoon weren't ridiculous enough to do that already?_

# # # # # # #

Five minutes later.

"Feel better now, Miss Lost?"

"Some. The problem with people who have never shot a gun before is that they'll freeze when they should be pulling the trigger. I've never shot anybody before so I might freeze."

"You know about freezing, do you?"
"Anybody who has ever watched a crime/detective bot knows that."
"Would you like to feel safer?"
"Yes, please."
"Still not willing to tell me your name? What's the harm in it?"
"My name is Annika. Why are you doing this for me? People in big cities don't do this."

"I used to be in law enforcement in a small town. Here's what you're going to do to be safer. I've asked my girl friend to come and help. When she arrives, she and you will move whatever you need for the night up to my apartment. My girlfriend will stay with you for the night. You can keep the gun with you. I'll be down here with a second gun in case somebody tries to break in. Tomorrow morning, I'll fix those bars. Does that sound OK?"

"Yes. What's your girlfriend's name?"
"Some people have called her the Beanstalk."

_Jim-Bob and the Beanstalk. Seriously? That's enough to give anybody the heebie-jeebies._
Let's stay in Toronto for a few more hours. Bean came over to the apartment and took Annika up to Jim's third floor apartment. She also took up foam pads to serve as mattresses and sleeping bags to serve as bedding. He himself had taken his sleeping bag and his saddle downstairs. Bringing the saddle from Montana to Toronto had prompted Bean to ask if he actually thought that he'd find horses to ride in Toronto. "Saddles can come in handy," he had argued and tonight would prove that point.

Other than some changes of clothing and a half squeezed tube of toothpaste, nothing was left in Jim's apartment. Bean wasn't much better off in her room in the university dorms. At least she had a bed. Before she moved into the dorm, she had quickly shut down a tentative offer from Dreamer to stay with the Wilizy basketballers, as she didn't want to get further involved with the Wilizy's operations. She didn't actually say that, but indicated only that she wanted to live as close to the university as she could. After the first day of classes, which could only be described as a disillusioning experience, she told Dreamer that she wouldn't be playing basketball this season. The experience of failing a year in high school was not something she wanted to repeat. She told Bean that she had enough money from the cadet camp to tide her over until she could work at the camp again.

From Annika and Bean's perspective, the night upstairs was uneventful. The same can't be said for Jim's night.

The area around the apartment building did not have what a former Montana sheriff would normally use as cover for surveillance. He had no soft prairie ground to lie on; no trees to climb; no gullies to hide in. The location did have a dark alley that gave a good view of Annika's apartment windows. The alley itself had a discarded sofa that nobody had wanted to take and somebody had moved it off the main sidewalk into the alley months ago. Now it was too soggy to be useful, but it was still bulky. Jim repositioned it in the alley and then sat behind the sofa comfortably on his saddle, his blanket around him for warmth.

He didn't have to wait long. The air-kisser knew enough to wear dark clothing; he
knew enough to slip into the darkness in front of Annika's building and creep forward to her window. He knew enough to quietly test the protective bars that had appeared vulnerable. He didn't know enough to bring a crow bar or his buddies. He didn't know enough to bring a light so that he'd avoid the big patch of mud that had miraculously appeared that evening right in front of the targeted window. Must have been a heavy shower from a very small cloud.

The cowboy waited until the air-kisser had turned the nearby corner and was out of sight. Then he followed the mud tracks to the air-kisser's home. Content with knowing that address, the cowboy lay on the floor of Annika's apartment, wrapped himself in his blanket and used his saddle as a pillow.
Morning arrived in the Annikian kitchen and Bean did too shortly afterwards. "I hafta go," she declared as she walked into the main floor apartment that Jim was still occupying. "Here's your gun. Annika thanked me for staying with her. She wasn't scared by the time I got here. Seemed like a nice enough girl."

"One of the boys harassing her came by last night. He tested the iron bars and went home. I know where he lives now. I'll fix the bars as soon as the hardware store is open. Thanks for helping out."

"Annika is waiting for you to come out of the apartment before she comes in. She didn't want to walk in on you if you weren't dressed."

"I'll walk out with you. Are we still on for the weekend?"

"I think so. Depends on how much reading I have to do. Are you going to look for work?"

"Yeah. I'll look around."

"You need to buy a bed."

"There's a battered soggy sofa in the alley across the street."

"You'll want to have a nice soft comfy bed in your apartment. Trust me on this."

"What are you doing?" a pleasant female voice asked.

Cowboy turned in surprise to see a lady in a well-used wheelchair looking at him. She had a small suitcase on her lap. Wheelchairs don't make noisy footsteps when they come down the street.

"You must be Annika's mom. I'm trying to fasten your set of iron bars to the apartment wall more securely."

"The landlord finally did something. I've been after him for months."

"Well, not exactly, Ma'am. Annika had a scare yesterday and I was handy. I'm the new tenant on the third floor. You can call me Cowboy. Apparently that's my name"
around here."

"I can see why they've given you that nickname. I'm Madhuri Lee, Cowboy." She held out a hand. Cowboy held up both hands covered in equal parts of quick drying cement and waterproofing tar. He mimed a bow instead.

"What was the scare?"

"Some boys were harassing her. My girl friend stayed over night with your daughter in my apartment. She was fine this morning and left for school at the usual time."

"How much longer will you be?"

"Fifteen minutes max, Ma'am. I just have to fasten this bottom bar and I'll be out of your hair. These bars will be unmovable by noon."

"Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No, Ma'am. That was next on the list."

"Bacon, eggs, hash browns, and toast will be served in the Lee kitchen, Cowboy."

"Well, hitch my suspenders up to the chuck wagon and call me Hungry."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"No Ma'am. My country witticisms rarely do."

###

Let's relocate to the air above Toronto now. The Wilizy teenagers living in the Wilizy/Asia were in school this morning. Dreamer was in first year university, Lucas in grade twelve, Theo in grade eleven and Nary in grade ten. Wizard was in Montana reviewing the plans for his water transportation business with Wolf. That meant that Winnie and Cassie had the ship to themselves.

Winnie wasn't upset that Lucas had lied to her. Lies are common when people are stressed and Lucas obviously was. What bothered her the most was that she hadn't been able to pry out any information about what had happened between him and the twins. The chances of prying that information from Lucas now were zero. Her brother could be extraordinarily stubborn when he wanted to be. Often, that was a positive trait, as in not quitting when obstacles seemed insurmountable. Today, from Winnie's perspective, Lucas was standing in the way of her gaining back her reputation as a reliable source of
romantic-based gossip on the family.

It didn't appear that a love-match for Lucas would be possible right now, so she'd be content to find out what had caused the break up with the twins. Dreamer would know, but she would be very unlikely to share the secret with Winnie. Winnie could unleash the hounds, in the form of Scapula and Patella, but they were good spies only if somebody were talking; they couldn't ask questions and pry like she could. As a result, at least for now, Lucas had achieved the near impossible. He had kept Winnie from learning a really juicy secret. He knew why Lohla and Lylah had broken up with him and he wasn't telling anybody. Winnie could do nothing about that. Well, almost nothing. She could always TiTr the twins and find out what had happened. But that would be cheating. A good snoop wouldn't lower herself to TiTr'g. Winnie had standards below which she would not snoop. Oops. Make that, she had standards below which she would not stoop.

Cassie now, she was also stewing but about Dr. Richardson. Yes, this was the man who had purchased her baby's tissues, but was that a crime? What if he didn't know anything about Oscar Garouch and what he had been doing in that orphanage? If it wasn't a crime, he didn't deserve to die. Cassie was dwelling on this question of legality/illegality while Winnie was mulling her chances of consolidating her position on top of the family's snoop rankings. Liset was rapidly gaining ground in that respect.

..."I don't think I can do it," Winnie said – referring to protecting her reputation.

*I don't think I can do it*, Cassie uttered the same words simultaneously but for a different reason.

"At least we're on the same page," Winnie said.

*Yeah, that's reassuring.*

"I could drop in on Bean and her boy friend, I guess."

*How would that help?*

"Nobody knows very much about them and there'd be high demand for any news I could pick up. But they don't know me so they might be unwilling to say much about themselves."

*Huh?*

"Dreamer is their closest friend but she'd never introduce me. She'd know what I
was trying to do. Bean and Mom have been close. Mom could introduce me. Better still, Mom could come to Toronto, drop in on them, and pick up some dirt. But that's all backwards. I'm supposed to do the snooping for Mom; she doesn't do the snooping for me. I could try to find some dirt on Kashmira and Mathias but I promised Mathias to leave him alone. I don't think I can do it."

*What are you talking about, Winnie?*

"Snooping, of course. I need to repair my reputation. What was it that you couldn't do?"

*Decide what to do about Dr. Richardson. Is it possible that he's not a murderer? If he's not and I stuff a stone carving down his throat, I could be a murderer myself."

"Do you know why people were buying baby tissues before they could be born?"

*No."

"Neither do I."

*We need to do some research. How? Where?*

"I can look it up on the Internet," Winnie offered.

*It would go faster if I could look it up also. I can work longer hours than you can too.*

"Why can't you look it up?"

*No brain plug and no pinky ring means I can't search the Internet. Doc helps me with lessons by putting a bot in his brain plug and then putting the information up on a large screen that I can read. He has to scroll it up and down for me to read."

"Because?"

*I can only pick things up and drop them. If I try to use my hands to push something, I don't get any push. My body has no weight."

"Let's ask William to make you something that will allow you to retrieve information off the Internet."

*Who's William again?*

"Melissa's husband. He's an inventing genius."

*Ask him if he can find a way for me to write things down too. I have to hold everything in my memory and I don't know how much memory space a ghost has."

"I wonder if William is friendly enough with Lucas to ask him some questions."
Back in the Lee kitchen, Madhuri and Cowboy had discussed Annika's scare during breakfast and that discussion included exactly the type of scare she had had, the source of the scare including physical descriptions, Cowboy's loan of his gun, and the return visit of one of the boys. When asked about how serious the danger was, Cowboy answered, "Serious enough for her to be cautious and to stay off the streets at night."

"Kids in her class don't like her because they're dumb and she's not. She refuses to pretend to be stupid."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"She hasn't mentioned these three boys before. I'll ask about them."

"Try and find out if they are in any of her classes."

"Why?"

"If they are, their behaviour towards her may come from jealousy or dislike. If not, she has attracted them for some other reason. They were commenting on her physical appearance."

"She doesn't dress in any way to attract attention."

"No Ma'am. I could see that. Her vulnerability is the key. She is alone in school. She walks home alone. She is quite small. The area you live in has a lot of rough edges."

"I can't afford to move to a better neighbourhood. Even this place is at the upper end of my resources. What do you suggest I do?"

"I'll ask my girl friend, Ma'am. She knows about self-defense. She's attending the university."

"You should introduce us. I work in the university's personnel office. What is she taking?"

[I'll skip this part of the conversation as my readers already know this.]

"May I ask a personal question, Ma'am?"

"You should drop the Ma'am, Cowboy."

"Can't do that, Ma'am. That's not how I was raised."

"If you're wondering about the wheelchair, I was injured in a copter accident. At the time, I was told I'd never walk again."

"At the time...?"
"I was at the university hospital yesterday getting an update."

"Good news?"

"In terms of what I will tell Annika – yes, I'll tell her that I received promising news. But truthfully, I'm not pinning my hopes on any experimental research."

"Experimental research?"

"A professor at the university is working on something called Plasma Surgery. My doctor asked him to run some tests on me. That's why I had to stay overnight."

"And the verdict?"

"I may qualify for his research study."

"Good news, then."

"I don't know. There's something about him. He gives me the heebie-jeebies."

That evening, Cowboy answered a knock on his door to find Annika there with an oral invitation from her mom to have dinner with them. By that time, Madhuri had had a chance to talk with Annika about her scare. Annika had revealed that Cowboy's apartment held a half squeezed tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush, and nothing else. No plates, no furniture, and no food. He didn't even have a face cloth. Nor was there any soap. That had prompted the invitation.

They were now in Annika's apartment.

"Annika said that the three boys that followed her home are in a lot of her classes, but she's never talked with them. The biggest kid is the leader; the other two do what he tells them to. He has a reputation of being a bully."

"I'll have a chat with him tomorrow."

"At school?" Annika reacted with some alarm.

"No. He's the one that checked out your iron bars and I followed him home. I'll talk with him at home."

"What will you say?"

"I'll point out to him how much happier he'll be if he leaves you alone. If he bothers you again, tell me. My girl friend said that she's too busy with her classes to help you learn how to defend yourself, but I can do that easily enough. I'll teach you some self
defense moves."

"I'm not very athletic," Annika confessed. "I get laughed at a lot in gym because I'm a klutz."

"Annika's skills are more in the thinking areas than in the athletic areas," her mom restated her confession to be more positive.

"I've seen some defensive weapons that many women carry with them. They're small enough to fit inside a pocket or a purse but still be effective. I'll look for some tomorrow."

"I'll pay for them," Madhuri jumped in quickly.

"My treat, Ma'am. In thanks for the dinner. You don't have to be athletic in order to defend yourself, Annika. Knowing how to handle yourself will make you more confident. Bullies like this guy ...."

"Pitface."

"Pitface? Is that his name? Really?"

"He has a terrible case of acne because he doesn't wash. That's what I call him, but I'm not stupid about when I call him that, Mom."

"Do you have nicknames for the other two?"

"Sure. Scabby because he is always scratching his pimples raw; Nasal Drip because he has never learned to blow his nose. Mom, I have names for everybody in the class. Why shouldn't I? They're all mean to me."

Cowboy brought the discussion back to self-defense. "Bullies like Pitface feed off their victims' fear. Your defensive weapon and some disabling moves can make a big difference in how you appear to a bully."

"I want to learn how to shoot a gun. Will you show me?"

"A gun? I'm not sure about that. I don't want a gun in the house, Annika."

"Mom, I may want one when I'm older and living on my own. We both know that I'm not likely to grow any taller. If Cowboy teaches me how to shoot properly, this could help me when I'm living on my own. Right, Cowboy?"

"She has a point, Ma'am. Back where I hail from, everybody has at least one gun. She can learn with my gun. I'll make sure she's aware of the risks."

"I'll pay you."
"Ma'am, given what you and I talked about earlier, that's not necessary."

"Given that you have no food in your apartment, nor anything else either, you should be paid for your services. If you won't take money, I'll trade your help for dinners like this for as long as you need them."

"I'd be much obliged, Ma'am. I'll be looking for work, so I expect to be gainfully employed soon."

"What kind of job are you looking for?"

"I have no idea, Ma'am. I'll be wandering around town tomorrow. My girlfriend would like me to have a bed in my apartment."

_Golly, I wonder why._

"What's your friend's name?"

"Beanstalk, Ma'am. Bean for short."

"Surely that's not her given name."

"Her family named her Benedikta, Ma'am. The nickname is not a name that she chose for herself."

"But..., Beanstalk?"

"She's really tall and skinny, Mom."

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Chapter 5

In previous news from the sporting community, my readers know about Bean's offer for her sheriff to steal second base. Soon after the sheriff had been released from the cadet camp's nursing center, he received additional offers to move further along the base paths. By the time they left for Toronto, the two of them were hitting homeruns on a regular basis although I must hasten to add that these were not four-baggers per se. Both of them agreed that they should run wide when they came to first base. Some baseball purists might object to this travesty. Bean and Cowboy didn't care.

Today, with Bean taking a break from university to retain her sanity, it was Sunday afternoon, January 16, at the ballpark and time for the seventh inning stretch. Bean and Cowboy were wandering around his apartment stretching, as was entirely appropriate given that it was the seventh inning stretch as I had mentioned. I will omit any description of what uniforms the two teams were wearing. Or not wearing as the case might be.

Both were looking at the giant bed that was lying on the floor smack dab in the middle of the living room, which one must admit was not the typical location for such a possession. Cowboy had wrestled it that far on his own which was quite an accomplishment for a third floor apartment dweller. You might conclude with some justification that he had been motivated to get a bed into his apartment.

"Good bed," Bean admitted. "How'd you buy it?"

Cowboy had acquired the bed by visiting a furniture store and offering to reveal all of the store's security vulnerabilities in exchange for a free bed. The owner didn't believe that he could find any, in spite of Cowboy appearing in his finery with a sheriff's badge fashioned as a belt buckle. Cowboy revealed one vulnerability. The owner had said, "You can have any bed on the floor if you keep talking."

Cowboy wasn't much for bragging, so his explanation to Bean was short. "I bartered for it. I traded security advice for the bed plus the bedding and pillows."

"Same source for the shower curtain, towels and face cloths in the bathroom?"

"Yeah. I figure I can barter for a lot of other stuff too. Storeowners will want to
know how they can cut down on petty theft, which is a problem in this area. The bartering will be good for them; good for us."

"Food?"
"Mrs. Lee downstairs is feeding me dinners in exchange for me helping Annika learn self defense and learn how to shoot a gun."
"You're teaching her how to use a gun?"
"It's easy to teach and her mom won't have one in her house, so I don't see the harm in it."
"You'll need a job that will pay money."
"I know. I'll be looking downtown after I've hit up all the local merchants for furniture and other necessities. In two weeks perhaps."

"Play ball," the hypothetical ump announced and both teams looked at the playing field and sauntered over. If you're going to indulge in baseball indoors on a Sunday afternoon, what better place than on a soft bed? Bean was about to tell Cowboy that she had noticed that Annika hadn't blinked once when she had talked to her. Bean had found it disconcerting; heebie-jeebie'fying even. But she quickly lost that particular thought and who could blame her.

# # # # # # # #

William couldn't invent anything electronic that would allow Cassie to communicate by print because he didn't know how her brain worked. If indeed ghosts had brains. But he did have an idea for a mechanical solution – a pair of gloves for Cassie to wear. Each finger in the glove contained a pneumatic device that translated the tiny pressure of Cassie's finger into pressure that was strong enough to press a key down on one of the old-fashioned computer keyboards that Hank had found. That keyboard would include scrolling keys. The glove devices cycled on and off constantly ensuring that each finger press would have enough strength no matter how quickly Cassie learned how to type, which is what the ancients called the action. The device drew on air pressure from the surrounding atmosphere to arm each finger.

The gloves had worked fine when William personally tested them. They didn't work so well when Cassie tried them. The gloves fell off. They had nothing to stick to.
Cassie's fingers and her whole body were composed of something that couldn't be seen or felt. Short of discovering how Cassie's body was constructed, and then finding a way to fasten the gloves to her hands, the gloves wouldn't work.

Mathias was an interested spectator to William's attempts to glove a solution. He suggested that the gloves be permanently attached to an apparatus that hovered over the keyboard. That way, all Cassie had to do was put her fingers into the gloves and move the glove apparatus over the key she wanted to press. He also suggested that the fingers on the glove be elongated and made very narrow which would help with accuracy. William had a working set of gloves by that evening. He also developed a similar concept that would allow Cassie to control video content delivered by bot to a large screen display.
Chapter 6

Early 2089 was a difficult time for many of the Wilizy. Safe Haven had been defeated and the missing slave girls in their bank basements rescued, although it must be said that they mostly had rescued themselves. With armed conflicts now safely behind them, the Wilizy settled down to normal life. That was good for some of them. The parents of the toddlers, for example. They could focus on raising their families. William, Wolf and TG had the time to re-examine their efforts to remove carbon from the atmosphere. To date, no measurable gain had been achieved. They were planning to add a second scrubbing station, a decision driven in part because they wanted to produce more diamonds. The demand for the Wilizy planes was going through the roof and Wizard was predicting a shortage of diamonds for William's power plant soon what with his decision to open up the production of Wilizy designed cars to other manufacturers.

Speaking of Wizard, he was happy with taking the Wilizy out of the plane business. This simply wasn't a business that the Wilizy could manage on their own. Instead, their licensing of the power plant would produce huge profits while the diamonds were being manufactured by robots, which didn't produce staffing costs or the need for supervisors. He had a lot more difficulty with his water transportation plans in the northern states. He had recognized that his plans weren't realistic and the business couldn't be scaled to a state-wide enterprise. The skies would be cluttered with invisible water pipes. Stu had tried to warn him, but Wizard had been blind to the practicalities. He saw only a way to move water into dry areas of the world. The Wilizy would continue to offer water transportation to their own properties in Montana. Nothing else would be done. But the failure was a blow to Wizard's confidence about his decision-making.

Later in the year, he'd also take the Wilizy out of the business of producing content for the Wilizy Broadcast Network – one of his first businesses. The Wilizy would still be involved on the transmitting end but local business would do the content production. Before the end of the year, Wizard would sell his most prized business – the Wilizy Cloth and Dye Company along with his peanut businesses.

All of these sales made sense because the local economies would be stimulated by
other businesses taking over management of these businesses. Moreover, the demand on Wilizy time and energy would disappear. The family would have a life again. And, if anything, the family's wealth would increase even more through the licensing of their products and services. But for Wizard, it meant the end of most of what he had been doing for the family. He had generated no new ideas recently about other businesses the Wilizy could develop.

Add to that the disappearance of his opportunity to coach. Dreamer and Bean were in university now, but neither of them was playing basketball. Nary's school team had mostly disappeared, so she didn't even try out. Lucas was focusing on his courses and hadn't tried out. Mathias had moved to Australia. Theo was the only Wilizy who was playing ball this season.

So, with the divestment plans all in place and proceeding properly, and nothing much to do, Wizard sat in the ship, moping. When Wizard had nothing to do, he got grumpy. With the ship mostly empty, he got grumpy with Dreamer.

Dreamer had her own problems. She was suffering through the first year of a four-year program leading to a degree in business. She hated it. Dreamer was a teenager who had run her own businesses, and now she hated the whole idea of business – as taught in a university. University business programs, by and large, focus on the theoretical.

Where should an ad be placed for maximum impact? Bottom of the screen? Middle of the screen? Let's study the research that has been conducted in the last seventy-five years that may give us a glimpse into the answer. Dreamers wanted to do. She didn't want to theorize what motivates shoppers to spend money. When Dreamer became frustrated, she became short tempered. The Dreamer - Wizard duo was a tinderbox ready to burst into flame.

Speaking of ready to burst into flame, Lucas was controlling his anger at how the twins had treated him by focusing all of his available energy on mastering his grade twelve course work. That wasn't going too well. Unable to lash out at the twins, which is where most of his anger was based, he took his frustrations out on his studies. Lucas always did struggle to learn abstract concepts. Put him on a battle field and he would instinctively apply the concepts without realizing what he was doing. Put him in a
classroom, and in a situation where he had no basketball or punching bag to work off his emotions, he was a pressure cooker with no escape valve.

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The sources of Lucas' frustrations were not doing so well themselves, but Lylah and Lohla handled it differently. Lylah's passionate kiss in the Schauble gym had led to a physical altercation with Lohla that started with hair pulling and ended with a rip-roaring wrestling match. By rip, I mean the shredding of clothes with their combatant still inside; by roaring, I mean cursing at high volume. The sisterly pact had been obliterated. My readers probably saw this coming.

Both girls had been immediately attracted to Lucas. But only one of the twins could have him, and in the end, neither got him. And, they only had themselves to blame. When sanity returned, but Lucas didn't, they turned back to each other. To family. That summer, they returned to their family home where they would be away from any thoughts of what might have been. Instead, they had the distinctly unhappy experience of remembering what life with their father had been like. Their father's obsession with his research was still all consuming. His daughters were only lab assistants who might be also counted on to make meals and hand deliver them to their master who was too busy to make them himself, and certainly too busy to think about what needs his daughters might have of their only available parent. Lohla and Lylah turned inwards to themselves. They only had each other; they could count on nobody but themselves. A relationship with Lucas was impossible and the sooner they got over him, the better off they'd be.

The twins had spent their first nine months before their birth physically touching each other. They returned to that. When sitting together, they'd be arm in arm. When walking, they go hand in hand. When sleeping, they'd curl up one behind the other. They became inseparable during that summer, emotionally for sure and to a large degree physically too.

When they returned to Toronto and to school in the fall, Lohla had moved in with Lylah. Lohla continued with basketball but her heart wasn't in. What's the point of making a pinpoint-pass to somebody who would immediately fumble it? Lylah didn't even go anywhere near a gym. Their social life was non-existent. They studied at the
same table, they shared room cleaning duties, they slept together, they probably even had the same dreams. They were sleepwalking through life, but at least they had each other.

On the other side of the world, Granny and Doc were experiencing a similar sleepwalking life. They had moved to Australia to care for Mathias and Kashmira. But, no caring was actually needed now. Both were in the ideal school for them. Kashmira was now wearing shapeless, style-less clothes so that she wouldn't attract attention from boys who were now on her *stay away from* list. She also shunned girls who were mostly jealous and spiteful. Kashmira focused on her music and closed everybody else out with the exception of Mathias.

Mathias was entirely comfortable focusing on his studies. Without Kashmira, he'd be a permanent hermit and would be quite content in that style of life. But with Kashmira peripherally in his life, in the evenings, they'd cuddle together but go up to their bedrooms at different times. This was just a ruse, because they were now sleeping together. But not having sex. Neither felt the desire. Their studies were all they could think about.

Granny had nothing to do. She had lived a life surrounded by children, grandchildren, and a growing number of great grandchildren. She was the family's primary source of baked goodies. Now, she had no toddlers in her life and she was eating all of her own goodies just because they were there and what else does a person do when she has nothing to do? She snacks. Some noticeable weight gain had hobbled Granny even more, which meant that she stayed on the couch even more, which meant that she snacked even more, which meant....

At least Doc had had Cassie to teach, but with Cassie mostly away now with Winnie, Doc retreated to his place of sanctuary – the wilderness. He spent most of his time leaning against a tree, staring into .... well, staring into the wilderness.

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Chapter 7

It was Sunday and Bean had a few hours away from her studies. She and Cowboy were engaged in America's #1 pastime. Baseball. Between innings, they talked. Bean now knew certain things that had happened in Cowboy's life since their last baseball-related encounter. For example, his bartering prowess had produced the following items that were now somewhere in his apartment: three each of anything that was sold in a certain popular men's clothing store; a bureau for those clothes; a wide screen viewing panel; an arm chair, a matching three person sofa and two foot stools; a kitchen table with chairs; a full set of cookware; a full set of dinnerware including cutlery, glasses, and mugs; a washer and dryer; a full set of camping equipment from a high profile outdoors outlet; and free ammunition for life for his two guns and free access to a basement shooting range from a gun shop owner. Cowboy hadn't forgotten Bean in his shopping. He had a coupon in her name for three each of anything that was sold in a certain popular women's clothing store, bureaus to hold everything she wanted, and fluffy towels and face clothes.

From the gun store, Cowboy had also acquired for Annika a small spring-loaded baton that was powerful enough to break bones. He also gave her four pressurized cans of bear spray that were surprisingly legal in bear-less Toronto with coupons that would allow her to acquire more when she returned the empty cans. Also, the store gave her a permanent free pass to the store's basement shooting range.

Cowboy had had two shooting sessions with Annika and her accuracy was coming along. Also her knowledge of guns. She had asked numerous questions. For example:

• **How loud were the gunshots? Would she need ear protection?**
• **She had heard that firing a gun could spray out gunpowder residue that could cover her hands and clothes. Was this true? Should she be wearing something to protect her good clothes? Did she need to take a bath afterwards?**
• **She had heard that firing some guns would expel bullet casings. Should she be cleaning up after herself in the range? Did they have brooms?**
• **Was it necessary to clean a gun after each trip to a firing range? Would he**
show her how to do that? Would the cleaning stuff ruin her clothes? Should she take precautions to keep the stuff coming out of the gun off the floor?

• What was best for a woman? Shooting at close range or long range? How far would this gun, for example, shoot accurately?

Cowboy answered all of Annika's questions patiently, impressed by her desire to know everything that she might need to become a safe shooter. When he mentioned the questions to her mom, she confided that Annika had always been very thorough. That was one of the reasons she was doing so well at school. Speaking of school, Annika had not been harassed again, neither in school itself nor on her way home.

With the apartment now having some creature comforts, Cowboy would be turning his attention to scouting for a paying job downtown. Mrs. Lee was still providing dinners but he was reluctant to continue drawing on her kindness since he was finished helping her daughter.

As to Bean, she was finding her courses to be almost overwhelming and was thinking of looking for a tutor. This would take money that she had in short supply. Cowboy promised to look long and hard downtown.

"You should look for work in your cowboy outfit," she advised.

"Cowboy gear," he corrected. "Women wear outfits; men wear gear."

"Whatever," she said. "I'm going to start calling you Cowboy. Everybody else does. Show me your new clothes. I may be able to fit into some of them."

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Chapter 8

On the same day that Bean was trying on Cowboy's new clothes, Granny was lying down on her sofa, enjoying a mid afternoon nap, and dreaming that somebody was tap-tapping on her front door. A voice was calling Granny in the dream too. The tap-tap was insistent enough for her to realize that somebody was at the front door and it wasn't a dream.

"Granny?"

She raised her head off the armrest she had been using as a pillow. "Who's there?" Granny croaked.

The door cracked open and a pale face appeared. It had a certain look. One that she had seen before. A grandchild was in trouble. "Lucas?"

"Hi Granny. Can I come in?"

"Lucas. My goodness. It's Lucas. Sure, you can come in. What time is it?" She was mostly mumbling to herself but Lucas answered anyway.

"1:22 Granny. I'm sorry to wake you."

"No, no. I had to get up now anyway." Granny raised her head in a beginning effort to rise but noticed the goodie crumbs that were covering her apron. She hand-escorted them down to her waist and then gathered the apron into a temporary collection bin. Only when the crumbs were safely contained did she sit up, pivot to place her feet on the floor, and stand up. The stand up part of her plan didn't work too well. The cushions were very soft and the sofa was too low. With her hands holding the apron closed, she didn't have the strength to lift herself off the sofa.

Normally with this sofa, she'd put both hands on the sofa cushions, rock back and forth a few times to get a running start, and then endeavour a launch into the air. Sometimes it took two tries. This time, she attempted a one-handed push off the couch and it didn't work. By now, Lucas was standing in front of her, holding out a hand. Still keeping the crumbs contained inside her apron with her left hand, she held out her right hand. Lucas gripped it tightly and pulled while Granny pushed with her legs unsuccessfully.
Lucas brought his second hand into play and used it to grab her left elbow. Granny pushed with her legs unsuccessfully.

Lucas set his legs in a weight lifter's stance, and heaved mightily. It was like pulling a giant sack of potatoes into the air. Granny rose slowly, but before she was fully upright, her right knee buckled and she had to release her grip on the crumbs in order to stay upright. The crumbs scattered in a successful escape from their crumb-napping. Granny muttered a mild curse that is common in such situations but which Lucas had never heard her use before. He had never heard her use any curse words before, actually. Not wanting to look at her teetering frame, he looked down. The crumbs that had just fallen out of her apron wouldn't be lonely.

[Before my readers start ridiculing Granny's efforts to rise from a sitting position that is too low, beware. This too will happen to you. I speak from first hand experience. The first time you'll notice how hard it is for old people to stand up will probably be when you're sitting on a toilet and that's not the kind of location where you will want to call for help. Getting old is full of embarrassments.]

"Hot chocolate," Granny announced and she lumbered off into the kitchen becoming more upright and more mobile on the way.

"Granny, I don't need..."

"Hush. Hot chocolate first; talk second."

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The hot chocolate drinking scene was now in place. Granny was sitting in a more suitable armchair, her feet on a low stool. A tray of goodies was within reaching distance on a small end table. She had placed an apron on her lap that reached from her neck to her knees. She had a mug of steaming hot chocolate in her right hand.

Lucas, for his part, was sitting in the sofa opposite his granny. He had two plates of goodies within reaching distance. Granny had insisted that he take both plates because she knew how much teenage boys liked their sweets. She encouraged him to polish them all off and she had more if he wanted them. He also had a mug of steaming hot chocolate in his right hand. He didn't particularly want it and was looking surreptitiously for a safe place to deposit it. With what he had to say, he didn't want to lose focus on the speech he
had prepared for this meeting. He'd try to place the mug by his feet as soon as she looked away.

"Now, here's the way this works," Granny started. "I will take a big gulp of hot chocolate and then you'll tell me what's bothering you. I know something is bothering you. Nod if I'm right."

Lucas nodded.

"I'll be surprised at what you say and will spew the hot chocolate all over myself. The apron is here to contain the mess. So... here I go." Granny inhaled a big gulp and held it in her mouth. Her cheeks bulged out a little and she motioned Lucas to begin.

"Granny, I've been dumped by two twins."
"Mrmmph."
"What?"
"Mrmmph," she repeated.
"I don't understand."

Granny swallowed her chocolatey gulp. "I said, that's not good enough. Hit me with your best shot. Come on. I can take it." She inhaled another mouthful of slightly less steaming hot chocolate.

"I didn't do anything wrong?" Lucas offered for consideration.
"Mrmmph." Granny motioned him to continue.
"They won't talk to me?"
"Mrmmph." Another motioning.
"I've had sex with one of them?"

Granny shook her head negatively and swallowed. "Was the one you had sex with an animal?"

"No!"
"You haven't witnessed a pervert in action?"
"No."
"You aren't planning to get pregnant?"
"Granny!"
"Do you think that you like boys more than girls?"
"Granny!"
Granny drained her mug and put it aside. She peered over her tray of goodies and picked out one. Then she peered again and took two more. Settling back into the armchair, she said with confidence, "Tell me everything. I can take it."

"OK," Granny said. "Here's your situation as I see it. You're madly in love. At first, you were in love with one twin but she dumped you for reasons that you don't agree with. You fell in love with the other twin, but the first twin kissed you at a basketball game when the second twin was watching and you were too surprised to react. Now the second twin won't have anything to do with you and the first one won't either. You don't understand why neither girl will talk with you or make any effort to get back together with you. From your perspective, you didn't do anything wrong. You're afraid that you've lost your one true love and you don't know what to do. At first, you were mad about this, but now you're desperate. You can barely function in school; this twin is all you can think about. Is that right?"

"Madly in love and desperate seems a little ..."

"One of them is your true love, right. You and she are intended to be together for the rest of your life?"

"Yes."

"So, admit it. You are madly in love and you're desperately afraid. These emotions are nothing to be ashamed of."

"Yes. You're right."

"And you want help understanding why they treated you this way."

"Yes."

"Tell me about each of the twins."

Lucas took a deep breath and began.

"Lucas, if your girl friends follow the stereotype, blonde bombshells can be conceited, shallow, and demanding. Usually the mother will have given them everything they've ever wanted. Clothes for example. The mother will be reliving her own teenage
years through them and will be reminding them every day to be beautiful and to be popular. They're used to having boys chase them. They have their pick of boyfriends and keep those boys in line by making demands on them. They need attention and if a boyfriend lags in that regard, they'll dump him and pick a new one to take his place. Or they may dump a boyfriend and expect him to come crawling back. That's how they control them."

"That doesn't sound like Lylah or Lohla, Granny. They seem very nice. Besides, I've already tried to come back, but they won't even look at me."

"Perhaps they're expecting expensive gifts?"

"I don't know about that, Granny."

"Fathers of beautiful girls can be doting. Blondes can charm their father as easily as they charm their boyfriends. He'll probably be wrapped around their little finger and will give them anything they want."

"Lylah does have her own copter."

"Any other signs of doting?"

"He pays for her university and has plans for her future. We had to date secretly because she didn't want him to find out."

"That doesn't sound like a doting father. More like a protective father. Did Lohla have to hide you too?"

"He won't have anything to do with Lohla. He's kicked her out of his house actually."

"That's revealing. Is she different in any way from Lylah?"

"Lohla is a take charge kind of girl; Lylah is more easy going."

"What about the mother?"

"Neither twin mentioned her at all."

"She may have had an affair and run away. If she herself was a shallow blonde girl, that would fit the pattern. The twins may be embarrassed by this. The mother's affair would have meant that the twins grew up on their own. Twins are always close; missing a mom would have made them closer. Do they get along well together?"

"They had to have a boyfriend pact stopping them from stealing boyfriends from each other."
"That sounds like they don't get along and one girl stole a boyfriend in the past. When Lylah kissed you in the gym, she was breaking the pact."

"Yeah. But why are both of them mad at me? I didn't kiss Lylah back. I didn't even put my arms around her. What was I supposed to do? Throw her against a wall?"

"Did you enjoy the kiss? Be honest?"

"Yes. It was the best kiss I've ever had."

"Lohla saw that you enjoyed that kiss. Any woman would be able to see that."

"But I didn't know it was coming."

"You didn't, but Lylah did. That kiss was planned in advance. Perhaps not much in advance, but it was planned. You were the lucky recipient of Lylah's A#1 kiss. She wanted you back and she was willing to destroy the boyfriend pact in the process. That suggests that she's a back stabber, at least from Lohla's perspective."

"But why is Lohla mad at me?"

"Because you enjoyed the kiss. She found out that she can't control you like she does her other boyfriends. These kinds of girls are scheming and shallow. As you've seen, they stab each other in the back. If they don't get what they want, they move on to another victim."

"I don't know, Granny. They seem very nice with people. Lylah is very serious about university and was coaching Bean."

"Perhaps they don't fit the stereotype. It's only a theory, Lucas."

"Could you give me another theory?"

"Let's try this. If you want to understand your girlfriend, you can look at the parents. You, for example, are very much like your father. If Lylah or Lohla wanted to know more about you, they'd get a clear picture of what kind of man you are by meeting your father."

"Lylah did ask about our family. She wanted to know Dad's name."

"With the mother not in the family any more, you'll have to learn more about the father. Do you have any idea what he does for a living?"

"Winnie told me a weird story that Cassie was going to kill the twins' father and she wanted me to warn them. I thought she was trying to match make. She was prying for information about who I liked more. You know Winnie."
"Your twins' last name is Richardson?"
"Yes."
"Cassie is going to kill him."
"Why?"
"He murdered her unborn baby and this led to Cassie's death."
"Winnie wanted me to warn the twins."
"Lucas, this is bad. The father of the twins was involved somehow in killing Cassie. The mother may have run off with a lover. What kind of family are you getting involved with?"
"I'm not getting myself involved with that family. The mother probably deserted them, the twins scheme and fight, and a ghost is going to kill the father because he murdered an unborn baby. And they dumped me? Really?"
"It's only a theory, Lucas."
Chapter 9

Wednesday evening. Cowboy was relaxing in his sofa with his foot up on one of the stools and his eyes on the big screen. He was watching an oldy moldy with John Wayne in the title role. In case you don't know this, John Wayne was the king of the cowboys, if cowboys were to put up with any such royal person without filling him full of bullets first. Oldy moldy cowboys had the benefit of owning guns that never ran out of ammunition.

A tap-tap on his apartment door was followed by the creak of it opening. None of Cowboy's barter deals had included oil for squeaky doors. This is not something that Cowboy was in the habit of fixing. Nor was he in the habit of locking his door as was customary for most people who lived in Helena.

"Are you decent, Cowboy?"

"Ayup."

Annika came across the threshold of the door and stood there. All she could see were Cowboy's boots on the stool. Annika's mother insisted that all shoes came off before feet could walk into the apartment. Apparently, Cowboy didn't have a similar prohibition. That doesn't surprise any of my readers, I am sure.

"Come on in, Annika. Is everything OK?"

Annika took two more steps and stopped. She could now see Cowboy's face. "I was going to practice at the range but it's evening and I'm not supposed to go out on my own. Would you come with me? I want to learn how to shoot with my left hand and I will probably mess up a lot."

"Why the left hand?" Cowboy asked the question without taking his eyes off The Duke, which is what people called John Wayne. Given that cowboys would never put up with anybody of royal blood, it seems highly unlikely that having the nickname of a person of royalty would be something that a cowboy would want. But that's what people called him. Mind you, John Wayne wasn't a real cowboy. He was more like Hollywood star royalty, so I guess that explains everything.

"I shouldn't assume that I'd always be able to use my right hand. What if
somebody had grabbed it?"

Cowboy thought the pause that would stop the oldy moldy and looked towards the doorway. Annika was in her range clothes. In spite of assurances that it was not necessary to take such precautions, she was wearing her oldest clothes, which already had numerous blotches. Her outfit was completed by a set of grungy gloves that she used to protect her hands from gunshot residue. They could double as gardening gloves if such use was ever contemplated. Annika was unlikely to become a gardener. That would involve touching dirt.

John Wayne was already on pause. He'd still be in mid quick draw an hour from now. Cowboy retrieved one of his matching guns from their hiding place, put on his cowhide jacket and walked Annika out the door.

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Annika's left hand did need a lot of work. She had trouble keeping her elbow locked straight and the gun aimed directly at the target. Cowboy fixed this by physically straightening her arm and holding her hand and moving it into the correct position. Her grip needed work. Her fingers were not quite positioned properly but he pulled them into the tight grip that she would need. She flinched badly on the first shots, so Cowboy held her arm in place until she became accustomed to the recoil. It was true that she wasn't athletic. She needed his help over several reloads. After that, she was able to shoot on her own.

On the way home, they were passing a Timmy's outlet when she grabbed his hand to stop him and then quickly released it. "Will you let me buy you a doughnut, Cowboy? For your help tonight. I was a real klutz, wasn't I?"

"Nah, you weren't. It's always hard when you have to use a hand that doesn't get much work."

The offer of a doughnut also included something to wash it down with, so they sat for a while talking about Annika's school before heading home.

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"I could help you learn to type faster, Cassie. We used to have keyboards when I was a young girl."

*That's alright, Granny. I'm getting faster at it now.*

Cassie, Doc, and Granny were in their Australian living room waiting for Winnie and Stu to arrive for their meeting. Winnie had said that they needed to talk about their research into very premature babies, or as the literature referred to them – fetuses.

*[Narrator: The first phase of birth is the embryo phase and it lasts from conception to the two-month mark. An unborn baby is known as a fetus from the three-month mark to birth.]*

Granny had four plates of goodies placed strategically around the dining room table. Cassie's spot at the table was empty of goodies but was marked by William's keyboard apparatus and a computer screen. Ghosts can't eat. But they can now type as the steady click of computer keys in the living room indicated.

"How many words per minute now?" Granny asked.

"Twenty."

"I don't mind helping, you know."

At this point, Stu and Winnie entered the living room and this gave Cassie an excuse to not respond. Winnie didn't mess around starting the meeting. "Cassie and I have a problem. We've spent over three weeks on the Internet and we still can't determine when it's illegal to kill a fetus. We need to know so that we can decide if Dr. Richardson's order for fetal tissue killed Cassie's baby and, if so, can he be held accountable."

###

"You're saying, Doc, that nobody agrees when it's illegal to abort a fetus," Winnie wanted to confirm.

"It's all over the map," Doc reiterated. "Different religions have different definitions. Some religions say that it's wrong to even prevent conception from occurring. In other places, if their country's law approved it, fetuses could legally be aborted before
a certain week in the pregnancy. Twenty weeks was once the standard. After that, they could not be aborted except in extreme circumstances like the mother's life being jeopardized. Some countries refused to allow any abortions at all."

"Religion played a huge part in deciding what was legal," Granny continued. "Kashmira's church had strict rules against using birth control, for example. This was a very touchy subject. Everybody in the world had an opinion and some people insisted on trying to force their opinion on others. Doctors who conducted abortions could be assaulted, for example."

"Extremism became the norm as the twenty-first century began," Stu began. "Some countries ruled that a woman who conceived a baby through rape could not abort the baby even early in her term. By law, she had to give birth to her rapist's baby. In some places, that rapist would have visiting rights with his child for eighteen years of the child's life. If he were in prison, the mother had to bring the child to the prison. And, of course, throughout those eighteen years, the mother would have to interact with her rapist. It was all crazy."

"The Troubles made things even worse," Doc took over. "Even now, nobody can agree on what's legal and what's illegal in terms of terminating a pregnancy before birth."

So when a baby was aborted two weeks before its birth, that could be legal?

Stu tried to answer Cassie's question but couldn't say anything definitive.

"Depending on what reason the doctor gave, and where he was, and what religion the mother practiced, ... possibly yes. This area is very cloudy and a judge would be unlikely to issue a clear cut decision."

"All a doctor would have to say is that he feared that the mother's life was compromised and he could argue he was compelled to abort the child," Granny threw a lot of cold water onto the discussion.

So, I can't prove that the doctor that aborted my baby was a murderer. And, I can't accuse Dr. Richardson of any crime whatsoever.

"Not so fast," Stu interjected. "We've been talking about normal pregnancies where parents are trying to form a family. What Garouch was doing was a commercial enterprise where he was making money off the sale of fetal tissues. That changes everything. Richardson could be legally charged in a number of ways."
"Like what?"

"If he knew that girls were being raped to create babies, he could be charged with being an accessory to the rape."

"And?"

"If he knew that Garouch's business plan was to abort the fetus early regardless of the mother's good health, and then sell the fetus tissue for a profit, he could be charged with accessory to murder."

"I thought you said that there was no agreement that aborting fetuses was murder," Winnie expressed confusion.

"I did. But judges and juries would be incensed beyond belief if they had positive proof that fetuses were routinely being aborted in order to make money."

"So, we have Richardson?"

"No, you don't," Granny said. "All he has to do is say that he didn't know how the stem cell tissues he was receiving originated."

"Where else could they come from?" Winnie asked.

"Before The Troubles, some medical research was being done with stem cells taken from adults but this can involve operations and thus risk. Stem cells can also be taken from the blood in a baby's umbilical order – after birth. Both of these are entirely legal. However during The Troubles, all stem cell acquisitions and research became highly controversial and medical proponents of this fetal tissue research were driven underground. But, if they were using stem cells that were collected from adults or from infants after birth, there'd be nothing illegal about it."

"We're back to where we started," Winnie said. "We can't get him. All he has to do is say that he didn't know where his stem cells came from."

"That's what you have to disprove," Stu said. "Find out if he did know or not."

"TiTr time," Winnie said. "It might be best to go into real time when I find something potentially useful."

*I'll view drone data and record what we found.*

"Would you like some help?" Granny asked.

"I'd love it, Granny. You can help me with the time-travel."

*Thank you, God,* Granny thought. *I finally have something to do.*
Thank you, Earth Spirit, Doc thought. Granny finally has something to do.
"I'm really hating basketball right now," Lohla complained. "There's no point in practicing. We suck so bad."

"Any chances of Nary coming back to play?" Lylah asked.

"It's the beginning of February. The season will be over soon. Plus, she looks at me kind of funny. She lives with Theo and Lucas. I think she has taken sides."

"You can't blame her."

"Dreamer probably feels the same way," Lohla predicted. "I liked her."

"I saw Dreamer on campus the other day. She smiled and waved. Would you like to know who else I saw?"

"Who?"

"Tom Showers. Do you remember him?"

"Too Tall Tom?"

"The very same. He's even bigger now. He plays on the varsity team. He asked me for a date."

"Lylah! What did you say?"

"I said I'd get back to him. I thought you might be interested. He has a wicked sense of humour."

"You know what he's called. Second Date Tommy. The word on him is you gotta wear a suit of armour on your second date if you want to keep your virginity. He loses interest real fast if you say No."

"That's why I'm going to say No to a first date. Do you want the date?"

"You're asking because I don't have my virginity to lose?"

"I didn't mean it that way."

"It's true though. Why shouldn't I go on a date? It'll get me out of your apartment. I'm tired of watching you paint your toe nails different colours."

"That was one time and it was an art assignment."

"Sure it was."
"I have a surprise," Cowboy said as Bean walked into his apartment.
"You can cook?"
"No."
"You can sing and dance the hootchie-kootchie?"
"I believe I shot one of those once. Does it look like a squirrel that fell into a liquor still and drank the entire contents?"
"Not even close. I take it you can't sing and dance yet."
"I'd suck so bad."
"Those are all of my dreams for you. Anything else will be a disappointment. What's your surprise?"
"I have a job downtown that pays money."
"Really?"
"Really. May I give you my card, Ma'am?"
...
"Private investigator? Is that like a private detective."
"Pretty much."
"You go around finding people who are cheating on their spouses and have to catch them in the act and take pictures?"
"That's part of what this firm does."
"Do you even know what sex is?"
"I did last Sunday. But, that was seven whole days ago. I may have forgotten."
"Well, if it means helping you to do your new job better, we could, you know..."

"I'm not interested in researching Dr. Richardson, Winnie. I have my studies. Organic chemistry is worse than calculus. I suck so bad at this. I don't know why Jock wants me to know all this. I'm never going to use all this theoretical stuff."

"That's OK, Lucas. We have the TiTr research on Dr. Richardson all ready to go. Granny will help me. We can handle it without you."
"I'm never going to use this theoretical crap, Wiz."
"You don't know that, Dreamer. You might."
"I'm never going to do this kind of business. And I certainly don't need this crap to run the type of business I like."
"The Wilizy is going out of the business of having businesses, Dreamer. You won't be able to do any more Wilizy projects."
"And without a business degree, nobody else would look at me."
"Yah."
"This sucks so bad."
"You could change programs, I bet. You could go to summer school to catch up."
"Any idea what?"
"Something associated with businesses so that you'd be in an environment you liked."

That was Sunday. It's now Wednesday evening, shooting range evening, and Annika was back knocking at Cowboy's door.
"Something is wrong with my shooting. Could you take a look? Please?"
So, off they went to the range and yes, Annika's form had deteriorated. She was anticipating the recoil and twisting her body. Cowboy diagnosed the problem quickly enough and told her what to do to cure it. But she had difficulty stopping her shoulder rotation.
"I can't stop from turning my shoulders a bit just before I shoot. Could you stand behind me please?"
"Here?"
"Closer."
"Here?"
"Right behind me. Good. Could you put your hands on my shoulders and stop them from moving when I shoot?"
That arrangement worked wonders and Annika made it through two reloads without missing her target. Cowboy stepped back from her, but she hadn't muscle-memorized the action and he had to come forward again and put his hands on her shoulders and hold her tight. They went through two more reloads successfully.

"My goodness, you have strong hands," she said as they were packing up.

Once again, Timmy's was the pause in their walk home. They spent the time there talking about Cowboy's new job. In that discussion, he warned Annika that he might be working evenings in the city and that might mean he couldn't help her with her shooting.

Annika didn't say anything on the way to her apartment. She did turn and thank him as she entered her home and then closed the door. This sucks so bad.

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Chapter 12

The company name on Cowboy's business card matched the name on the door of a fifth floor suite of offices on Bloor Street, namely O'Flaherty's Discreet Inquiries (ODI). The owner, O'Flaherty, had a florid complexion complete with a bulbous red nose. What with the ample belly, a stint as Santa Claus during the Christmas season was theoretically possible. Unfortunately, the owner's first name was Megan so she wasn't going to be Father Claus and wearing the elf's costume was, well shall we say, a little ambitious.

Megan O'Flaherty ran a very effective private detective agency that was well known within the Toronto law enforcement industry. One of their specialties was taking on cases where the police had come to a dead end and the victimized family had posted a substantial reward for investigative results leading to a conviction. The police would recommend O'Flaherty to the victims and confidential files would be discretely copied and slipped to the agency. In previous times, money might be slipped back to the Lieutenant in charge. But not now. The days of graft in the police department were over.

All of O'Flaherty's detectives worked from their own homes meaning that ODI did not maintain a big office in downtown Toronto. They had a reception area complete with receptionist, one office for Megan, and another for their accountant, Megan's daughter Aideen. Cowboy was in the first office, sitting across the desk from Megan.

Megan O'Flaherty explained that ODI took on just about anything that required a discreet inquiry including *Spousal Research* as it was called. Business fraud was a big-ticket item for them and their customers included company presidents asking ODI to investigate other businesses who were looking to take over their own business, for example. Or, they'd investigate competitors who were perhaps flying a little too close to the shady side of the street. The key employee in these kinds of cases was Megan's daughter, the accountant. Megan had hired Cowboy to take on cases where rewards were being offered. Chasing down *missing people* was one of the primary tasks.

But not on his first case. Loris Seymour was not missing. She had been found lying on the expensive parquet floor of the foyer to her home in Toronto's Forest Hill neighbourhood. Police had been unable to ask her why she was lying on her expensive
floor because she was dead from a single blow to her head. Although the corpse was not talking, the detective assigned to the case (Aloysius – call me Louie – Tubb) had a good idea what had happened. A downstairs window had been broken from the outside. Some of the glass fragments had been tracked further into the house. Three valuable paintings were tied into a single package and were leaning up against the door to the coat cupboard in the foyer, apparently ready for transportation. A heavy marble vase was there as well and it also was worth stealing. Mrs. Seymour's house key was in the lock to the front door. A baseball bat was lying on the floor of the foyer and it had bloodstains where you would expect it to have bloodstains. Mrs. Seymour's injuries were linked directly to the bat, which had samples of her blood and hair all over it. The killer was right handed. The bat was commonly found in Toronto's youth baseball league's dugouts during baseball season.

Tubb's investigation focused on house burglars. He reasoned that a burglary in progress had been interrupted by Mrs. Seymour's entrance. Other than the items at the door, nothing else in the house had been disturbed. That meant they had nothing stolen to search for, no fences to grill, and no pawnshops to walk through. No fingerprints were on the bat. The time of death was early evening. The coroner could not be more precise. Police officers canvassed every house in a two-block radius and found nobody who had seen Mrs. Seymour come home. Tubb put an Inactive label on the file at the end of the week arguing that they had no leads to which of Toronto's growing number of house burglars might have murdered the woman. Mrs. Seymour's mother didn't like hearing that and went to ODI.

"Tubb's a good man," Megan O'Flaherty told Cowboy. "We wouldn't want to embarrass him unnecessarily. He's given us a copy of the full file."

"Are you suggesting that I go through the motions?" Cowboy asked quietly. Cowboy was all business, as was his clothing: a dark gray charcoal suit, white shirt, dark blue tie and black shoes. His long hair was gathered together into a discrete bun at the back of his head.

"No. We want the reward. Typically, you'll receive 30 per cent of the reward money but I'll give you 50 per cent since this is your first case. All of your expenses come out of your 50 per cent."
"What's the reward worth?"

"$20,000."

"Any instructions on what I can't do as part of my investigation?"

"Don't get caught."

# # # # # # # #

"Susie, is it customary for you to make initial contact with the person offering the award to introduce me?" Cowboy posed that question to the receptionist. Her name was on a nameplate at the front of her desk. "It will assure Mrs. Bradshaw that I am who I say I am."

"You have a business card."

"Anybody can run off a business card."

"Anybody can make a phone call."

"Susie, make the phone call," Megan bellowed from her office. "Tell Mrs. Bradshaw that she can talk with me directly if she wishes."

"When would you like to meet with Mrs. Bradshaw?" Susie asked.

"At her convenience. I'll wait here while you call."

Cowboy read the case report in the reception area. It didn't take long. Naturally, the husband had been questioned. He and his wife had been getting along fine. He had no motive for killing his wife. The security system was off because they rarely turned it on because of too many false alarms. Cowboy spent most of his time going over the pictures of the murder scene. The appointment with Mrs. Bradshaw was set for tomorrow (Tuesday) at 10 a.m.

Cowboy used the city's metro service to find the Seymour house and walk by it. He put the name of the security company protecting the house into his pinky ring computer, used a Toronto map to find the location of the firm, and made another trip on the city metro. He flashed his sheriff's badge at the security company's receptionist and said, "I'm investigating the Seymour murder. I need to speak with somebody in charge."

That produced a man who took Cowboy into a small office and listened to his request for the file on the Seymour house that revealed when it was turned on and off, as well as any record of false alarms. The man declined, citing privacy concerns. In Helena,
nobody had ever refused to give Cowboy information. Usually, the information came with coffee and dessert. Heck, people offered him help for crimes that hadn't been committed yet.

"I understand," Cowboy said although he didn't. "I'll need you to give me a signed document saying that you have refused to cooperate on an ongoing murder investigation. We'll be going to a public trial soon. Do we haul you into court to answer our questions or should it be your boss?"

Cowboy returned to his apartment and quickly changed into more comfortable clothes. After ten minutes perusing the house security data, he put the odds of identifying the murderer at 60 per cent.

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Cowboy learned from Mrs. Bradshaw that the Seymours were not getting along, although she had not been able to give Detective Tubb proof of that. She told Cowboy that she was always unhappy about the marriage because she felt that her daughter had married somebody below her station. With their assistance, Brian Seymour had stepped into a job with the exclusive Rosedale Golf Club where he was given the position of Assistant Pro. Rosedale Golf Club had been originally founded in 1893 and it often appeared from watching the foursomes creep around the course that some of the original members were still playing. The course was challenging with narrow fairways and heavily treed surroundings. The geriatric foursomes took a long time to make their way around the course. Those who wanted quick rounds signed up for the early bird specials.

Mrs. Bradshaw did know the names of two of her daughter's closest friends and yes, she would arrange for Cowboy to meet both of them at the same time. She also acknowledged that she had a key to the Seymour house and knew the security passcode. She was happy to take Cowboy through the house that very afternoon when the golfer was at work. She was also happy to leave the key with him in case Cowboy wanted to have a quiet visit again.

Later that evening, Cowboy put the odds of identifying the murderer at 80 per cent. The idea of an interrupted burglary in the Seymour house did not make any sense. If the robbers were experienced, they'd know that the paintings that they had selected to
take with them would be hard to fence. If the robbers were inexperienced, why would they take paintings that they knew nothing about? Why wouldn't they take other valuables that were easily found in the house? Why would they elect to take their stolen goods out the front door when the back door was much more private?

On Wednesday, Cowboy donned his citified finery again and inquired about purchasing a membership at the Rosedale Golf Club. He was rebuffed politely. *The Club has a very long waiting list.* They didn't actually escort him off the premises, so Cowboy managed to wander around the main building. Pictures of the club executive and staff were posted prominently and he found Seymour's picture in the bottom right corner, next to Head of Catering. Another mistaken turn later, he wandered into the Pro Shop where members could buy golf wear and equipment, book tee times, and arrange for lessons from the Pros. Cowboy noticed that Seymour had a number of coaching rounds scheduled for next week, but the Head Pro had more. Cowboy didn't find any baseball bats for sale, but he did notice that Brian Seymour had strong arms and a big chest. Golf club swings weren't all that much different from baseball bat swings. The odds of finding the killer were now 90 per cent.

Later that night, Cowboy was lying crossways on his sofa mulling how he could actually prove that Seymour had committed the murder when he heard a tap-tap on his door and Annika's face appeared. "Are you ready for the range, Cowboy?" she asked. He had forgotten all about her; luckily, Annika had remembered.

This time, Annika was having difficulty because Cowboy had told her that she should take a deep breath before she shot. But she didn't know how deep a breath to take. If Cowboy put his hands around her rib cage, he would be able to tell her whether she was taking in enough air. She demonstrated with her own hands on Cowboy's body where she thought they should be placed.

Cowboy was about to oblige and then noticed that his hands would be almost in the DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING HERE TERRITORY. He stepped back and said that he'd be able to see her breathing from a distance. Annika had a terrible time shooting that evening and blamed it all on her being a klutz. As usual, they went to Timmy's on the
way home, and since she was so upset, Cowboy paid.

    # # # # # # # #

Thursday's meeting with Mrs. Seymour's best friends raised the odds of finding the murderer to one hundred per cent. The couple was fighting a lot. Mrs. Seymour had confided to her friends that she had met with a divorce lawyer although she hadn't told her husband that yet. She was in the process of making a list of all of their assets and indicating which she had brought into the marriage, and which she had not. That would be a factor in the divorce. The house would be hers, for example.

Cowboy asked the friends if they knew enough about Seymour's schedule to accidentally bump into him. They assured him that they did. "Here's what I'd like you to say to him privately," Cowboy said. "I'll be around in case he causes trouble."

"But not dressed like that," the smarter of the two women said.

"No, Ma'am. I save these duds for special occasions such as a meeting with y'all."

"I probably could use a little rehearsal on what my role in your little play will be," the same woman said and then looked at him with what she thought was her best come-hither look.

"Well Ma'am, if I may be so bold to say, you need a rehearsal like chickens need feathers."

Cowboy was blind to subtle sexual invitations. He didn't understand the language of arched eyebrows, lip licks, and hair tosses. He would probably have gotten the message she was trying to send if she had stripped off all her clothes and then howled at the moon. It being daylight, he was spared that experience.

    # # # # # # # #

Friday night, Loris Seymour's two best friends confronted Brian Seymour as he approached the washroom in his favorite bar. They pushed up against him and started with comments on how poor he had been as a husband. They went on from there. With another man approaching the washroom, they ended with:

    One friend said, "We know what you did. You won't get away with it."
    The other added, "We know people you wouldn't want to meet."
Saturday afternoon, Cowboy visited the gun shop where the owner had given him free ammo for life. Again, he appeared in cowboy attire. He asked the owner about sound suppression equipment and opened up the carrying case on his sniper rifle.

"Sniper rifle," the gun owner commented neutrally. "I haven't seen one of those in Toronto yet. Are you a hunter?"

"How long have you been in Toronto," Cowboy asked – not because he was interested but strictly to change the subject.

"Not long. May I handle it?"

"You know about asking permission."

"Had one of those myself. Not as good as this though."

"Feel free," Cowboy permitted. "I don't want any noise at all and the range will be limited. Are you ex-military?"

"Yeah. By limited distance, do you mean less than a kilometer? Are you ex-military too?" The owner could have been holding a tiny baby he was so careful.

"A-yup. Range will be less than 150 metres. Where'd you serve?"

"Scandinavia. You?" The owner returned the gun to Cowboy, turned away and started pulling drawers open.

"You've come a long way. What brought you here? I served in Mexico."

"Long way for you too. I figured you were from the southern states what with your clothes."

"I spent some time there."

"This baby will give you what you need. I'll let you screw it on. Ammo stores are behind me – help yourself. Give it a good test downstairs."

Cowboy did and then came upstairs and paid. The owner apologized that he had to charge an ex-military man, but business was slow.
Chapter 13

If Winnie had thought that she'd be in charge of the search for incriminating evidence on Dr. Richardson, she would have to think again. The natural order of things asserted itself very quickly.

"Cassie, when did they take out your baby?" Granny asked.

May 3, 2052.

"We should go back to that date and look for evidence of the shipment to Dr. Richardson in Garouch's office."

"OK, but I get to search the office," Winnie tried to assert herself.

"Of course, Dear. This is your investigation. I'm just helping."

Right.

# # # # # # # #

Winnie and Granny TiTr'd to the orphanage one week after Cassie's baby was harvested. Winnie successfully broke into Garouch's office and found Cassie's file. It contained two invoices, the second of which was to Dr. Richardson. That invoice listed the contents of the shipment as *Research Materials*.

That discovery almost shut down their investigation right there. In a court of law, if that vague invoice were submitted as evidence, Richardson could easily claim that he didn't know what exactly was in the shipment. Winnie started browsing through other files. All the invoices said exactly the same thing.

"We could make copies of all of the files; that would give us a list of his clients," Winnie messaged Granny who was standing watch in the hallway outside the office.

"That's a lot of copying. What would you do with the information?"

"I don't know, but it's better than going back empty handed."

"OK. Cassie will be disappointed."

"Hang on. I found a list of all of his clients including addresses. I'm copying it now."
The client list had thirty-eight names and addresses. All of the clients were doctors. Fifteen were located in Asia, eleven in Europe, and twelve in North America. Eight of the North American clients were scattered around the United States. Mexico had three and Canada had one.

"How does this help us?" Winnie asked Cassie.

*We can find all of them and search their records.*

"They all received the same invoice. Some may be innocent of any wrongdoing. They could think that they were receiving legitimate fetal tissues." Granny wasn't being particularly inspiring.

... 

"How did all of these doctors find out about Garouch's services?" Winnie posed the question.

"Word of mouth?" Granny theorized.

*We'd never get anything legally incriminating with word of mouth.*

"What if they all heard about Garouch in a meeting?" Winnie asked. "And what if they were told in that meeting exactly what Garouch would them? What then?"

*We'd have him.*

"We'll need to involve TG and his computer skills," Granny advised. "Is everybody OK with that?"

"He's an honourary female," Winnie agreed to his involvement.

*What's TG going to do?*

"Give us a chance to find out when and where they met. He can put drones above all of the homes of the North American doctors, computerize the incoming data in real time, and send us notices if any doctor's copter leaves but does not return within forty-eight hours. We figure that any meeting would take at least that long just in the travel time."

*When should he start the search?*

"Melissa dated the beginning of Garouch's business as 2045," Winnie remembered.

"What about January 2044?" Granny posed and everybody agreed.
Latter when Cassie and Winnie were alone at night, they shared some concerns. "We should ask TG to put a drone above the freezer with an alarm bell if the lid goes up."

*She's having difficulty moving with all of her weight.*

"The freezers are full of goodies. Why don't you feed some to the birds?"

*You should take more breaks during the day. Go for walks with her, Winnie.*

###

Granny and Winnie attended a mini-conference in May 2044 that had been restricted to stem cell scientists. Eight of the twelve North American scientists were in a small conference room in Dallas Texas. The two-day meeting consisted of a keynote speaker encouraging attendees to pursue their research in spite of having to stay hidden from public scrutiny. This was followed by nine half-hour presentations by scientists on their ongoing research. A question and answer period followed. The primary focus during this session was on the practicalities of conducting research, such as: distributing results; finding trained laboratory assistants who could keep their mouths shut, and ordering sufficient fetal tissue samples to experiment on.

One of the American scientists brought a single page flyer from an Australian man who was offering fetal tissues that were collected from aborted babies. The price was high, but everybody in the meeting took down the details of the offer. The man who brought the flyer burned it publicly after making this statement: "We must be very careful that this man not be hindered in his services by Neanderthals attempting to discourage scientific progress. Share this information only with people who can be trusted."

Granny asked TG to search Garouch's 2044 computer files for this flyer but TG found nothing. Winnie conducted a more thorough search through Garouch's paper files and found no copy of this flyer. But even if they did find the flyer, Richardson was not at that meeting. Unless they could find a copy of that flyer in Richardson's possession, their chances of finding incriminating evidence on him were slim.
Chapter 14

Sunday afternoon February 20, Cowboy told Bean about the previous Wednesday night and Annika's difficulty with her breathing.

"She wanted you to do what?"
"Use my hands to measure how much her chest was expanding."
"Show me where she wanted your hands."
Cowboy didn't mind obliging in this case.
"Can't you see how close your hands are to my breasts?" [Since Bean's clothes were scattered throughout the apartment, this is a question Cowboy should have been able to answer. Truth be told, even a blind man could answer that question. Personally, I believe that men are equipped with sonar-producing hands which tell them accurately how much further they have to lift their grubby little paws to reach pay dirt in such situations.]

"That's why I stepped back. I don't think she realized what a compromising position she was putting herself in."

Bean snorted. "Women know exactly where a man's hands are at all times when they're on a date," she revealed. [To my male readers: We can actually feel air molecules moving if your groping little hand get within groping distance in a grope tempting place. That's why we can slap it away so quickly.]

"But we weren't on a date."
"You stopped off at Timmy's and you paid. That's a date."
"But she was upset. It seemed like the right thing to do."
Bean elevated her snort to a guffaw. "Tell me about all of the times she touched you or she encouraged you to touch her."

[My readers already know the answer to that question. You have the time to get liquid refreshments.]

..."Have you ever heard of a young girl having a crush on an older guy?"
"No."
"Have you been in a community where there are young girls?"
"Army camps don't have young girls."
"Of course. Sorry about the snort. You wouldn't understand about crushes and how sneaky girls can be. Let me tell you."

[If my female readers want to heat up some goodies too, you have the time. To my male readers: I have already revealed too many of our secrets. You're on your own from here on.]

. . .
"I didn't realize. Would a girl with a crush actually try to seduce a grown man?"
"Hard to say. Depends on the girl. She would have daydreamed about the touches and, in her mind, they would have been expressions of love from the man. She might indicate somehow that she was willing to go further and let the man take the first step."
"She would interpret any touch as that first step?"
"Perhaps. Last Wednesday, Annika's crush was approaching sexual territory. It wouldn't surprise me if she didn't ask for lessons on how to shoot from a prone position soon. Naturally, you'd have to lie down on the ground beside her. She'd be fantasizing about that even now. She'll have planned this out, you know."
"What should I do?"
"Make yourself scarce this coming Wednesday. I'll be here and will take over the job of range instructor. She has to realize that you're unavailable."
"She's a good kid. You'll tell her gently, right?"
"Of course."

# # # # # # #

On Monday, Brian Seymour was playing eighteen holes with a hook-swinging man and giving personal instruction on the way. Each had their own golf cart and as Seymour was entering his, the windshield on the cart exploded. His playing partner was the first to respond.
"Man, I didn't even see that golf ball. Where'd it go?"
Seymour looked but didn't find the ball. He texted back to the pro shop that they should send a clean up crew out to the eleventh hole and he waited there until it had
arrived so that other golfers wouldn't use the hole and tramp windshield fragments onto the green.

An hour later, Seymour was entering his cart after his tee shot on the fifteenth hole (par three, dog leg right, bunkers front and back) when the front tire on his cart exploded as he stepped past it. Suspicious, he and his partner examined the tire and found a hole. But Seymour couldn't remember hearing a noise. Certainly, no noise of a gun shot. He and his partner finished the round, but Seymour's head was on a swivel the whole time.

# # # # # #

Early Tuesday morning, Seymour was on the course early, but this time he was working on the eighteenth green with a man who couldn't read greens. They'd have ample time for him to work on this difficult hole before the early birds reached the eighteenth hole. Seymour was on the far side of the green, in position to see his student's putt, when there was a definite crack of a shot. Both men looked up with a jerk. The student was the first to see the furrow of the bullet that had embedded itself in the green a few feet in front of Seymour. Both decided to terminate the lesson early. Seymour told his boss that he had to tend to some legal issues arising from his wife's estate and he would have to take the rest of the week off.

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Wednesday, Seymour stayed in the house the whole day and never attempted to use his copter. If he had, certain alterations that Cowboy had made to the copter's ignition switch would have made that impossible. Cowboy remained on surveillance the entire day and early evening.

Back at his apartment, Annika tapped on his door at the usual time and opened it to find Bean sitting on the sofa. She was wearing military fatigues. "I was wondering if Cowboy was ready to take me to the range?" Annika asked.

"He's busy tonight. He asked me to go with you. What's with the sleeping bag?"

"I was hoping he'd teach me how to shoot from a prone position. It would be good to know how to aim the gun if I had slipped and fallen."
"And the sleeping bag?"
"It's more comfortable than lying on cement."
"Cement won't do those nice clothes any good."
"Everything else was in the laundry."

Bean checked the two holsters on her belt – two shooters would be at the range tonight. "I usually wear military fatigues like this when I go out on a shooting range," she said to Anika as they left the apartment. "Did you know that I used to be in the military?"
"No, I didn't know that."
"Shooting is kind of a hobby for me."

Bean had given Annika the basic theory in how to hold the gun while lying flat and had then stepped back to let her work at it. She observed that spread sideways, the opened sleeping bag would have handled two prone bodies easily. As she had expected, the store's range was empty except for them.

"You did fine," she complimented as Annika finished her last round and stood up. Bringing the target paper in, she observed, "Two of your shots hit the inner circle and three made the outer ring. Not bad."

"Not good for forty-eight shots. Cowboy would have helped me more."

"Your biggest problem is holding the gun steady. That just takes practice. Run a clean target down to the end of the range and I'll show you something that good shooters are able to do."

Bean kicked the sleeping bag out of the way, undid the holster belt and put it aside, laid face down on the ground, and waited for Annika to signal that the target was in place and she was out of the way. "If you are shooting against somebody shooting back at you, you can't stay in the same place after each shot. If your first shot misses, you're a sitting duck for his first shot. You have to move. Like this."

Bean shot once and then made a full roll to her right and shot again. She repeated six times but was unpredictable with her rolls. Six shots, twelve seconds total. "Bring the target in," she said as she stood up, brushed herself off, and reloaded the gun. "How many shots hit the target?"
"Six."
"Where did they hit?"
"Inner ring."
"Whereabouts in the inner ring?"
"Bulls-eye, all six times."

"The kind of target practice you've been doing is good, but don't believe for a second that it's the real thing. Enemies shoot back. You have to learn how to shoot on the move and know where you want the bullet to go. If I have a clear unobstructed shot, I normally aim for the forehead. If the target is moving, I aim for the chest. Death is instantaneous in both cases."

It was a quiet walk until they reached home.

"Word of advice, Annika. If you're at a shooting range, other people there will be men and they'll all be enjoying the panty flashes that you're giving them with that short skirt."

"Laundry!" Annika tried to excuse wearing the shortest skirt she had in her closet.

"Guns are good when your enemy is some distance away from you. But for you, you're more likely to be confronted by a boy who is bigger and stronger than you and is in your face before you know it. A gun will not do you any good. You need something else. Put the sleeping bag down and face me."

Annika did.
"Make a fist and swing it at my nose."
"Oww, ooww, ooow, ooow, ooowww. Let go of my hand!"
Bean did.
"That hurt," Annika said as she rubbed her wrist.
"That's the point. Make the boy hurt so bad that he forgets why he's going after you. I could have broken your wrist with that hold. I could shatter your ankle with a kick," she added.
"Owww owwww oww."
"That was a tap. Or I could break all your toes with a stomp ..."
"Owww, owww, ow." Annika limped out of range. "Stop doing that."
"That was just a tap. Cowboy has a full time job now working as a private
investigator and he says that he's sorry but he can't give you any more instruction on the gun range. I don't think you need it. Did you want help learning some martial arts? The first thing I'll teach you is how to fall so that you don't hurt yourself. You won't be practicing to fall on a sleeping bag because that never happens in real life."

"I don't think I'd like martial arts."

"I'll be seeing Cowboy on a regular basis seeing as how I'm his girlfriend and he's my boyfriend. Let me know if you change your mind."

Bean was more than a girl friend to Cowboy; she was also his accomplice. That position opened up late Thursday afternoon after Bean had finished with her classes. Using the Seymour house key Mrs. Bradshaw had left with Cowboy, she slipped into the house when Seymour was distracted by some loud knocks on the front door along with a male voice shouting, "Parcel delivery."

Seymour didn't answer the door although he did go the door and look out through a side window. He hesitated there, peeking at the parcel and wondering if somebody were just outside the door. Curiosity proved to be compelling and he opened the door and put his head through the opening. Nobody was in sight and Seymour had a clear view of the front yard. The delivered parcel sat in plain sight saying, effectively, Pick me up. Pick me up. Seymour did. He didn't see his name on the address. He did see an address that was four houses down. That prompted him to punt the package into the front yard. When he came back into his house and turned to shut the door, he felt a hand squeezing his neck. Seymour regained consciousness in a place he couldn't see, being hampered in that regard by a blindfold of some kind over his eyes. He would have explored that covering with one or other of his hands, but both were tied together; as were both feet. In fact, all four limbs were tied together. A rope around his neck kept him from moving very far had he wanted too. You might say that Seymour had been roped and hogtied just like a calf in a rodeo would be constrained. Except, Seymour wasn't in a rodeo. He was on the floor of the bathroom on the main floor of his house. The rope around his neck was securely attached to the base of the toilet and not to a cowboy's hand. The half roll of toilet paper that had been scrunched and then stuffed into his mouth muffled his call for
help. That last part of his capture wasn't in typical rodeos either. At least none that I've ever seen.

Eventually Seymour's muffled cries for help were heard. The door to the bathroom opened.

"I've almost finished robbing you," a feminine voice said. "You had some good stuff upstairs. Your wife's jewelry on her bureau was excellent. She also had a collection of jewelry boxes that I can sell individually. I found your safe. I've taken all of her evening gowns but I can't say that I like the furs. They'd be attractive to some collectors but I don't believe in cruelty to animals, so I've left them on the floor. I didn't see anything in your bedroom that I wanted. I could have taken your cheap suits and given them to vagrants, but your copter is almost full. Nice electronic toys. Big screens will sell well."

"Mppph."

"I'll be doing the ground floor now and will hit the basement last. I'll check in with you before I leave for the combination to your safe. The guy who's going to kill you is due here at midnight. He wanted me to get you ready, but I couldn't find any tarps to control the blood loss. I put you in the bathroom instead. He'll probably put you in the shower stall before he starts on you. That way your blood will disappear down the drain. He's ticked off that he had to hang around after his three shots missed. That meant he had to give up another gig. Ta-ta for now."

The door closed. Periodically, Seymour heard doors being opened and closed. Time passed extremely slowly. Then the bathroom door opened again.

"Are you willing to tell me the combination for the safe?"

Seymour nodded vigorously, or as vigorously as the ropes allowed. She'd have to remove the gag.

Which she did.

"Why are you killing me?"

"I'm not killing you. I'm robbing you. You won't need any of this stuff after tonight. I could rob you after you're dead I suppose, but the smell of blood usually makes me want to hurl. I can't say that I agree with what the guy does in these messy situations. Apparently, the people who ordered the kill wanted you to suffer. I don't like cruelty to
animals, not even to the likes of you."

"You're setting me up to be butchered!"

"I'm just robbing you. What happens afterwards is none of my affair. My arrangement with the guy who's going to kill you is he tells me in advance when he has a contract and I get to rob first and take anything that I want. He kills after I'm gone and keeps all the money from the contract. The arrangement works well for both us. What's your safe's combination?"

"Why is he killing me?"

"Duh."

"OK, so my wife didn't die from a break-in, but I had nothing to do with it."

"Sure. Keep telling yourself that. Combination?"

"How about we make a deal? I'll give you access to lots of money; you untie these ropes before you leave."

"Nah. I don't need the guy hunting me down. No money in the world is worth that. No thanks. I gotta unlock the door for the guy. Back in a sec."

... 

"I have plenty of loot from this robbery now. I don't need what's in the safe, so holding out on me won't work. Last chance. I'm running out of time. My deal with this guy is that I don't ever see his face. I expect it's because he's extraordinarily ugly."

Bean stuck her tongue out at Cowboy who returned the favour. He had been there the whole time.

"I've been robbing my wife for years. She found out about it and that's why she started to plan a divorce. That's why I had to kill her."

"Save me the sob story. I don't care about you killing your wife. So long as she didn't suffer."

"I only swung the bat once. She was going to sign divorce papers. It was only one swing. She died right away."

"Where'd you get the bat?"

"I kept it in the front closet in case a burglar broke into the house."

"Where's the large amount of money? I doubt it's in the safe. She'd have access to that."
"I have a safety deposit box in my name only. Toronto Dominion Bank downtown. You go into the vault with me and I'll give you everything."

Bean turned off the recording device, extracted the bot, and gave it to Cowboy. "Nah. I'm content with the arrangement I have with this guy now. See yah."

###

Friday morning saw Cowboy's cowboy persona sitting in his boss' office. Boots, Stetson, long hair and all.

Megan O'Flaherty looked him up and down and frowned. "Tubb said that your bot gave them all the evidence they needed. Seymour's confession on tape will be admitted into evidence and the money was in the TD Bank as he said. They'll play that tape in court and that will do it."

"The woman's voice?"

"It will be garbled to protect her identity. They'll say she was part of a sting operation conducted by the police department. That will give them some good press. The money won't come in until the trial verdict is announced but I'll advance you half of it now. Obviously, you need more clothes. Why didn't you play the part of the robber?"

"I was Plan B in case that didn't work. As the assassin, I would agree to murder the two women who had ordered the hit for all his money, but I'd want something to hold over Seymour's head first: details of his murder. You said that Tubb was a good detective. He wasn't. There's no way that the evidence pointed to a robbery."

"I didn't say he was a good detective. I said he was a good man. He is a pleasant man, but totally unsuited to being a homicide detective. We receive a lot of reward cases off Tubb's bungled investigations. It was obvious who killed her. The difficulty was in proving it. Are you going to cough up some details?"

"All you need to know is that I didn't get caught."

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"I've been thinking a lot about Father recently," Lylah said. She and Lohla were lying on their bed that Friday night, not quite ready to sleep yet. Just talking. Lohla had been out on a date with Second Date Thompson – a date that had ended abruptly. Afterwards, Lohla had spent some time getting a few things off her chest. Those things were her date's fingerprints. Second Date Thompson would now be known in Richardson circles as First Date Thompson.

"What kind of thoughts about Father?" Lohla asked.
"I'm going to do what I should have done years ago."
"Brush your teeth first thing in the morning?"
"No, I'm serious. I'm going to break my contract with Father."
"Really?"
"It's illegal. He can't hold me to it. I was too young to know what I was doing."
"When will you tell him?"
"Tomorrow before I change my mind."
"I'll go up with you."
"Moral support only. I need to do this on my own."
"You're making the right decision. Put the date on the calendar. Saturday, February 26, 2089, the slave set herself free."

The contract in question was signed on June 2, 2080 – the twins' ninth birthday. Dr. Richardson had explained to Lylah that he was just formalizing an agreement that was already in place. He explained that this kind of contract was common and was legally binding, meaning that he had to do what he was promising to do, and Lylah had to do what she was promising to do. She would be breaking the law if she didn't. He read the contract to her and asked if she wanted to sign it. Lylah had nodded her head, influenced in part by the huge row that her father and Lohla had just had. Lohla was going to go outside and play with her friends and wouldn't be imprisoned in the lab any longer and
she didn't care what he did, she wasn't going to be a slave any longer.

After Lohla had stomped out, Lylah's father explained that Lohla's increasing disobedience would probably mean that his Plasma Surgery invention would fail and people would die as a result. Lots of people could be saved by his research but he needed help now that their mother wasn't here. Lohla was being selfish by refusing to help the family and that would mean people would die. It would be like murder. He really leaned on the word. Would Lylah work on his research with him and help him save lives instead? Lylah had nodded yes. She was finding school ridiculously easy but working in the lab was interesting and challenging. She signed the contract knowing that she wouldn't be able to break it without having to appear in front of a judge who would probably ask some questions about her mother. She didn't want to do that. The contract boiled down to the following responsibilities:

• Lylah would perform necessary domestic duties around the Richardson family home until she graduated from high school.
• She would enroll in a scientific program at the University of Toronto where she would earn a bachelor's degree and at least one scientific postgraduate degree.
• She would work thirty days each summer at minimum wage in Dr. Richardson's lab unless she gave ample notice. In such situations, she would make up the missed days the next summer.
• She would not enter into any serious relationship with a man without her father's permission. Such permission would be withheld if the young man did not agree in writing that Lylah's work on Plasma Surgery would always come first.
• She would not have any children in that relationship except as approved by Dr. Richardson.
• She would fulfill other responsibilities as identified by Dr. Richardson if they were needed to advance the research on Plasma Surgery.

For his part, Dr. Richardson agreed to take responsibilities for his daughter Lylah as follows:

• He would provide a roof over head and other necessities for her healthy upbringing.
• He would pay all fees and expenses related to her schooling from this date until she graduated from a postgraduate scientific degree at the University of Toronto. This commitment would be canceled if Lylah interrupted her studies for any non-approved purpose.

• He would train her in the application of Plasma Surgery techniques without charge. Once he approved her for work with patients, she could keep all of the fees that she earned without being obligated to make any payment to Dr. Richardson.

• He would include her name as a co-contributor in any research papers that he wrote.

• He would recognize her as a co-contributor on any awards that Plasma Surgery received such as a Nobel Prize. If there were a monetary component to any such recognition, she would receive 50 per cent.

• All of the above benefits that Lylah might receive would be cancelled if she broke any of the commitments she had agreed to in her part of this contract. She would then be required to pay him back for everything he had done for her.

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Chapter 16

Winnie wasn't going to quit looking for evidence on Dr. Richardson even though Cassie had indicated that she was quite willing to keep the last stone carving as a souvenir. Cassie was spending most of her time working on the schooling bots that Doc had provided. Now that she could read the bots on her own, she was flying through her studies and working on them at least twenty hours a day. Doc had enrolled her in a formal high school distance education program offered out of Melbourne University under her real name, Cassie Jaitmatang, but born February 19, 2077. He figured revealing that her real age was fifty-two might raise a few eyebrows.

"In our hearts, we know that Dr. Richardson knew that the tissues he was ordering were from late abortions, right Granny?"

"Yes Winnie, I'm sure of it."

"So, Cassie's baby ended up in some scientific lab and Cassie died as part of that, right?"

"Yes."

"Why should we quit now? We still have things we can do."

"Like what?"

"Like searching Dr. Richardson's home for evidence that he knew what he was ordering. I know where he lives."

"Let's go," Granny said.

# # # # # # # #

Not so fast. Winnie wasn't quite right when she said, "I know where he lives." A more correct statement would be "I know where he will live." When they time travelled to 2044, the year of the conference, and then flew to his home north of Toronto, they found somebody else living there – a farmer of some kind.

"When did Richardson move in?" Granny asked.

"I have no idea. But I have drones."

It only took a day of real time to install a drone flying high over the property and
then collect data from it in the present. They fast-forwarded the video of the drone until
they saw two heavy-duty transport copters land in front of the house. It was August 24,
2051.

They waited for the two men to deposit all of the contents of the transports in the
designated rooms in the house and then entered invisibly. "This house is in chaos,"
Winnie said. "They won't notice if we rummage through the stuff in this office tonight
after they're asleep."

Winnie was right about that. She and Granny looked in every filing cabinet and
every file in those cabinets. They looked in desk drawers. They looked in any cardboard
box that contained paper. They found nothing that linked Dr. Richardson to Garouch.
With dawn approaching, they left the house and hovered above it, mulling.

"His wife is really beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is," Granny replied. "How close is she to what the twins look like?"

"Spitting image," Winnie said. "I'd say that she's in her early twenties. What do
you think?"

"I'd say she's ... nineteen years and three months old."

"How'd you know that?"

"I found their birth certificates. Her maiden name was Paula Alison Swensen,
born June 5, 2032 in Denver. With that surname, the family may have Swedish roots
which would explain the blonde hair."

"Her husband?"

"Thomas Ellison Richardson, born September 2, 2029 in Denver."

"Anything else?"

"Dr. Richardson received his Doctor degree in Internal Medicine at the age of
twenty-two from the University of Denver. That's very young to have earned that kind of
degree."

"Lylah skipped a bunch of grades which is why she's in university and Lohla is
not. Guess where we're going next."

"I'll guess Denver, Colorado," Granny said.
That Monday night, Cowboy was sitting with Bean in the university's SUB eating a scrumptious nutritious dinner if such a thing is possible in a cafeteria setting. They had decided that some of his earned money would go towards a tutor for Bean and some of the money would go to Cowboy for food. It seemed obvious that he should purchase a meal ticket for the SUB and that would allow them to see each other every day, if only briefly.

"I found another job this afternoon," he announced happily.

"Doing what?" the rabbit across the table asked.

"Catching a cheating spouse," the carnivore said between teeth chomps.

"Wonderful. Do you have to take pictures of them in action."

"Probably."

"I'm not particularly happy about this part of your job," the rabbit confessed and pointed her half eaten carrot at him in admonishment. "Take the pictures but don't look at them having sex. Especially if she's good looking."

"I might pick up some pointers."

"Not funny, Jim foot-in-the-mouth Jackson! You know how I feel about my body."

"Sorry. That was stupid, but I have to look so that the pictures are focused properly. I promise not to enjoy looking."

"If the guy is good looking, I'll come on the stakeout with you. I might pick up some pointers of what guys are supposed to do."

"Perhaps we should negotiate this."

... 

"Megan is not impressed with my cowboy persona."

"I thought you were going to wear one of your dull boring suits every time you went into the office."

"I did, but she warned me anyhow. I have to be inconspicuous whenever I'm on duty."

"Are you going to do that?"

"No. I am what I am. But when I'm meeting the client for the first time, I'll wear a
suit; when I'm working undercover or on a stake out, I'll wear something unnoticeable. Otherwise, *Yippy-yi, yippy yay.*"

"Speaking of Annika?"

"She hasn't been back to ask for help shooting. Whatever you said must have worked. Her mom has been very pleasant when she sees me. I need some disguises."

"To avoid being tackled and hogtied by Annika?"

"No. So that I can trail people and have different appearances. If they see me too much, they'll become suspicious. It's not only clothes. I have to look different in other ways too. Do you know anybody who could help?"

"I have somebody in mind. You don't know her. I'll let you know."

Winnie and Granny TiTr'd to Denver on Wednesday as Granny had stipulated. They spent a couple of days digging into his past, but that didn't help tie him to Garouch. But observing the professor who was in charge of Richardson's final year made a difference to their plans. He was the American scientist who had brought Garouch's flyer to the meeting – the flyer that he had burned to a crisp.

"Now we know how Richardson heard about Garouch," Granny observed.

"We won't find any record of this professor telling Richardson, will we Granny?"

"No. Do you have any ideas what we can do now?"

"No. I don't see any way that I can do to prove that he knew he was murdering a baby."

"Are you going to give up?"

"No. You saw him virtually haunting the University of Colorado's hospital, looking for women who were miscarrying. You saw him when he talking with that woman with a pen in his hand and a form in the other hand. She was barely conscious."

"Gave me the heebie-jeebies," Granny admitted.

"I've never heard that expression before."

"Strange expressions were common in my day. Creepy-crawly. Hotsy-totsy. Win-wams. Rhyming words – some of them invented."

"What rhyming words would you use to describe what we're planning to do next
about Dr. Richardson?"

"We're planning to pang-dangle."

"Pang-dangle?"

"We're planning to go along cheerfully and resolutely in spite of minor setbacks. You'll find a way."

"Are we going to get the guy, Granny?"

"We will, and you'll think you are the bee's knees when you do."

"Huh?"

"You'll be the cat's meow."

"Huh?"

"The flea's eyebrows."

"Huh?"

"The kipper's knickers."

"Granny!!!

"You'll feel good about yourself, Sweetie."

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Chapter 17

Dinnertime at the SUB.

"A guy named Hank came by today and brought several boxes of clothes and other things that I can use to disguise myself. Seemed like a nice guy. He said his wife sent him."

"That would be Yolanda - a friend of mine. Her husband Hank haunts second hand stores and he's also friendly with some community drama groups."

"How'd you meet her?"

"She came into the medical clinic where I was working with my mom one time. I had lunch with her. I played basketball against two of her granddaughters."

"You miss basketball, don't you."

"Yeah. I miss her granddaughters more. What kind of things did Hank give you?"

"Wigs, fake beards, fake moustaches, a fat suit, lots of different hats, things I can put in my mouth to change my appearance and how I talk, fake teeth that change my appearance, coats that I can turn inside out and it'll still be a coat but a different one.... Tons of stuff. He wouldn't take any money. Yolanda's orders."

"Sounds like Yolanda. How far have you gotten with your cheating spouse case?"

"Not very far. I didn't want to be spotted. I'll get down to serious snooping now."

"Who made the accusation?"

"The husband."

"Is the wife guilty?"

"Probably. She spends long lunch hours in different hotels."

"Is she good looking?"

"No. Worst looking woman I've ever seen. Waddles when she walks."

"So her husband would be a loser too?"

"Borderline mammal. Are you going to eat the rest of that piece of pie?"

"You've already had two pieces of your own."

"I looooove pie."

"You can have the rest of mine."
"Well stick my face into a pie plate and call me a cherry cobbler."
"Groan. Do you even know what a cobbler is?"
"It's a dessert with cherries in it. Why would I want to know more?"

Cowboy stretched the case out for more than a week. He had the wife dead to rights in a couple of days and didn't need to take naked people pictures at all. He took pictures of her and her boyfriend going into the hotel and then into the hotel room. After about an hour, he took pictures of her boy friend coming out of the room and receiving a passionate kiss. Ten minutes later, his last picture showed her coming out of the hotel room completely dressed now and make up all in place. All the pictures were date and time stamped. No judge or jury would need an explanation of what had happened inside that room. For the pictures going into the room, Cowboy had been a stranger waiting for the elevator. For the last set of pictures, he had disguised himself as a carpet installer taking measurements of the hallway.

The disguises had worked so well that Cowboy decided to practice with some more – he really wanted to wear the fat suit for example. He decided to trail the husband, just because he knew who he was. That didn't work out too well. For the husband.

Dinnertime at the SUB again.
"The husband was cheating too?"
"Yeah. Big time."
"Did he actually hire a private detective to prove that his wife was cheating while he was cheating too?"
"Yeah. For him, I think it's because he wants to marry the woman he's sleeping with."
"You know that he's sleeping with her for sure?"
"I put a microphone against the door. Let's just say that they were enthusiastic in their love for each other."
"Why is the wife cheating?"
"I'd guess because she's lonely and her husband doesn't love her. She doesn't know about her husband's affair. I think. I might be wrong on that. She could be having
revenge sex."

"What a sleaze ball he is."

"It's a broken marriage. Both carry some fault."

"He's going to use the affair against her. It will be an attack on her."

"Yeah. Plus he has a pre-nuptial arrangement. If she cheats on him, he doesn't pay her anything and gets to keep all of his wealth. He was quite upfront about what he was going to do with any evidence I collected."

"That does make him into a sleaze ball."

"A-yup."

"What are you going to do?"

"Give him the evidence that he paid for. I have no choice on that, Bean."

"And the woman loses."

"Perhaps not."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm certain that she hired a private investigator to catch her husband cheating on her. I got some glimpses of the detective. She was at all the hotels, disguised as a university student. Young, tall, slender woman with an exciting captivating body. I'm surprised that he didn't see her, seeing as how sexy she is. I expect that she'll offer to give her detecting evidence to her client and the court will have a lot of fun figuring out what to do. The wife has a pre-nup agreement too."
Chapter 18

On Monday morning March 14, Cowboy received a text message from Megan O'Flaherty giving him his next case – two missing university students. Her housemates had pooled their resources to hire a private detective because the police weren't taking them seriously.

Megan provided the name of the contact person, Erin McNeil, and the address of the boarding house. She suggested that the best time to meet her would be at meals. She also added a caution. "The students have only put up two-hundred dollars, so watch your time. The reward amount won't change. The missing students probably left university early. That happens when term exams are approaching."

Cowboy showed up as suggested at lunch and found ten girls sitting around a large dining room table and chowing down. Erin McNeil stood up when the boarding house owner, Mrs. Slingsby, announced that the private detective was here. She led him up to the third floor, talking as she went.

"We started to worry when Lylah and Lohla didn't show for classes," she said. "The police said that we had to wait ten days before submitting a report but they just shrugged it off as students quitting university early."

"How long have they been missing?"

"The last time any of us saw them was on Friday, February 26. We know that Lylah didn't show up for her classes on the Monday which was two weeks ago."

"What about the other girl? Did she miss school too?"

"She doesn't go to school here so we don't know for sure. But she hasn't been in her room or here for meals."

"Full names?"

"I don't know their middle names. Lylah Richardson is in second year science. Lohla Richardson is her younger sister and she's still attending high school, but we don't know where. Mrs. Slingsby wouldn't let any of us into their room but she did peek and
make sure they weren't there. Here's the key. Mrs. Slingsby will want it back when you're finished."

"Can you arrange for me to meet all of the girls this evening?"
"Sure. Can we make it right after supper? Everybody is working on papers. 6:30?"
"Around the dining room table, please."

# # # # # # # #

Cowboy closed the door and stood still. Staring. Getting a feel for the room before rummaging around. Here's what was going through his mind.

Tidy room. Two study desks with books and papers on them, organized neatly. One bed. That would have been a tight fit for two girls. I need to ask Mrs. Slingsby if all the rooms here are single occupancy. Room has a hallway closet and a stand up closet. Two bureaus with pictures on the top. Bathroom off to the left. Wood floor. Two lamps for the study desk, one overhead light, and a bed stand light. This would have been quite comfy for one girl, but not for two. Why are the two of them living together when the younger sister isn't attending university? Be sure to find out what school she's attending. Is it close?

The hallway closet is crammed full of indoor clothes. They like bright colours. Some outdoor gear as well. Two identical raincoats; two identical insulated coats. Shoes and boots quite organized. Rain hats on the shelf; also winter toques; gloves. Do they have umbrellas? Yes, they do. They're behind me in an umbrella stand by the door.

The stand up closet is also crammed full. The other girl's clothes? I've seen some of these already in the hall closet. Hang on. .... They're the same clothes and the same sizes. Ditto for shoes and boots. Are they twins? If not, why would they have so many clothes that are exactly the same?

They're not twins. Lohla has a textbook on her study desk from George Vanier High School. Grade ten? Grade eleven? Neat handwriting. Binders are well organized. The other study table is Lylah's. Heavy-duty university science text. Lab manuals. Binders are well organized; neat handwriting – but not quite the same as her sister's. Hang on... George Vanier School is nowhere near this boarding house. The parents are from out of town and trying to save money?
Pictures on the bureau: Here's one of a basketball team; these players look like university age. These must be Lylah's pictures. Here's an Earl Schnauble Private Academy picture. Never heard of it. Grade one picture. Look for Lylah? She's right in the middle of the front row right next to...? Which one is Lylah? Which one is Lohla? No question they're twins. What's going on? One is in university, the other in high school?

Here's a selfie of the two girls with each other. Very pretty girls. I'm sure they won't mind if I borrow the picture. Here's a family picture from a photo studio – date stamp 2074; the girls are three or four years old? Father and mother appear old for girls this young. Dad's quite tall; stands very straight; he has a beak on him; clean-shaven; some gray in his hair; forties? Mom would have been beautiful in her youth. Same face and hair as her girls. She looks old in this picture. Tired; no smile. Everybody in the picture is standing up straight and tall. Looking grim. No touching. If you were paying to have a family picture taken, wouldn't you have the girls sitting on laps? Why aren't they smiling?

Checking inside Lylah's bureau. Crammed full inside, but organized. No personal name labels inside the sweaters or any of the other clothes; they don't care who wears whose clothes. Some twins might be very possessive; these two aren't.

This bureau would be Lohla's. What's this on top? Employee card from Timmy's in Lohla's name. Hang on. What do we have here in the first drawer? Pictures. Elementary school basketball team? The same Earl Schnauble grade one picture as Lylah had. Same family picture. Very interesting. Somebody has run a black felt pen over the father's body. Very neatly too. It's like he's not in the family. A good detective would consider this a clue.

Big bathroom; vanity is huge; big mirror; heavy on the lights. This boarding house may have been designed especially for girls. Lots of storage; towel and face cloths here under the sink; also traveling bag for cosmetics. Whoa. If there's a traveling bag for cosmetics, where are the suitcases? No room in the bathroom; no room in the closets. They're under the bed. Two identical sets, plus two back packs.

Back to the bathroom; a drawer with pills, floss, the usual. Another drawer with things I won't look closely at. This is interesting. Two identical fancy party wallets. Inside – a small spray perfume; doesn't smell like perfume; smells like MACE. If they have
party wallets, they'll have purses too. No sign of purses. Makes sense. Wherever they went, they took their purses with them. Means that they probably were not abducted. No sign of a struggle in the apartment, so let's call that a definite conclusion. No abduction from the boarding house.

How'd they go where they wanted to go? Confirm with Erin that they had a copter.

Comfy bed. Time to mull.

# # # # # # #

They didn't leave the university because term was ending. They were doing homework right up to Friday. Their suitcases are under the bed. They went somewhere on Saturday or Sunday fully expecting to be back on Monday. They did not take any kind of weather protection. Coats and hats are here. Umbrellas are in the stand by the door. This is consistent with going somewhere in a copter and not being outside in the weather for very long.

They didn't take their Mace. They obviously take their Mace on dates. Or when they might be threatened by people around them. Walking during dark nights? But not on Saturday. They were going somewhere that was safe for them? Or, they might have a second can in their main purse. Ask the girls in the house what girls here in the university do to feel safe. See if they knew what these two girls did.

I need to look at the parents, especially the dad.

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Chapter 19

Cowboy was interviewing Mrs. Slingsby, the boarding house owner.

"Has this house been created specifically for girls? The bathrooms seem designed for them."

"Yes. When I renovated the house, I made sure that the rooms would be attractive to girls. I built in large bathrooms with lots of light and I only rented one girl to a room. No roommates. I'm able to charge a much higher rent as a result. I never have a vacancy for very long."

"How long has Lylah been staying with you?"
"I'd have to look it up. Several years anyway."
"When did Lohla join her?"
"September."
"It didn't bother you that she was a high school student?"
"No. Lylah has been a good tenant and when she said that her sister had lost her previous apartment, I was quite happy to take her. I'm only charging them one room rental because they're sharing the room. Both do have to pay boarding costs."
"And how does that payment come in?"
"Lylah's dad pays me once in September for the entire fall and winter semesters through electronic transfer. Lohla pays me at the beginning of each month with cash. She has assured me that she can keep paying the rent because she works at Timmy's."
"Did you ever ask why her dad wasn't paying her costs too?"
"No, but it may be because she didn't plan on staying long. That might be why she's gone."
"Any troubles with either of them? Boy friends sneaking in? Loud parties?"
"They'd be turfed automatically if they had a party with people from outside the house. Same with boys. Boyfriends can't go past the foyer. None of the girls want to take a chance of losing her room. We're only ten minutes away from campus. I run a quiet house and that's on purpose. Only serious students apply."
"Do the two girls have any relatives in Toronto or near by? Somewhere that they
might have gone to?"

"Not that I know of. I can tell you that they didn't visit relatives and stay there. Lylah had tests coming up that she has missed. She wouldn't have done that. She always had a book in her hands – even at dinner."

"Did she go out often on dates?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Any ideas what has happened to them?"

"White slavers nabbed them and they're gone now. Those two girls were beautiful with a capital B."

"Did they take any precautions against that kind of thing?"

"I wouldn't know."

# # # # # # # #

The meeting with the housemates took longer but yielded less. Cowboy was hoping for the other way around. He was hoping that somebody's comment might trigger some memories. He didn't get any triggering. That might be because he wasn't wearing his Roy Rogers costume. [Narrator: Ancient cowboy hero Roy Rogers had a horse named Trigger. I agree with what you're thinking but are too polite to say. I spend way too much time watching old TV shows. That's because I'm old and not very mobile. What do you expect? Let's continue now with Cowboy asking a question.]

"Does anybody have any idea where Lohla and Lylah might be staying if they had decided to visit friends or relatives?"

Consolidated answer: No idea. If they had friends or relatives, they didn't share their names with their housemates.

"Would they have willingly stayed away from school for so long?"

Consolidated answer: Not a chance for Lylah. They barely knew Lohla.

"Did either of them have a steady boy friend?"

Consolidated answer: They didn't think so. They spent most of their time in their room.

"When was the last time that anybody in the house saw either of them?"

Consolidated answer: Friday night. Suppertime for most of them. One girl met
Lohla coming home from a date with Second Date Tommy. She was fuming. She said that he had groped her on the first date. From now on he was *First Date Tommy* and we should tell everybody we knew, which the girls did.

"Lohla wasn't one for groping?"

Consolidated answer: Neither was that way. They didn't want anybody to think they were blonde dummies who were easy.

"Should I interview this Tommy guy? Could he have been involved in their disappearance?"

Consolidated answer: His name is Tom Showers and he's on the varsity basketball team. You should interview him if you want to know Lohla's bra size; otherwise, he doesn't know anything about anybody.

"Could Lohla have smacked him and that made him angry?"

Consolidated answer: Second Date Tommy was used to being smacked. He bragged about it. But, they didn't know if Lohla would have smacked him or not. They didn't know much about her. Lylah wouldn't have gone out with him to begin with.

"Why not?"

Consolidated answer: She'd know about Second Date Tommy and wouldn't want to have to fend him off.

"Did the girls have any martial arts background to deal with men who were following them around?"

Consolidated answer: They didn't know.

"How did they protect themselves from unwanted advances."

Most common answer: They hardly went out with people. One girl had noticed that Lylah had a spray can of Mace.

"Would Lylah have had two cans, one for her party purse and the other for her regular purse?"

Consolidated answer: They didn't know.

"What about you? How do you protect yourselves?"

Consolidated answer: Mace, pepper spray, even bear spray. One girl had a small gun but she had been attacked previously. The campus was alright during the day because other students were always around. They'd never walk home at night alone without a can
of chemicals and the can would be in their hand in their coat pocket.

"What would you say if I told you that I found Lylah's can of Mace in her room?"

Consolidated answer: She was going somewhere where it wouldn't be needed. There's always the risk of pushing the nozzle button by mistake when you're digging around in your purse. If you do, the purse is ruined. No point in taking the risk if you don't need to.

"Did either girl ever talk about their family?"

Consolidated answer: No.

"Did they have a copter?"

Consolidated answer: Lylah kept her copter in the parking lot behind the boarding house. Nobody had seen her using it recently. It had a broad pink stripe over the fuselage. That was the end of the interview.

If I were two girls, what place would I copter to that was completely safe?

# # # # # # # #

Cowboy didn't finish with the interviews until well past dinnertime. He had already warned Bean about being late, so he ate alone with a clear conscience. Mulling about the next step. Bean phoned in mid-mull.

"How's your case going?"

"I'm getting a feel for it. Why'd you call? I thought you were swamped."

"My tutor has quit because he has to prepare for his exams. I'll be eating meals in my room from now until exams. Do you mind?"

"No. I'll be tied up in the case for a while; no telling where I'll be at dinnertime. Are you going to be OK?"

"Sure. I'll have to study extra hard now. I'll find the time."

Since she had already buried herself in her studies for six days out of seven, it was obvious to Cowboy what day the extra study time would come from. That message came a couple of days later.

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Chapter 20

Cowboy walked into the University of Toronto's personnel office bright and early on Tuesday and asked if he could talk with Madhuri Lee. She was wheeling to the counter half a minute later.

"My, you're looking formal today. Suit and tie. I'm impressed. Everything back home OK?"

"Official business, Ma'am. My name is Jim Jackson. I wonder if I could speak with you privately."

She looked at him and he winked.

"Why certainly, Mr. Jackson. We have an interview room where we can talk."

... 

"Who's Jim Jackson, Cowboy?"

"That's me when I'm being citified. Did you know that I'm working as a private investigator now?"

"Yes, Annika told me."

"I'm on a case right now. Two students have gone missing. I'm hoping you can show me some information in an unofficial way."

"I don't see why not. You are wearing a suit after all."

"I could show you a badge."

"Why don't you do that and I'll pretend to look at it."

...

Madhuri had put the desired information up on the big screen in the interview room. Cowboy was making notes. Lylah Swenson Richardson, born June 2, 2071. Father is Doctor Thomas Richardson; mother is deceased. Her permanent address: 3100 Simcoe View Drive, Franklin Beach, Ontario.

"Who's the other student?"

"She's not one of yours."

"Do you remember me telling you about the professor who was working on plasma surgery. He said that I might qualify for his research."
"I remember that very clearly. You said that he gave you the heebie-jeebies."
"Lylah Richardson is his daughter."
"Really?"
"Really."
"I wonder if there might be something in her father's employment file that could help me find his daughter."
"You could ask him."
"I could," Cowboy said and waited.
"Are you kidding me?" Madhuri looked at him with an arched eyebrow.
"Don't tell anybody that I asked about him."
"What do you want?"
"Everything you have."

# # # # # # # #

The university had quite a lot, actually.

Thomas Ellison Richardson was born September 2, 2029 in Denver, Colorado. He enrolled in the University of Denver on September 1, 2045 at the age of sixteen. He completed his Bachelor of Science degree in 2048 and finished his medical training in 2051. His awarded title was Research Scientist. Richardson's focus of graduate work was on Surgery in the Future. Madhuri commented on how early he had entered university and how quickly he had gotten his training. She went on to add:

"Richardson worked for one year at the University of Denver under the supervision of Dr. Bill Sailor, Research Scientist. Dr. Sailor also provided the reference letter that accompanied Dr. Richardson's application to U of T."

"Dr. Richardson began work at U of T in September of 2051. He achieved tenure in 2074. At his current age of sixty, he is five years away from optional retirement. If he wished and the university offered, he could stay on as Professor Emeritus for three more years after that. This position means that he would work part time and remain his full privileges and full salary as a faculty member. Dr. Richardson is eligible for a complete pension. His beneficiary is listed as Lylah Richardson."

"He would have named his wife beneficiary before she died, I expect," Cowboy
commented. "She would have been his beneficiary. Does the file indicate when he changed his beneficiary to his daughter?"

"No."

"What's this tenure business?"

"Most universities have something like this," she began. "At the U of T, beginning professors start as Assistant Professors before advancing to Associate Professors, and then finally to full Professor. Their salary goes up accordingly. Once they are a full professor, they are eligible for tenure which means that from that point on, their employment is guaranteed, short of them being charged with some atrocious behaviour. Dr. Richardson didn't achieve tenure until his twenty-third year of employment. This is quite late."

"So he's not some famous, esteemed professor?"

"No. I didn't know anything about him before my family doctor referred me to him."

"Did he receive a lot of complaints about his work? Is that why he didn't advance quickly? He sure earned his degree quickly."

"I don't see any complaints in his file and this is where they'd be if he were a very poor teacher, for example."

"If you wanted this tenure quickly, how would a professor go about getting it?"

"Professors have two ways to advance their careers. The first, and the best way of receiving recognition, is by conducting original research that usually involves winning a lot of grants that will pay for the research and will allow him to hire research assistants who are usually graduate students. The second, slower way is to focus more on teaching university courses and publish articles that advance the field."

"Since he was trained as a research scientist in Denver, you would think that Dr. Richardson would pursue that route to advancement?"

"Yes, you're right. The point of getting that training in Denver would be so that he could follow in that path. Some letters are in the file. Let me see."

....

"One year after he was hired, Dr. Richardson wrote to the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine indicating that he did not think it right that he would not receive sole credit for
whatever research he conducted while he was working in the university. The dean wrote back that since he'd be using university labs and resources, and since the university was paying him for his work during this time, it was only fitting that any results he gained from his research would be owned by the university. Dr. Richardson replied that he would be focusing his effort on instruction and would not be conducting research as part of his employment with the university. The letters sound somewhat testy. Like Richardson didn't know about the university owning his research before he took the job. That's surprising. Even I know that the university owns any research conducted in its labs."

"Could Denver have a different system?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. If Dr. Richardson didn't publish very often, that might be the reason for his slow advancement. Even now at sixty, he's teaching a full load of courses which is unusual for professors of his age."

"Would his publications be listed in that file?"

"No. But you'd find them easily enough by looking through the university library. He's been here for..... thirty-eight years. At a minimum, you would expect to find thirty-eight articles. An ambitious professor might do two or three publications a year."

"Do I need to show anything at the library to get access?"

"I'll give you a visitor's card. Are you enjoying the detective work?"

"I'll let you know after this case is over."

"Annika said that they had a missing student at their school too. The word among the students is that he ran away from home."

"He's probably couch surfing with friends."

"That's what Annika thinks too. I'll give you the professor's teaching schedule in case you want to talk to him."

"I expect I'll do that. Thanks for your help."

...

Cowboy's visit to the university consumed an hour. On the way out, he looked at Dr. Richardson's teaching schedule for this semester and then jogged to his copter that he had left in a public parking lot. During his flight north, Cowboy mulled over the possible reasons why the professor had listed only one beneficiary when he had two daughters.
Chapter 21

Franklin Beach was not hard to find, nor was 3100 Simcoe View Drive. The lot held a single level house with no apparent basement. A big barn-like structure was twenty or thirty paces away from the house. Neighbours were in short supply so Cowboy dropped the copter down low and came in fast. He parked it behind the house, hidden from view of anybody who would be walking down Simcoe View Drive.

Getting inside the house took longer, but people usually hide house keys in case they lose theirs. Those keys are either hidden under the mat, somewhere high within reaching distance of either the front or back door, or under a rock in the garden. Richardson didn't have a garden – the front yard was a yard in name only. If goats had been grazing there for a week, they would have died on the second day. The rock sat on the bare ground rockily, conspicuous in all of its strangeness. It might as well have had a sign on the top: \textit{Roll me over; there's a key underneath.}

Cowboy eased the front door open – his one reservation about his unauthorized search had been if the professor had owned a dog. But there were no signs in the yard of a dog; besides, Cowboy was good with dogs. He whistled just in case, took off his city shoes, and entered. As was his habit, he closed the door and stood there. Looking. Memorizing. Making mental observations.

\textit{Living room. Big screen; two recliners; a sofa with matching armchair. Wood floor that has lots of sand and gravel from the yard. No blinds or drapes. One recliner shows signs of use; the material on the sofa and chair are faded badly; drooping with age. Nothing in the form of interior decorations to be seen. This is a big empty room with nothing personal to reveal its owner.}

\textit{Closet by the front door: Cold weather gear; also rainwear. No shoes or boots. No umbrella. Almost empty.}

\textit{Moving into the living room: He eats in his recliner. Lots of stains and crumbs scattered around it. There's nothing like that near the other chairs.}

\textit{Empty dining room. Some marks on the floor suggest a previous presence of table and chairs. Again, no window coverings.}
Kitchen: Pantry is full of canned food; soups, beans, and such. He can make a meal in one minute or less. Potatoes and crackers too. Refrigerator has fruit and raw vegetables in the bins. Several varieties of cheese all within air proof containers. Cream in the fridge. Expiry in a week. Freezer has three loaves of white bread and a whole lot of frozen cheese. This man liked his cheese. Also a can of frozen coffee beans. No ice cubes. Frozen sausages, frozen hamburger. Again, all of this says he doesn't care what he eats. Can't cook?

Counter has a toaster oven that has crumbs from The Last Supper. Coffee maker. Microwave. The rest of the counter is covered in dirty plates, glasses, mugs, cutlery etc. He washes weekly? He has lots of clean plates and cups still in the cupboards. Cleans up every two weeks? Plates of different sizes – all matched with teacups and saucers that are on the top of the cupboard and probably unused for some time. He's not a tea man? No tea bags apparent.

Cutlery drawer full of knives, forks etc. Some of it is from a set; others not. Lots of crumbs inside. This drawer could feed the goats. Pots and pans in abundance, most of it on the counter. He'd sluice off what he wanted to use that evening and put it back on the counter after supper. At least he puts water in them; easier to wash.

Dish soap, scrub pads under the sink; usual stuff.

Oven shows no use; cleanest thing in the kitchen.

No spices other than salt and pepper. No liquor in any form. This man lives alone and never entertains. He's not a lonely alcoholic.

First bedroom down the hall: Not a bedroom; study with a single pedestal desk and a single chair on castors. Multiple filing cabinets against the wall; unlocked. Look at these later. Closet holds all the discarded blinds and drapes from the front rooms. I can smell the dust and mold from here. Top middle drawer of desk has office supplies. Middle drawer has bank statements, invoices, bills, etc. all scrambled up. Look at these later. Bottom drawer has paper supplies and a dictionary.

Bathroom: Needs a fire hose to be clean.

Bedroom at end of hall, right side: Master bedroom with double bed. Coloured sheets with a single blanket. Highboy with four drawers. Nothing on top; some dust. Highboy holds his clothes; nothing remarkable. Long dresser with a mirror: nothing
inside; nothing on top except dust. His wife's. Closet has suits, ties, and shirts. Also a spare set of shoes. A laundry basket half full. Under the bed? Dust bunnies almost touching the bottom of the mattress.


Last bedroom: The twins. Two single beds, pushed together; each has matching sheets, blanket, and bedspread. Two sleeping pillows and two decorative pillows on top - identical on both beds. Stuffed koala bear on one bed; stuffed bunny on the other. Floor is immaculate even in the closet. Some dust bunnies are under the bed where a vacuum couldn't reach.

Two open faced shelving units on the floor with books. No infant books. Lots of youngster books. All fiction. Some have messages inside: "Happy birthday, Lylah (or Lohla), love Mom and Dad." Also Christmas gift books. One shelving unit is for Lylah; the other for Lohla. Books in the shelves are different; they didn't get the same books; this would promote sharing. All signed with a feminine hand.

Two long dressers with a mirror; identical to the mother's. One is almost empty. Has some summer shorts and t-shirts. Underwear. The other has more. All the clothes inside are folded. Double closet; perhaps as a renovation because it consumes one wall. One side with lots of clothes; the other is mostly empty. What's left is for a young girl, not a teenager.

Closet floor is covered with games. Board games mostly.

One daughter comes home from time to time; the other does not.

# # # # # # # #

With an eye on the time, Cowboy took pictures of all of the bills and invoices in the desk making sure to take them out in order and put them back in order even though this was not likely necessary. He scanned through the filing cabinets to get a sense of what was there. They held mostly copies of press releases and other publications on Plasma Surgery as released by something named Richardson and Associates. The professor obviously served as his own press secretary.

The locked door on the barn structure yielded to the house key. Switches for the lights were by the door and revealed a giant open room full of scientific equipment of
some nature. Various workspaces were apparent. Cowboy had never seen anything like it, but then he hadn't been in a scientific laboratory before. He did recognize a freezer and a refrigerator at the end of the room. They held... things. Obviously they were not intended for somebody's lunch.

An enclosed room was at the far end of the barn with a sturdy padlock on the door. Cowboy had seen these equipment storage rooms in the ranches near Helena, but not with an interior lock. Usually, there'd be an entrance into the room from the outside. Richardson's barn had one of those too with a doorknob lock similar to the house's front door. That lock yielded to his key, but the door didn't budge. Something inside the room was preventing it from opening. Back to the inside. The interior security on the room was a sturdy padlock that did not have any respect for his key and stuck its snooty hasp into the air. *Get lost,* it sniffed in disdain.

"I'll be back, Schlage," Cowboy promised.

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Chapter 22

Cowboy spent the morning and afternoon in the library reading Richardson's published works. Some were pamphlets published by Richardson and Associates, some were articles in local newspapers and magazines that were contributed by Richardson and Associates. At 3 p.m., he made a phone call to York University, which was also located in Toronto. After ten minutes of talking, he arranged to meet a professor emeritus in the medical faculty, a Doctor Astrid Zewinski. She was tied up for the rest of the day but she had time to meet him in her office at 6 p.m. She gave him directions on how to find her since he'd be coming into an empty building.

Cowboy resisted the temptation to message Bean, returned to the library, asked if they had a dictionary of medical terms, and then took it back to the table he had been using. At 5:30 he copterred to York University for his appointment at 6.

Dr. Zewinski was a well-groomed woman of average height with perfectly coiffed white hair. She looked to be in her mid sixties with all of the wrinkles associated with that age. She wore a white blouse and long gray skirt. A blue blazer was hanging from the back of her chair. The desk was impressive for its size and lack of clutter on the top. Other than a pen and a note pad placed within easy reach, there was only one other item: a small vase with a red rose. At this time of the year, that rose would have been artificial.

The office contained two floor-to-ceiling bookcases. All were full of books, standing erect, but not organized by declining height. There'd be some other organizational method but Cowboy wasn't close enough to see. By author perhaps. One of the shelves behind her had at least thirty books with the name Zewinski visible on the spine. She stood up as he walked through the open door and extended a hand. "You must be my 6 p.m. appointment," she predicted.

"Yes, Ma'am. Jim Jackson. My card."

"Private investigator?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm working on a case and, as part of that, I've trying to make sense of some articles published by Dr. Thomas Richardson and I ..."

"Oh good," she interrupted. "He's been caught."
"Dr. Richardson is not the primary focus of my investigation, Ma'am. I was planning to ask if you knew him or knew his work. I guess you do."

"I've known about him for close to thirty years. You're not putting him in jail? Who are you investigating?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, Ma'am. I'm having difficulty understanding his articles on Plasma Surgery. I was hoping that you could give me an overview of what research he's conducting. The words peri-natal patulamic dulama keep coming up and I couldn't find them in a medical dictionary."

"You won't find those words in any dictionary, Mr. Jackson. Dr. Richardson invented them. He has invented a lot of words to explain his research, but nobody in the academic community can make sense of his work. As a result, he is unable to publish in peer-reviewed journals. That's why he has no credibility and that's why he's still teaching undergraduate courses at the U of T. He's a charlatan, a sham."

"Ma'am, you mentioned peer-reviewed. I'm not familiar with that term."

"Scientists of all disciplines gain credibility in the field when their work is reviewed by other scientists of equal or superior reputation. Scientific work is often theoretical in design. Richardson's plasma surgery is theoretical. When a scientist publishes in a reputable journal, other scientists can read about his work and comment on it. They might dispute it; perhaps agree with it; perhaps suggest similar lines of research that could be followed. This vetting by colleagues is how scientific theories are advanced. The same vetting occurs when a scientist conducts original research on his theory. Other scientists get to comment. When a scientist conducts research that is intended to support his theory, again he has to put that work up for review by his peers. Clear enough?"

"Yes, Ma'am. And nobody can understand his theory because of the words that he has invented."

"That's right."

"And nobody can understand his research that supports his theory."

"Not quite right. In all of his time that he has been working on his theory of plasma surgery, Dr. Richardson has never conducted a single research project. At least not one that he has told anybody about."

"Is it possible that Richardson is so brilliant that others cannot understand him?"
"You have been reading his publications, I see. That's how he defends himself. *I'm too smart for others to recognize my brilliance.* Yes, it's possible that somebody could make a discovery so revolutionary that human bodies would never get sick again. That's what plasma surgery is intended to do."

"Ma'am, could you explain, in plain English, a little bit of how plasma surgery would work?"

###

"So, he puts something in a person's blood and wherever that blood goes, it cures whatever is wrong in the body. Heart disease, broken legs, cancer, infertility to name a few. What is it that he puts in the blood?"

"He doesn't say. Just that it will be a miracle cure."

"Is this even remotely possible?"

"Before The Troubles, medical science was entering a promising area of research with stem cells. Do you know anything about this?"

"Not a thing."

"I haven't eaten since noon. If you promise to tell me how your inquiry touches on Richardson, I'll give you an easy to understand explanation at my favorite restaurant."

"I could give you a hint, I suppose."

"Meet me at The Broccoli at 8 p.m."

"Vegetarian restaurant?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

###

Cowboy had more than enough time to stop off at his apartment and escape from his citified clothes. The tie around his neck was too much like a noose to tolerate for long. He was waiting inside the restaurant when Professor Zewinski came in. She too had changed clothes and was now wearing a multi-coloured skirt, with a fluffy mauve sweater over a white blouse. A bright purple silk scarf graced her neck. Cowboy approached her as she looked around. "Ma'am."

"I'm meeting somebody, Cowboy. Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying."
"Ma'am, I'm the person you're meeting. Jim Jackson. You were going to explain stem cells. This is how I dress when I'm not working. I don't like ties, Ma'am."

"I can see that. I don't like university uniforms myself. What do you think?" she asked and indicated her appearance.

"Well, stick my nose into a blender and call me Snotty," he replied.

"That doesn't make any sense at all."

"If my nose were cut off and if I had a cold...."

"But, you're supposed to be surprised at how I look, not snotty."

"My country sayings do need a little work, Ma'am."

"Do you mind me calling you Cowboy?"

"No, Ma'am. Everybody else does."

"Well, stick my nose into a blender, turn it on, and call me surprised," she corrected.

####

During the meal, the professor had objected to Cowboy's repeated use of Ma'am, claiming that it made her feel like an old school marm. Cowboy said that he had been raised to be polite. The professor claimed that when she became upset, she had an overpowering urge to start taking her clothes off, and nobody in the restaurant would want to see that. "If you call me Ma'am again, I'll be standing on this chair and swaying to music only I can hear," she claimed. "Can't have that," Cowboy replied. They compromised on Lillian, which is what her friends had called her when she was young.

The main course had been cleared from the table (steak for Cowboy and vegetarian lasagna for Lillian) and they were waiting for dessert. Lillian was on her second glass of wine while Cowboy was keeping pace with her but with beer.

"I understand the part about stem cells having a bright future and how the research had been shut down by the religious right during the troubles," Cowboy said. "Everybody was murdering everybody, so if they thought you were killing babies, you were cooked."

"The research line died," she confirmed.

"I also understand that stem cells can come from different sources. The prenatal
sources were shut down by violence; why didn't the researchers just use the legitimate sources?"

"The people running around burning down labs and homes didn't understand the difference. Plus, stem cells from other sources were not easy to obtain. Bone marrow transplants required sophisticated equipment and heavy sedatives; without them, it would be extremely painful for the donor."

"But it sounds like the stem cell research before *The Troubles* could have led to remarkable advances."

"Not *could have*. They did."

"What's the link between stem cells and Dr. Richardson?"

"If he were actually doing any mind-blowing research and not just pretending, he'd have to be doing it with stem cells. And he'd need a steady supply of stem cell tissues over the last twenty or thirty years to make any progress at all."

"But you said that all the easy sources of stem cells were destroyed. The people involved were killed. Where would he find the cells?"

"That's a very good question, Cowboy. Does your investigation have anything to do with Richardson's research?"

"I don't know, Ma..... Lillian. I don't see a link to him at all."

"You promised me a hint."

"I'm investigating the disappearance of a university student."

The waiter's return with more liquid refreshments gave Lillian a chance to think.

"This would have been about seven years ago," Lillian started the discussion up again. "Richardson was attending a round table discussion forum where I was presenting. It wasn't about stem cells, but it was about molecular biology which is complex. A young girl was sitting with him. Perhaps ten years old. She had been introduced to the table as one of Richardson's associates. Professors do not snicker, but had we not been polite, that would have been the reaction. A ten-year-old associate? I watched her as the discussion proceeded. She didn't contribute, but she did take notes, and at one point, she whispered something to Richardson and he nodded. Blonde girl, very pretty."

... "I thought that she might have been his daughter but there was no physical
resemblance whatsoever. When they left the building, he walked out on his own ahead of her, not even looking back to her. I saw no sign of any emotional attachment to her at all. Nor attachment from her to him. Her name was .... starts with an L ..... Lylah."

"That's his daughter. He has another daughter as well. A slightly younger twin. Lohla."

"And your case?"

"Both girls are missing."

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The wine and the beer bottles continued to appear. The conversation changed to what Cowboy had been doing before he came to Toronto. They were talking about the waitress at Fuzzy's when Cowboy remembered Lillian's threat.

"Would you really have jumped on a chair and danced your dance if I had continued to call you Ma'am?"

"That's how I made it through undergraduate school."

"I can't imagine you doing that."

"Modesty has a habit of disappearing when you have a goal that consumes you. Starving also helps with the motivation. I was young and dead poor. I cared only about a career in medicine."

"My girl friend is studying to be a doctor. First year at U of T."

"Are you married, Cowboy?"

"Roped, not branded yet."

"Well, stick my head in a carton of ice cream and call me a caramel covered professor."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"I thought that was the rule."
Chapter 23

Cowboy spent the next day looking for a motive. Yes, the father was attractive as a person of interest, but not a person of interest in the disappearance of his two daughters. He wasn't much of a scientist, according to Dr. Zewinsky, but he had been gainfully employed at the university for years without a complaint about his conduct with students of Lylah and Lohla's age. What would be his motive in making his daughters disappear? Try as he might, Cowboy couldn't find one. Richardson probably had the means. If the girls had gone out to his home on Saturday or Sunday, he'd have had the opportunity. But he didn't have the motive. He may not have had the ideal family life, but why would he harm his daughters?

Cowboy spent the day interviewing Lohla and Lylah's teachers, past and present. He gleaned some nuggets of information, but nothing that would help him solve the case, at least in his opinion.

• Lylah was as bright as they came. Her father had pressured officials at Earl Schnauble Private Academy to advance her two grades when she was in primary school. The teachers agreed that she could handle the work. They weren't sure how she would handle the social impact of the move. They gave in to his demands and his assurance that she was a genius, just as he was. They found his bragging to be distasteful.

• Lohla also was smart; perhaps as much as Lylah but not as dedicated. The counsellor, a Mrs. Glenfiddick, offered to show him her grades when she had been enrolled. Straight A's.

• Lohla continued with impressive grade in her high school classes at Vanier. Again, the counsellor revealed her grades. Straight As. Also, she was a very good basketball player. Her teammates, coaches, and teachers were all concerned that she hadn't been in class recently. This was not like her at all. She didn't have any recent boy friends. The counsellor advised Cowboy to check at Timmy's. She had a part time job there. The school also gave Cowboy the address where she had stayed last year. The school knew that
Lohla was rooming with her older sister in the university this year. Lohla had said that the sister, a girl named Lylah, was serving as her guardian.

• The young teenage manager at Timmy's had nothing but good things to say about Lohla. He became very distraught when he found out that she was missing and he couldn't continue with the interview.

• The manager of the apartment complex where Lohla had lived last year told Cowboy that she was a model tenant. She did have friends over from her basketball team, but they were quiet. It was possible that a boyfriend may have slept over at times, but the manager hadn't seen that himself. Lohla had shared a room with a teammate but he didn't know anything about her. So long as the rent was paid on time, he didn't care who contributed to the rent.

• Lylah's professors all had good things to say about her. They hadn't realized that she was two years younger than others in the class. One professor said that Cowboy should talk with the university's Athletic Director. Lylah had been a promising basketball star but had quit the team after one year.

• The Athletic Director told Cowboy that Lylah had stood up to her basketball coach as a freshman when he was bullying another player. She had filed a complaint against the coach but, at the time, the disciplinary panel had thought it was unfounded and it was a deliberate attempt to sully his reputation. Her accusation turned out to be correct and the coach was fired.

These interviews consumed a lot of time because Cowboy had to work them in while the people were working. He knew the two girls better now, but he didn't have anything that would reveal why they had disappeared. Cowboy was almost certain that they had been abducted. Responsible, mature girls such as these would not disappear without notice. But what was the motive? The only thing that had been a little hinky was the father. Cowboy would drop in on one of his classes tomorrow and watch him teach. After that, he'd spring a surprise interview on him and see how he reacted.
Chapter 24

Friday morning at 10:10, Cowboy walked into the back of Lecture Hall 212 and took a seat at the back. He didn't know it but this was one of the smaller lecture halls in U of T's biological science building. Still, it was large enough for the twenty-seven students clustered together at the front. The hall could accommodate a capacity of three hundred students, so when Cowboy slipped into a seat at the very back, he was very noticeable even in his citified clothes. Dr. Thomas Richardson was on the elevated dais and standing behind a table that held what presumably were his lecture notes as well as two textbooks. The large screen monitor displayed only the bullet points of his lessons and the students were busy making notes of what he was saying.

At 10:18, Richardson said, "That will be all," and the students trooped up the stairs to the exit at the back of the hall. Lecture halls are usually constructed as a mini amphitheater with the lecturer at the bottom of the bowl, and students at various levels up the sides of the bowl. Cowboy waited for all the students to leave the hall before making his way down to the bottom. Dr. Richardson watched him the whole way and he greeted him warmly.

"What the devil are you doing in my lecture hall? Who are you?"

The word *warmly* might not have properly captured Richardson's pleasure at seeing a guest in his place of work.

"My name is Jim Jackson, Professor Richardson, and I'm a private investigator. My card."

Richardson had to come to the front of the dais to receive the card that Cowboy was holding above his head. He looked at it, turned it over, gave it back, and then looked at Cowboy. "There's no photo on this. You could be anybody."

"True," Cowboy responded. "Have you been contacted by the police yet?"

"No. Why would the police contact me?"

"I'm investigating the disappearance of your two daughters, Professor. The police didn't take their unexpected departure from their boarding house apartment on campus too seriously and I've been hired to investigate."
"Lohla was living with Lylah?"
"Yes."
"Hmmph," their father replied and returned to his table and began collecting his teaching materials.
"Professor, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your daughters."
"I have nothing worthwhile that I could contribute to your inquiries. I have had very little to do with them these last few years." The girls' loving father turned towards the exit behind the dais.
"You know them more than I do, Professor. What you tell me could be instrumental in me finding them. They may be in danger."
"They left school to do what all young irresponsible girls will do when they tire of completing their obligations, that's all. They've been acting in a very undisciplined manner recently. I'm not surprised that they would disappear like this. You're wasting your time as well as mine. I have a class to teach."
"Your next class isn't until 1 p.m. I made sure that you would have ample time for us to talk before coming here."
"I'm busy. Papers to mark. Deadlines to meet."
"I could ask your dean if he could relax some of those deadlines if you want. I'm sure he'd be willing to do that for you seeing as how your daughters' lives might be in peril."
"They're off gallivanting around somewhere, probably with boys."
"That's a good place to start my queries. You don't mind if I record our interview, do you?" Cowboy sat in the middle seat in the front row of the lecture hall, removed his pinky ring, and set it up to record. "Do you have the names of any such boys?"
Richardson put his materials down and stood behind his lecture table. "I don't know the names of any of their boy friends."
"Perhaps you could give me the names of some their girl friends?"
"I don't know any of their friends, period. As I said, I am not involved in their lives."
"Would their mother know any of their friends? Could you arrange for me to meet with her?"
"Their mother is no longer in their lives."
"She still might want to offer information on the girls lives. You live out of town, I believe. I could interview her at her convenience."
"Their mother ran away from her duties as a wife and mother, possibly with another man."
"Might the girls be staying with their mother?"
"They don't know where she went. Neither do I."
"Might she have contacted them privately?"
"They would have told me. Both of them were very angry that their mother had deserted us."
"How long ago was this?"
"This seems to be an unnecessary incursion into my private life."
"If their mother's departure was fairly recent, they might have felt the need to try and find her. If her departure was a long time ago, they probably would have gotten over it."

"She deserted us February 20, 2079. More than ten years ago."
"Could you tell me about Lylah? What kind of girl is she?"
"Her teachers called her a genius which is probably correct. She takes after me."
"So, she's smart. What else?"
"I'm not sure what you want."
"Personality? How does she spend her time away from classes? Does she have any hobbies? Is she very friendly with people? Reserved?"
"She coached a girl in basketball for a while."
"Is Lylah good at the sport?"
"I believe so. She played at her high school."
"Did she play basketball here at university?"
"I don't believe so."
"If she had friends, what would those friends notice about her?"
"She was pretty."
"Do you have a picture you could give me?"
"No. I have an excellent memory. I don't need pictures."
"How did she pay for her university fees? Did she work?"
"I paid all of her expenses."
"Did you give her spending money? An allowance?"
"She worked for me during the summers as a lab assistant."
"Here at the university?"
"No, at home."
"You have a science lab at your home?"
"Yes. I'm a research scientist and I conduct all of my research at home where the university can't steal my ideas. Lylah helped in the lab."
"Is she a good worker?"
"What has this to do with her disappearance?"
"I have to know about the girls if I am to find them. If she has run away, knowing if she worked diligently or not might give me clues as where I should look for her. She'll have to be living somewhere and earning money somehow."
"Lylah was very diligent about working summers in the lab until recently."
"Why did she change?"
"I have no idea. Hormones? Boys? Who knows?"

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"Moving onto Lohla. Good student?"
"No. No discipline. No commitment. Lazy. Unreliable. Not very smart to begin with and didn't work hard. Would rather play with friends than improve herself. She had a lot of her mother's unfortunate traits."
"So, Lylah was having success and Lohla was not. That could make for some issues between them. For example, who had to do the chores?"
"After their mother deserted us, Lylah took over caring for the house, making meals, and so on. Lohla would help but not all that willingly. She became very rebellious towards me and to her sister. She chose to leave home as soon as she could and I have had very little to do with her since."
"She lived on her own somewhere before moving in with Lylah? Where?"
"I don't know. She cut off all ties."
"Even with Lylah?"
"Lylah never talked about her sister with me."
"Did Lohla work to support herself."
"She would have had to. I don't reward my children for bad behaviour. I had thought that when she found out how generous I was being with her here at home, she would have come back."
"Generous in what way? Would you have paid for her university like you did for Lylah?"
"Lohla did not have the intellectual capacity or the discipline to go to university. I offered her free room and board at home. I offered to let her work in the lab."
"She turned you down."
"Yes. Even that work was too hard for her."
"So, she's been living on her own for several years and paying rent and all of her expenses. That sounds like a diligent, industrious girl."
"She may not be working as hard as you think. She's lazy. Unprincipled. Low moral character."
"Low morals? What are you suggesting?"
"She was pretty. Too pretty for her own good. Pretty girls can make money by lying around if you get my drift. Hard work was never part of her character."

###

"I'm finished with my questions, Professor. Thank you for your patience. If I think of more questions, I'll ask you next week. I will need to see your daughters' bedrooms. They may contain valuable clues. When would be a good time next week to visit you? What did you say your address was?"
"That seems unnecessary. I've told you everything I know. Their bedrooms are essentially empty."
"But you said that Lylah had worked for you in the summer."
"There's nothing for you to see that would be of any help."
"That will be up to me to decide, Professor. Does next weekend work for you?"
"This is a gross intrusion into my privacy."
"All in the interest of finding where your daughters are and making sure that they are safe. Surely that's of sufficient concern for you to allow me to enter your home and look into their bedroom."

"That's all?"

"Well, I suppose I should look at the place they worked as well."

"That's too much. I cannot allow that. My lab is working on solutions that could transform the way the world uses medicine. My competitors would pay thousands and thousands of dollars just to know what instruments I use. I cannot allow that search."

"I could get a search warrant."

"You're a private investigator and you can't get that kind of court order."

"I'm a private investigator whose last job was as the Chief of Police of an American city, Professor. I'll get the warrant through the local police. I may ask them for help searching. Next weekend?"

"Only the house. That's where my daughters used to live. I can't have police traipsing through my lab, perhaps taking pictures. You'd ruin me."

"How about this? You willingly let me into your home and I won't hit you with a court order. Your lab will remain your secret."

"Half an hour only."

"That's probably all I'll need."

###

Cowboy returned home, viewed the tape, and made some notes. Mostly about things that stood out to him.

- Why did Doctor Richardson not act surprised to learn about the twins' disappearance? Why did he not ask a single question about their disappearance? Did he already know that they had disappeared, as in he had disappeared them?
- Either the professor was lying or he doesn't know his daughters hardly at all.
- Throughout the interview, Dr. Richardson spoke about his daughters in the past tense. As if they were dead. Or had he been away from them for so long that he routinely thought of them as being dead to him?
• Why did he say that his wife had run away from the family when he had told the university that she was dead?
• He certainly remembered the date that his wife ran away. Natural I suppose. I wonder why she left?
• Why did Professor Richardson show no sign of emotion or even interest in his daughters? What parent doesn't have pictures of their children on a pinky ring? Could he be uninvolved in their disappearance and the guilty signs I'm seeing are simply signs that he doesn't care about them or what has happened to them? Is that a science professor's trait? Or is he involved in their disappearance? If he did so, I didn't see any sign that harming them would have bothered him. If he did hurt them, what's his motive?
• Did he actually believe that Lohla could be earning money through prostitution? No hint of that had been raised in the interviews Cowboy had conducted.
• He certainly didn't want police wandering through his barn. Was that because he truly believed that people would pay thousands of dollars to learn what equipment he has? Or, is he hiding something?
Action item: Get into that locked storage room without leaving any signs of entry.

###

Later that evening, Cowboy messaged as follows:
"How'd you like to be involved in an illegal break and enter Monday morning?"
"I'd love to. I'll skip out of my classes."

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Chapter 25

On Saturday, March 18, the characters in our little detective mystery story were engaged as follows:

Cowboy had purchased a Schlage padlock identical to the one locking a certain barn door. He took that lock and the accompanying key to the offices of O'Flaherty Discreet Inquiries where Aideen O'Flaherty was waiting for him. Aideen was a younger version of her mother in all dimensions and complexions. She showed him how to use a ball pick to unlock the Schlage lock in case he ever put that lock on something and then lost the key. Cowboy showed her that he understood the basic principles and went home to practice. Aideen also went home but not before reminding Cowboy not to get caught. She also informed him that he was way over on the number of hours he had already spent on this case. He was now working for free. Why was he doing that?

Doc was sitting in the hovel belonging to Ted and Cassandra Jaitmatang and preparing to tell them that their daughter was still on Earth but in the form of a ghost. Even now, he wasn't sure how he was going to do that. Cassie was sitting on his head asking him what was taking him so long. Cassie had decided that she wanted to have a family of her own even if they didn't remember her or love her. By the end of the day, she would hear that they did love her, they just couldn't keep dwelling on the pain of not knowing why she had died. By that same afternoon, her parents would learn everything that Cassie had experienced in her mortal life. She held back what she had done as a ghost. Cassie would spend the next two weeks after-living in her parents' hovel.

Winnie had messaged the Wilizy executive that she was dropping the investigation into Dr. Richardson because she couldn't find any evidence.

Granny and Winnie were off touring the world looking for places where Truth might be able to find somebody sufficiently evil to catch and subject to a public trial. That touring required plenty of walking through towns and villages. Without Cassie there to translate, their tour had been restricted to English speaking countries.

Bean was scurrying from the SUB back to her dorm when she saw her former tutor sitting on the grass lounging back against two comely coeds. He wasn't under the
time stress of studying for finals as he had said. She put the signs of his exasperation in recent lessons together with the coed-sandwich and got an answer. He had dumped her because she was too dumb to learn. Bean decided that she'd prove him wrong and upped her study hours to nineteen out of twenty-four. She decided that she wouldn't tell Cowboy that she was close to flunking out.

Dreamer had already decided to drop business school. She might not even bother with the exams. She would be visiting the registrar's office soon to ask questions about programs that were about business but weren't theoretical in nature. Wizard was encouraging her to do so; he might even come with her seeing as how he didn't have much to do these days.

Lucas was succeeding in his courses. He wasn't dwelling on the delectable duo. He considered himself lucky that they had dumped him.

By the end of the day, Cowboy couldn't resist the temptation to see what was happening at 3100 Simcoe View Drive. He took his sniping rifle and headed north. Stopping well short of his destination, he entered some woods where he would not be easily seen and scoped out the view. Scoped out meaning he looked through his rifle's scope to see what was happening at the professor's crumb haven. He smiled in satisfaction when he saw money passing from the professor's hands to the hands of a middle aged woman who was putting various empty buckets, mops, soaps, and other cleaning supplies into her copter.
Chapter 26

Cowboy met his partner in crime at a pre-designated corner in Toronto. She was wearing fashionable black boots, black trousers, and a black pullover sweater. "I have a black balaclava and some gloves if you want me to wear them," she said. "The gloves are part of an evening gown ensemble that I wore years ago. They might attract too much attention. I'll put the balaclava on later." She pulled two-elbow length, maple leaf green and sparkly pink gloves out of her pocket and then hid them again.

For my readers who aren't up to speed on burglar finery, balaclavas are black woolen toques that cover the entire head and face except for the eyes. Originally designed for Canadian winter weathers, they became the go-to disguise for people who were doing dastardly things and didn't want to be recognized.

Cowboy was in his jeans and t-shirt ensemble without a toque which is a warm head covering for winters. He didn't even have gloves. "You won't need the gloves or the balaclava," he said.

"I thought we were breaking into Richardson's house," his partner asked somewhat confused.

"We are, but I'm using a key."

"So, I won't be needing this either?" Off came the back pack and up came the working end of short pry bar, also known as a crow bar, which is not a saloon for feathery friends who want to meet other feathery friends for a drink or two. In keeping with the burglary motif, her crow bar was black.

"Bring it along, but I don't think I'll need it. Richardson has classes all day."

"We don't have even a little chance of getting caught?"

"We'll have to take care not to leave evidence that we were there. Don't pull those gloves out of your pocket, for example. Pink sparkles on the floor might be noticed."

"Too hear is to obey, young Master Sleuth."

"I appreciate that, Grandma Sleuth."

"That hurt."
On the way up, they talked about family. He learned that Lillian actually was a grandmother of three and a great grandmother of one. She had been widowed for the last five years. She learned that he and Bean hadn't talked about having little buckeroos yet. That was too far off in the future, but he himself wouldn't mind having a family. The mention of his girlfriend's name lead to an explanation of why she was called a bean and what she looked like. A beanstalk. A few stories of what he did as a Sheriff in Helena took them to the point when Cowboy had to bring the copter down low and then nestled it in behind the house. "Leave your backpack in the copter," he said. "Less chance of it bumping into something breakable," he added in explanation.

"But you're bringing yours?"
"I need it and I'll be carrying it in my hands."

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As Cowboy expected, the inside of the house was immaculate. Lillian exclaimed at how clean the professor kept his house and Cowboy had to explain that this wasn't the case.

"You've already been inside?"
"Yes, last Tuesday. On Friday, I told him that I wanted to see the twins' bedrooms and asked for a meeting with him here."

"Why did you want to see the bedrooms when you already had been here?"
"To see his reaction. He got legal on me; he definitely did not want me here. That in itself suggests that he has something to hide. I gave him no choice. On the weekend, he hired what has proven to be a very good cleaner. The house was a pig sty last week."

"Why did you do that? To prove that he knows the name of a cleaner?"
"No. I did that to make him worried that I might find evidence that would be worrisome to him. There's a desk with a drawer full of receipts. I took pictures of the contents and printed them off last Tuesday. Those pictures are in my backpack. Now you and I will find out what evidence he destroyed on the weekend."

"Is that why you wanted me here? To compare receipts?"
"No. I'll need you in the second half of the search."
Two very long receipts were missing from the desk drawer. Cowboy marked the pictures of the receipts that he had and put them back into his backpack. "I'll look at them more closely later," he said. "At first glance, I don't see why he would want to destroy these."

They ambled over to the barn and Cowboy used the key.

"Did you do this often in Helena?"

"Did I do a pre-investigation so that I'd know what I would find? Yes, I did that often. It's a good way of figuring out which questions to ask when you interview a suspect. When you know the answer already, it's a liar detector test. One lie and you've probably found your criminal. Did I use a key in Montana? No. Helena citizens mostly left their doors unlocked."

"Where did you find this key?"

"Under a rock in what passes for his front yard. Rocks are one of the first places a robber would look."

"Remind me to change my hiding place."

"This is his lab. He was very insistent that I not come in here. He said his competitors would pay a lot of money to see what instruments he had. Take a look around. Was he telling the truth?"

"First of all, he has no competitors that I know of, so there's no big bucks to be spent. Second, there's no specific theme to what he has here. I would have no idea what his research interests were from looking at this equipment. Even knowing what he's doing, I find it odd when I see some of his equipment."

"For example?"

"He has the makings for an entire surgical operating room here. The pieces are all in different places in the lab, but he could pull them together quickly enough. I don't see a bed, but it's easy enough to put a patient on something hard and level and make do. If you were creating some form of blood-based plasma, why would you be operating on
somebody? The plasma would be entered into the body intravenously.

"The refrigerator and the freezer are standard fare for a biological lab. If he had acquired stem cell tissues, they could be kept in the freezer for a long time. The electronic microscope would be a requirement for any biological lab. The centrifuge too. For some of the other equipment here, their presence isn't a bad sign, but it's not a good sign either. This lab doesn't tell me what he's doing."

"And somebody like you should know?"

"If the lab were set up properly, and if this is all the equipment in the lab, then, yes, I should know. I can tell you this. This is very expensive equipment."

"You're wondering if some of the equipment is behind that locked door, aren't you?"

"If he were a typical mad scientist, he'd have a working version of a French guillotine in there?"

"Really?"

"No. The only thing I know about mad scientists is what I've seen in science fiction movies. Still, even with my ignorance of mad scientists, a padlocked door in a barn or a lab is a flashing red light. Something is behind that door that the scientist in charge wants to conceal. There should be another door on the outside of the barn. Did you try that?"

"Yes. It's blocked on the inside."

"Do I need my crow bar?"

"If we were willing to leave evidence behind that we were here, yes. The crowbar would do the trick. But for today, we're in secret mode." Cowboy put down his backpack, rummaged through it, and pulled a thin metal tool of some kind. "In burglary circles, this is known as a lock pick."

"Now, I feel like a real burglar. You're going to use a real lock pick."

"I'm going to try to use a lock pick." In respond to her questioning look, he added. "I'm still learning. There were no locked doors in Helena," he added in case she had forgotten.
One successful pick later.

"It's a typical barn storage room," Lillian said. "Long and narrow. A farmer would keep all of his equipment here. Dry and safe; easy to get to from the outside."

This time it was Cowboy's turn to look a question at her.

"My parents were dirt poor farmers. That's why I had to strip for a living. How about you go to the left and I'll go to the right?"

The door was in the middle of the room. It was only natural that they split up.

Cowboy was in front of a series of drawers and cupboards. "I see only basic supplies here. There's no reason to hide these, is there?"

Lillian looked over her shoulder at what he was holding. "There's no reason to hide them. He's using this area to store things that would take up space on the lab floor. Same thing for my cupboards."

"More of the same here."

"Me too."

"More of the same."


"This is interesting, Cowboy."

"I see a big open storage box that is full of seeds. In a barn, no less. What's so interesting?"

"These seeds are dead. They died a long time ago." She put a hand into the container, scooped a palm full, and dropped them back in place. These are husks. There would be no point in a farmer keeping them. How long has Richardson been living here?"

"He started work for the university in 2051."

"Thirty-eight years ago. These seeds could have been here when he took over the barn. Why would he keep them that long?"

Cowboy came up with an answer first. "He's hiding something inside the bin. The seeds serve as camouflage for any intruder who isn't a farmer."
"Let's see." Lillian buried her arm up to her elbow and felt around. "Nothing so far."

"Hold on. Take your hand out very carefully."

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"Those husks are sticking to your clothes," Cowboy said. "Anybody who goes digging around in there will spill husks on the floor here, and then carry husks throughout the barn, perhaps into house."

"A burglar would not notice them," Lillian observed.

"Richardson would. Nobody said the man was dumb."

"They're not sticking to my flesh; just my clothes. There's an obvious solution. I'll pick up any husks that fall off my body onto the floor with a damp cloth."

Cowboy was pretty sure what was going to happen next.

"I believe you were working down at the other end?"

The next time he looked at the seed bin, he saw a bare back almost inside the bin and a barely visible black bra strap. Keen robbers always come fully dressed in black.

###

"I found something," Lillian announced. She was halfway into the bin with her stomach resting on the edge and her feet off the ground.

Cowboy was on his knees at the other end of the storage room, looking closely at some cartons that were stacked on top of each other. "Careful you don't fall in," he cautioned.

"I'm good." She emerged from the bin and put her prize on the floor. "This thing is very light."

"Looks like a briefcase."

"It's not locked. Shall I open?"

"Yah."

"Data bots," they said simultaneously.

She held up a bot and said, "Should I?"

"Go ahead."

Lillian inserted the data bot into her brain plug and waited.
"Spreadsheet... expenses and income... not sure of the income... definitely expenses."

"Does he name the source of the expenses?"

"No. His column headings are very cryptic. The spreadsheet is identified only by the year. This one is 2080."

"These are his company books. This has to be what he was afraid of me finding."

"What do we do? Take the briefcase? Take the bots and put the empty briefcase back in the bin?"

"Either way we'd have to come back to return the bots. We have no idea how often he looks in the brief case. Do you have space for more storage on your pinky ring."

"Sure? Do you want me to have this information?"

"Why not? Besides I have something down at my end that I want to check out."

# # # # # # # # #

"I'm done. I'm going to feel around in the bottom of this bin first before putting the brief case back where I found it. Hold my feet will you?"

...

"Got something... metal... pull me up."

Lillian emerged holding a pair of manacles. "They're heavy enough to sink all the way to the bottom of the bin. They'd be well hidden."

"They were used over here," Cowboy took her to the far end of the storage room and pointed down at the floor. "I wondered what that iron ring was for. It's embedded in the floor very deep. I couldn't budge it."

"Iron ring and manacles. All you need to make this place a prison is a chain."

"We saw lots of chains in the lab holding equipment in place," Cowboy observed.

"But who was this prison for?"

"You know who I'm thinking."

"There is no proof of what you're thinking."

"Take a look at these cartons, will you?" Cowboy stood in front of three large cartons that were stacked on top of each other. Each was labeled the same – *Test tubes: Fragile*. "I tipped the top one down and peeked in. It was full of test tubes. I jiggled the
second carton. It was the same weight. I didn't touch the third – it would have meant unstacking the top two and moving them out of the way."

"I'd have done the same. Labs go through lots of test tubes. Why are we here?"

"If you look at where one box meets the other, you'll see that the fronts of these three boxes are higher than the backs. Not by much, but it's noticeable. The bottom box is not level."

"We need to unstack."

...

Cowboy bent over and picked up a wad of clothing that was left on the floor after all the cartons had been shifted. This wad tilted the stack. He pulled the wad apart and held up two bras for inspection. "Somebody deliberately hid these under these cartons."

"Same make," Lillian determined. "Same size. I doubt that any woman imprisoned in this cell would be wearing two bras at the same time."

"I found exact duplicates of these bras in Lylah and Lohla's room in their boarding house. White with blue polka dots. Would these be commonly worn by girls their age?"

"Beats me." Lillian turned them over and rubbed the material. "They're made of cheap material. The elastic is still springy. I'm not familiar with the brand but I don't shop in the same places as the twins would."

"What are the chances of these bras belonging to two other women who happen to wear exactly the same size as each other and who also wear the same size as the twins?"

"Nil. But you can't prove that these belonged to the twins without them corroborating it."

"The twins were here – attached to that ring. Their father jailed them here and the twins left their bras behind as proof they were here. But I still have no motive. What's his motive?"

###

On the way back to town...

"I'll go through all the data and give you some sort of summary. Don't know what kind yet, but I'll need a couple of days."
"OK, I have to find Lylah's copter. If she used it to go up to Franklin Beach with Lohla, and then ended up in that barn's prison, where did their copter go?"
"Bottom of Lake Simcoe?"
"Hope not. If so, it means that he likes to bury things in deep water."

####

As Lillian stepped out of the copter...
"It's been good having you to bounce ideas back and forth. I appreciate you coming."
"This is the most excitement I've had since I buried my husband."
"Excitement burying your husband?"
"He didn't want to climb in the coffin."
"Well, tickle my body with a feather pillow and call me laughing."
"Getting better, but not good yet. It would work if Laughing were the name of a person."
"Laughing was one of the eight dwarves. Twin brother to Dopey. Can I take you to dinner in appreciation for your help?"
"Save your money. You need it more than I do. Did you notice how rusty that iron ring was, Cowboy?"
"I did. His wife left him on February 20, 2079. Would you say that there's ten years of rust on that ring?"

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Tuesday was a frustrating day for Cowboy. The receipts that Richardson had removed from his drawer were not helpful at all. One receipt was for three months ago at the local hardware store. As part of many purchases at the store on that day, Richardson bought some rat poison. On a second purchase a month later at the same store, he bought a can of alkaline drain cleaner. Cowboy had noticed the drain cleaner under the sink in his first visit to the house. Why would Richardson have removed that receipt? A quick Google search revealed that alkaline drain cleaners contain lye that can also be used to speed up the decomposition of dead bodies. It looked like Richardson was being ultra cautious about having a search team jump to any mistaken conclusions about poisoned or buried bodies. If he were planning to kill and bury the twins, why would he shackle them alive in the storage room?

It was easy enough to check. Cowboy was going up to Franklin Beach anyway to search for Lylah's copter, so he popped into the house and looked under the kitchen sink. There was no can of drain cleaner. A search through the outside garbage can revealed an almost full can of drain cleaner. The rat poison was there too.

For the rest of the day Cowboy flew a search pattern that gradually took him further and further from the house. He was beginning to wonder about his theory when he spotted a flash of white in a clearing below him. A second fly-by revealed a pink stripe as well. He landed in the clearing and checked the interior. No personal items. An examination of the engine compartment revealed a faulty connection from the battery to the engine. Conclusion? It must have come undone in flight, but the pilot had enough time and flying skill to land the copter in these woods and then walk out safely. There'd be no fingerprints in the copter. Nor would there be anything else that could link Richardson to Lylah's copter.

Cowboy flew back to Richardson's house. On a direct line, it was about eight kilometers. Hiking back would make it more like ten kilometers. Not impossible for a man in his sixties.

Cowboy messaged Lillian on his way back into Toronto. She was more positive
about the dead ends he had encountered. "He's gone to a lot of trouble if he just wanted to kill them. We're getting a picture of a very careful man."

"Any progress on the spreadsheets?"

"Getting there but slowly. The bots go all the way back to 2051. Each bot has data for each year up to 2088. His current bot is probably stashed somewhere more accessible. It wasn't in the brief case. I can tell you this. He came up to Toronto with a great deal of money."

On the other side of the world, two tired tourists were returning to their lodgings after finishing a guided tour through the tourist hotspots of the local city. And by hotspots, I do mean hot. Both were dressed appropriately for the culture with light cotton leggings, a shift that fell to their knees and covered their upper bodies, but which left their arms bare. A light shawl covered their hair. While the residents of the city used sandals, these two tourists had been advised by family members to wear boots. The young diminutive tourist wore black stylish boots with a slight heel. The older and bigger tourist had heavy duty hiking boots. Both tourists had brown skin, but not quite the same shade of brown as their hosts.

Covering her hair with a shawl had been a contentious issue for Winnie when they were planning the trip. She didn't see why she should have to cover her head when she didn't believe in the religion that required such coverings. Granny trotted out the You're doing it out of respect for their culture argument. Winnie countered with the So, if a culture said that you and I should go topless, then you would want us to do that? Granny responded with the rebuttal - Then I wouldn't go there.

The issue spread wider with other Raging Gardeners becoming involved. All of them liked the idea of Winnie and Granny travelling, but showing respect was a key part of what one did when one was in a foreign country. Winnie was pushing back hard with Nobody tells me what and what I can't wear position – the almost a teenager disease. Granny was ready to introduce the We need to be unnoticeable last line of defense when Momaka, the diplomat, stepped into the fray with two items of home made clothing in her hands. Silk bandanas in ivory white and emerald green.
This can be your own fashion statement, Winnie. Nobody else will have these.

To Granny, Momaka messaged Winnie will be easier to track if she's wearing something unique.

Both liked what they each heard and the matter was settled with nobody believing that there could ever be repercussions from something so innocuous as Wilizy coloured bandanas.

As I have mentioned, Granny and Winnie were on their way to their hotel and were tired. Winnie was eying her boots, and to be perfectly honest, she was a little cranky right now. I realize that most authors of heroic stories hide the fact that their superhero might have some human failings. To the extent that Winnie might be considered a superhero, it behooves me to reveal that she could get cranky. I would know – I was on the receiving end often enough.

Other authors aren't so honest. You never see Superman being cranky although this was one of his human quirks. A cranky superman could be a danger to his friends. For example. Here's a comic strip that never made it to publication.

Superman was in his bathroom, trying to position that curl in his hair just so, when a friend poked his head into the bathroom. "Hey, Supe. What do you think about..."

"WHAT?! Superman snapped and glared full force at the intruder.

"Ow," his friend complained.

"Ooops," Superman said. "Were you planning on using that eyeball for anything important?"

Now you know why Superman didn't have many friends.

You never see anything revealing like that in the strips. Robin, of Batman fame, had a teddy bear that accompanied him to bed each night. Iron Man snuck iron pills into his diet out of fears of becoming anemic. Wonder Women had times where she would worry about her weight to the point of tossing back diet pills. She'd borrow them from Super Girl who died her hair blonde so that she'd be different than Super Man. Super Girl ate one whole leaf of lettuce for her meals. When that inevitably caught up to her, she'd binge on Mars bars. If you ever wanted to know where Super Girl had been, you could follow the Mars bars wrappers. You could follow the wrappers because superhero costumes have no pockets. You didn't realize that, did you?
Winnie had pockets, but she still got cranky. Winnie became cranky when, for example, she looked down at her stylish boots and saw some brown residue on the side of her heels.

Here's a little insight into the environment of the country where they were travelling. All countries have animals that are part of their culture. Dogs, for example. In the undeveloped countries, these are mostly wild dogs that roam the streets eating garbage and polluting the streets with evidence of them having eaten some garbage. In farming communities such as where Winnie and Granny were now, farmers brought chickens into the market to sell. Dead chicken bodies don't last long in tropical climates. That's why they were sold alive. They'd arrive at the market in wire cages (four chickens to a cage) that farmer wives would bring with them in the horse drawn trolley cars that served as public transportation. The women would put those cages on the floor of the trolley during the ride. Wire cages had no bottoms to them. Guess what would happen during that trip? Along those same lines, I'll remind you of those horses pulling those trolleys. Guess what would inevitably happen on that trip.

Maintaining pristine public hygiene was not a big priority in those countries. Citizens would sluice their feet and sandals outside the house and leave the sandals outside when they entered their home. But that was when they got home. Right now, Winnie was sitting on a hard wooden bench in a smelly trolley car that had stomped on brown smudges all the way down the aisle of the car that she would have to walk on to exit. Her nice shiny boots would need cleaning again – sides and bottoms as well. Granny, in her battered hiking boots, didn't care what she was tracking around with her.

Here's another superhero revelation. Winnie could be fastidious at times. She wasn't the only one. I bet you didn't know that Spiderman had elements of that. He had seven different costumes, one for each day of the week. That way he'd have to do laundry only once a week. Doing laundry is a big deal for a guy that has sticky spider web remnants stuck all over his suits. Winnie's fastidious nature is a more polite way of saying Neat freak. Guess who Winnie inherited that from.

Back to Winnie and the trolley car. The car was gradually emptying out. Winnie and Granny were at the very back so they had a good view of the people coming in and going out. Granny was nodding off. Every now and then she'd be shaken awake when the
car would fall into a deep rut and she'd message, *How much longer?* Winnie had just replied *fifteen minutes* when four young men hopped into the car. One man stayed at the front, chatting with the driver. The other three slouched down the aisle and sat themselves in front of, beside, and behind the only remaining passengers in the car – not counting Winnie and Granny. The leader started chatting to the young woman who was sitting next to a male companion. The culture in this country dictated that any young woman of a certain age had to travel with a male companion if she were outdoors. This restriction did not apply to farmers' wives and their loads of chickens. The companion of this young woman was younger than her. A brother perhaps. She herself was of marrying age. The leader of the foursome was the one who had sat in front of the young woman and had turned around to speak to her. Winnie couldn't understand what he said; but she did understand what she saw on his face.

*Wake up, Granny. Wake up.*

*Wha's... Are we there?*

*No. We have trouble. Wake up.*

###

When Winnie and Granny announced that they were taking a tour through Asia, the family had only one reservation. Both would be wearing their slings, of course. In addition to invisibility, the slings offered firing power that could take out a platoon of soldiers with one sweep of their arm. However, sweeping that arm would reveal powers that nobody wanted them to reveal. Taking conventional weaponry with them was discussed and Hank, as head of the family, offered options. The option of not taking them was never offered, and actually, neither Granny nor Winnie objected to the precautions. Both selected their conventional weapon of choice.

Nobody knew what risks, if any, the two travelers would encounter. The instructions from Hank and reinforced many times by Yolanda were simple: At the first sign of danger, find a way to disappear.

Have I mentioned that Winnie was of the age where orders from parents could meet with various levels of resistance up to and including direct disobedience?
The man talking with the man controlling the horse said something and the car came to a halt and the driver left quickly without looking back. The two men sitting near the young woman approached Winnie and Granny speaking in their own language and then adding hand signals when our two intrepid travellers sat there in silence.

He says that we have to leave the car. The horse is sick. Winnie was interpreting what the man's forehead was revealing.

I understood the part about leaving. Let's go.

As they approached the middle of the car, it got a little crowded with the young woman and her companion still in their seats and three men all standing up now. The young woman turned her face towards Granny and Winnie – her silent plea for help clear to both of the Wilizy. The fourth man had swiveled around in the driver's seat waiting for the two unwanted foreigners to leave. As Granny and Winnie approached, the men stepped back and left the aisle open for an easy exit. That gave Granny an opportunity to stand immediately behind the man in charge. Seconds later, her left hand was entwined in his hair and was pulling his head back. Her right hand was holding a ceremonial sword to his throat. Winnie was holding a long thin blade that had been previously introduced into these novels as Mac's Pea Sticker. She had placed the blade against a second man's chest with the angle of the blade suggesting it would have an easy entrance through the ribs and into the heart. Nobody was saying anything.

Both of Granny's hands were occupied so Winnie went into the hand-motion language, indicating that the young woman and her companion should leave. Less than a minute later, that same language brought the man in the driver's seat back to the middle of the car. Again following Winnie's hand gestures, the men disrobed one at a time – this was not the exact situation in which they had been planning to disrobe. Winnie threw the clothes into the back of the car and Granny repositioned Jock's scary looking, and very sharp looking, ceremonial sword to a lower location on the leader's body and mimed what would happen if they were followed. Then they left the car and, once out of sight, activated their slings.
Chapter 28

It was Friday night and Cowboy and Lillian were meeting in a conference room next to her office in York University. The large screen held a single spreadsheet that Lillian had created to summarize all that she had found on the thirty-six bots.

"I've told you already that he arrived with lots of money. The company opened its books with a $100,000 capital investment. He spent most of it in the first two years buying his lab equipment. Other scientific purchases followed. He has only three thousand dollars of his original investment left. He's been transferring money into the company from his university salary. Without knowing his pay grid, I'd cautiously suggest that he's putting 80 per cent of his salary into his research. The rest goes to personal expenses like food."

"Any idea where that initial capital came from?"

"No."

"Most of the expenses were normal expenditures. Lab supplies, for example. Schooling costs for the girls were run through the company. We can probably assume that Lohla left home in 2086 because her bills from the private school ended. I saw nothing to indicate that he was paying for her rent or board wherever she was living. Lylah continues to have all of her schooling expenses covered. There's even an entry for her copter purchase. He appears to be quite generous with her. In exchange perhaps, she worked for him as a lab assistant during the summer. She'd have stayed in the bedroom she used to share with Lohla. She didn't work for him one summer; she was working for him this summer. So was Lohla."

"Lohla worked for him this last summer and stayed in his house?"

"That's what his books recorded."

"He lied to me. He said that he hasn't seen her for years. Why would he lie to me about that?"

"To avoid there being any recent history together? It would be easy enough for
you to learn that the two were estranged."
    "Being ultra cautious again. What about stem cell purchases?"
    "These books won't help you with that."

    # # # # # # # #

    "You can see that many of the column headings were cryptic. Only a few expenses were obvious. FD was food, for example."
    "An example of cryptic?"
    "He has had monthly expenses with a place labeled as HAFH," Lillian answered. "The expenses started in April, 2079 and are ongoing. I have no idea what HAFH is."
    "Neither do I."
    "Other than the lab equipment purchases, he's only had one major expense that stands out. That expense was a one-time payment in 2052 to something called GRCH. It was a healthy amount of money and nothing of that nature appeared again. If that was when he purchased some stem cells to work on, he hasn't made such purchases again."
    "Might the costs have been hidden inside something else?"
    "Everything else of this size could be explained."
    "What about HAFH? Could he be buying stem cells from them?"
    "Perhaps. The payments started two months after his wife left him. That suggests that this organization might have smaller quantities of less expensive stem cells available for purchase. But if that's the case, the heading is so cryptic that you could never prove anything."

    # # # # # # # #

On the other side of the world, two TiTr researchers were sitting down to discuss their findings.

Winnie had been adamant that they'd do more than release this one young woman and her brother from the bus; she was going to do something about the gang. So, she and Granny had waited invisibly outside the bus and had followed the gang leader (Harvid) to his home that night. A couple of drones later, and a couple of nighttime follow-the-leader excursions later, they knew that these four men had been responsible for several gang
rapes. They didn't feel the need to accumulate any further evidence.

While Winnie had been following Harvid in real time, Granny had been researching the country. She didn't like what she had found. That's why they were meeting this Friday evening. Granny began a summary of her research with bad news.

"This country had had laws against rape, but they were ineffective before The Troubles. Some deaths from gang rapes had raised a lot of outrage, and that had sparked some determined efforts to stop the crimes. Court cases and long jail cells were beginning to have an effect. Then everything stopped with The Troubles. Today the laws are still on the books, but unless the rapes end in a death, nothing is ever done. Women who have tried to take their assailants to court face an impossible situation, especially when it's a gang rape. It's one woman's word against four men. The men will never be convicted. DNA testing does not exist in this country."

"The men won't be convicted even if it were a gang rape by four of them?"

"Yes, having four involved makes it safer for them. In this country, an alibi from three other male citizens is enough to prove innocence. A woman's testimony is considered less important, especially when a woman breaks down in court and becomes emotional and therefore unreliable as a witness. You know how women are when they become emotional."

"Who do I strangle first?"

"See what I mean? That's an emotional woman talking. In this country, a woman's future is tied to marrying to a man. Other than teaching and nursing, little professional work is available for women. Those jobs are allowed to last only until they get married at which point they are required to quit. Their job is pleasing the husband, having his children, and cooking. In that order."

"A seventeenth century jail sentence," Winnie proclaimed.

"You're not even close," Granny corrected. "Even in the twenty-first century before The Troubles, plenty of countries in the world treated women in an archaic fashion. Being required to have a family male member with her when she ventured outside was not all that unusual. In that situation, jobs were impossible to hold even if anybody thought that a woman had the brains and emotional control to do the job well."

"What are you saying, Granny?"
"If any woman in this country ventured into a courtroom and made the accusation that four men gang raped her, she'd never find a husband. Virginity is a necessity for marriage here although women have found ways to fake that. But an open statement in a court that she was no longer a virgin would have life changing consequences. She'd never have a husband. Her family would feel shamed enough that they could not support her in her ostracism from their society."

"Like what Kashmira saw in the Philippines."

"Only worse, because it's four men who assaulted her, not one. That's why instead of going to the police, the women of this country remain in their homes and never venture out except in large groups and in full daylight and in public view."

"Which is where the country wants them. In the home, where they belong."

"I can't do anything as Truth," Winnie concluded. "There'd be no sense of outrage if I showed the people here the truth."

"She was out near nighttime. That meant that she wanted to have sex."

"The Raging Gardeners can't catch them and plant them."

"I have no jurisdiction here."

"This is SOOOO frustrating. I have all this weaponry. I can fly invisibly through the air, and I can't do ANYTHING! Why are people so evil, Granny?"

"These men don't see themselves as evil. When you step on a bug, are you an evil person?"

"That's what women are to these people?"

"Not bugs. But second-class citizens, yes. Women have been put on Earth for one thing. That's what this nation believes and you can't change that. It's a tribal sentiment and these people have been living inside that belief system for centuries. You can't kill these men, Winnie. In their eyes, they were just out having a little fun."

"I gotta do something, Granny."

"It can't be inside their legal system. You can't expose these gang rape victims to public scrutiny. Let it go, Winnie. Let's go home."

"Not yet. I have an idea."
"I'm not sure if this will be useful to you or not, Cowboy."

Lillian and Cowboy were standing together with the big screen turned off. The meeting was over. Goodbye hugs were imminent.

"What won't be useful?"

"I told you what I saw in the books. I haven't told you what I didn't see in the books."

"The answers to my questions."

"This isn't an answer to your questions. You may not like it."

"Spit it out."

"The company books show absolutely no earnings. Richardson's lab has no revenue coming in other than what he transfers over from his job."

"Why won't I like that?"

"University professors have a mandatory retirement clause in their contract. Unless the university promotes them to the position of Professor Emeritus, they must retire at sixty-five."

"Still not getting it."

"The University of Toronto will not promote Richardson after he reaches sixty-five. He was lucky to achieve tenure."

"He's sixty years old now."

"In five years, he'll be living on a pension that cannot cover the costs of his research if those payment to HAFH are for stem cells. In five years, his life's goal will be unattainable."

"He's going to become desperate if he's not already there," Cowboy concluded.

"He probably killed the twins. Too risky for him if they were found."

"Desperate people make mistakes. What will you do now?"

"I don't know yet."

"I'm off for a holiday with my family tomorrow. I'm not sure when I'll be back. This has been a lot of fun. Give me a hug, Cowboy."

The hug was surprisingly sincere for two people of vastly different ages who had met but recently. Cowboy expressed his appreciation for her help. "I never would have
found that briefcase in that seed box without you there, Lillian."

"My life as a farm girl turned out to be useful, after all. I'm happy for you."

They were still touching – Cowboy with his arms loosely around Lillian. He was close enough that he could smell a faint perfume - something with a cinnamon base if such a thing were possible. Lillian's right palm was touching his cheek. It was then that she said something unexpected.

"If Bean discovers that she's not as keen on becoming a doctor as she thought she would be, York University offers an accelerated program for medics. It's geared for first responders in traumatic events. It's an intense program, but the career would be very gratifying as she'd be saving people's lives who would otherwise die."

"That's what she wanted."

"It will mean an entire change in direction for what she had been planning. I believe the university is running classes in summer school for students who want to begin early. Some scholarships will probably be available because these people are desperately needed in small communities. It will mean changing directions in what Bean wanted to do. Changing directions can be a good thing when you're frustrated."

"I know about the small communities. I'll mention it to her."

"Goodbye, Cowboy. Take care."

"You've just given me a great idea, Lillian."

"I did?"

"I know what I can do about Richardson. I'll change directions on him. I'm going to come at him from Denver."

###

"We'd be happy to keep your apartment key safe, Cowboy. Annika, put Cowboy's key in our hidey-hole, will you?"

Annika stood up from the table where she had been eating breakfast, pulled a chair over to the bank of cupboards, climbed onto the counter, placed his key behind a decorative plate, and then went back to her munching.

"What's in Denver?"

"An old friend who I hope will have some useful information for me. I could be
gone a week. I didn't want to take the key with me and risk losing it."

"We'll keep it safe. Won't we, Annika?"

Munch, munch.

"How's school these days, Annika? Have you had any more problems with that kid who was harassing you? What was his name again?"

"Pit-face, also known as Carlos Escondido. He's not in school now. Kids say that he ran away from home because his mom was beating on him all the time. I don't miss him at all." Munch, munch. Annika kept her face down – engrossed in selecting what would be in her spoon next.

"That professor we talked about, Cowboy. He says there's a good chance that he can give me at least partial use of my legs, if not more. He wants to give me more tests at the university. It'll mean another overnight stay in the hospital. What do you think?"

*He's getting desperate?* "Were the tests that he did last time painful?"

"No. They were normal body sensor scans. He wanted me in the hospital so that he could redo some tests first thing in the morning before I even got out of bed."

"I guess it can't hurt. But, don't sign anything. And have him explain exactly what his operation would involve and how it would help you. Do you have a camera on your pinky ring?"

"Of course I do. Why would you ask? ... Oh, I see."

They both looked over at Annika.

Munch, munch.

"We can talk again when I return. See ya, Annika."

"Whatever." Munch, munch.
Chapter 29

Cowboy took his time on the weekend copter ing to Denver. There was no point in rushing, as the people he would probably be talking with would be easier to find on a workday. He went down in short stages, stopping to fish whenever he saw a likely lake. No noise except from the insects; no bustle of people constantly on the go; no murders; no mad scientist fathers willing to kidnap their daughters. But, no Bean either.

Cowboy had considered taking his guns with him, and actually had the rifle packed and ready to go. The matched pistols would remain at home – he didn't even pull them out of their hiding place. Then he had second thoughts. He wasn't with the Sheriff's Department any longer. Nobody down in Colorado would react to the implied threat of a law enforcement man with two pistols hanging off his belt. A man without guns might receive more cooperation. A man bearing gifts ... even more. The sniper rifle went back into his apartment at the last minute. Why would he take it? There was no need.

His first stop on Monday morning was at the University of Denver and he was quickly directed to the Faculty of Medicine and, once there, to the offices of the current Dean, a man named Brownstem. After a quick chat with his receptionist, Cowboy went back to his copter and returned in time for his 10:00 a.m. appointment with his fishing rod slung over his shoulder and a wicker bait basket in his hand. As the receptionist had indicated, Brownstem had fishing gear attached all over his office walls. The gift of a Rocky Mountain trout caught this morning was an instant success. It took Cowboy more than an hour to nudge the conversation away from fishing stories and back to why he was here.

Yes, Brownstem knew Thomas Richardson. Brownstem had been an Associate Professor in the faculty when Richardson had arrived fresh out of Aurora High School – a teenage miracle man in the making. Here are Cowboy's notes on the meeting.

- Richardson was very full of himself; predicted that he would win a Noble Prize in medicine. This did not endear him to other students or to associate professors who had to teach him. *Insufferably conceited* was a term that was used a lot in the Faculty Lounge whenever Richardson's name surfaced.
Richardson became a member of the group of professors who were deeply involved in stem cell research. The faculty was split on the ethics of this form of research. The dean at the time opposed this form of research and counseled everybody in the faculty on the perils of being associated with something that many citizens in Colorado would object vociferously to on religious grounds. He couldn't stop the research – university professors have long standing rights to pursue whatever research they want so long as they follow scientific principles. But, he could stop them from being publicly involved in it. He ruled that they could not publish using their status as members of University of Denver faculty. Stem cell research in the lab was always confidential and no support staff or undergraduate students were to be told of what they were doing.

Doctor Bill Sailor was the leader of this group which met frequently in Sailor's home. He was a full professor with tenure. He quickly took Richardson under his wing and supervised his graduate work and his subsequent work in the university's unannounced stem cell laboratory.

Threat-filled rumours about the stem cell group started circulating publicly in 2051. Richardson left in that year and Sailor helped him to find another job somewhere safe. In 2054, Sailor was found hanging from the branch of a tree in his front yard. A crude sign on his chest announced that he was a baby killer. Some of his group quickly transferred to other universities outside of the state. Others kept a low profile. No further work was done with stem cells and all records of the research were shredded.

With his access to the university records, Brownstem was able to provide the following information on Paula Allison Swensen.

- Graduated with honours from Colorado Academy, a private school, in June 2050. That school had an excellent academic reputation.
- Enrolled in University of Denver with numerous scholarships in September 2050.
- Her declared Field of Study in 2051 was Organic Chemistry.
- Did not register in September 2051.
Did Brownstem have an address for Professor Sailor's family – a somewhat unique surname? The university had no such address, nor could Cowboy find one in the city directory for anybody with that surname.

Did Brownstem have an address for Paula Allison Swensen's family? Yes, he did. The Swensen family was a generous benefactor to the university.

Did the initials HAFH mean anything to Brownstem? No.

A towering beefy man opened the door at the Swensen residence. Residence is probably not the correct word. It took up half of a block in Cherry Creek, which Brownstem had warned was the home of Denver's equivalence to royalty. When the capital of the United States moved to Denver during The Troubles, the city had escaped major turmoil to the point where its citizens were among the wealthiest in the country. Make that the former country.

"Are you here to get the cat out of the tree?" the beefy man asked. "Stupid thing was chased up there and is too frightened to come down."

"I can do that for you," Cowboy replied.

Half an hour later, the cat had been rescued and Cowboy and Howard Arnold Swensen were sharing a brew by the football shaped pool. Cowboy got a sense that the interview would go well after he had told Swensen that he was investigating Thomas Ellison Richardson and the big man had asked, "Do you hang people in Canada? Can I watch him die?"

Boiled down to the essentials, here's what Cowboy learned from Paula's brother.

- Richardson had come out of a dinky little house in Aurora, which specialized in having dinky little houses.
- Paula had met Richardson at D.U. and had fallen under his spell in her first year there. Richardson was going to save the world. There'd be no more health problems ever again. She and he would attend the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony together. All of their children would be extraordinarily smart; they too would save the world in some way yet to be determined. Paula had brought him home to meet the family on several occasions.
• Paula's father had quickly labeled Richardson as a gold digger – interested only in Paula because of her family's wealth. Richardson never showed any affection for her on any of his visits. Paula's brother had started calling him Goldie and that moniker was quietly accepted as the Gospel Truth – the family being faithful members of the local Southern Baptist chapter. The Swensens lived life to the fullest; happy in their exuberant rowdiness. Pool parties consisted of the Swensen family throwing each other into the pool while Richardson sat in a pool chair on the deck, his back straight, his face unsmiling. The consensus of the family was that if Richardson wasn't even holding her hand, they weren't having sex.

• That assumption was proven wrong when Paula announced in April 2051 that (1) she was pregnant, (2) she was moving to Canada, (3) she'd be married there, and (4) she wanted her inheritance now. By then, her exuberance for life had disappeared. Her purpose in life revolved around her husband-to-be and his career. She would finish her degree in organic chemistry in Canada and would become his partner in the greatest medical invention ever to be produced.

• The family was shattered at her plans for a sudden departure and the news of her pregnancy. Their lawyer played hardball and produced a one-time cheque for a $100,000 inheritance. Richardson took the cheque and ran. It was far below what her inheritance would have been. The family never heard from Paula again.

"Is she happy?" Paula's brother asked Cowboy.

"I don't know, Howard."

"Where does she live now?"

"I don't know. I'm focusing on finding her daughters. Have you heard of something called HAFH?"

"No. Why?"

"Her daughters might be there."

"Cowboy, what are you are investigating? You be straight with me, you hear!"

"Your two nieces have disappeared. Their names are Lylah and Lohla and they
are twins. I've been hired to find them. I believe they’ve been kidnapped and have sent to
this HAFH place."

Howard disappeared only to reappear five minutes later, a sheet of paper in his
hand. He handed it to Cowboy.

"You want to hire me to find your two nieces and you'll pay me $50,000 if I do."
"You can have more if you need it. Give me your transfer information and I'll
send it right now."

"Howard, I've already been hired for this case. I can't take your money."
"How are you fixed for guns? Copters? Horses? Electric chairs?"
"I have everything I need right now, Howard. How do you know that what I'm
telling you isn't a giant con to swindle you out of your money?"

"Brownstem told me that you'd be by. I stuffed our cat up the tree to see what
you'd do. Crooks don't climb barefoot up a tree to rescue a cat, Cowboy."

"I'll be in touch when I have anything to tell you."

"One more thing, Cowboy...."

"Yes?"

Howard picked Cowboy up and hurled him into the pool.

"Consider yourself Swensen-tized. We'll have a party after you rescue my sister
and her kids. You can try and throw me into the pool if you can bulk up some between
then and now. Nobody has ever been able to do that before, so you better start eating. My
sister had twins. Imagine that."

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Chapter 30

Cowboy spent another night camping in the Rockies, had a leisurely breakfast of Rocky Mountain trout, and left for Denver's Sheriff Office. He had contacted Stook the previous night and the sheriff had set aside most of the day for his former deputy sheriff. The sheriff's real name was Charlie Stookenhap. The only time anybody ever saw that surname was when he was running for re-election. He had been Denver's sheriff for over twenty years.

We'll skip their hour of reminiscing. We'll also skip the part where Cowboy described his case and how he was dead in the water. It's now early afternoon. Cowboy is talking.

"Have you heard of any scientists working underground with contraband stem cell tissues?"

"No. There's nothing like that in Denver. I'd know. Sailor's lynching was before my time, but I heard about it when I got here."

"Do you still have a network with other sheriffs in Colorado?"

"Of course. Do you want me to ask around?"

"Yeah. Ask if they've heard anything about a HAFH too."

"I'll ask but those letters could be anything. Like High Altitude Felon Heaven. You said the guy was making up cryptic abbreviations. Good luck finding what this one stands for."

"I'll need luck. I have nothing in his current life that I can grab onto. That's why I'm chasing down his past. I'm looking for anything that will lead me to HAFH."

"Can't help you there."

"What about the D.U. professor that was his mentor? The University said all records associated with the stem cell research were shredded. I thought of looking for his family but nobody named Sailor lives in Denver. Do you have any idea if he had family and where they might be?"

"I can help you there. His son moved to Boulder northwest of here and changed his name. He's known as Padre Butterfly now. His church has a drop-in whenever you
Padre Butterfly's church sat on the outskirts of Boulder and was surrounded by hay fields, all untended from what Cowboy could determine. The church itself looked very much like a one level rancher. Perhaps two bedrooms? The yard was as untended as the hay fields. In fact, you could say that the padre's yard was a hayfield. This would be great if the padre were a beef rancher, but there was no sign of any such four-legged creatures. Cowboy didn't bother to look for sheep. Colorado was beef country. The weather was very hostile to sheep what with the lead bullets that could drop out of the sky on dark nights.

Stook and Cowboy alighted from the sheriff's copter and stood looking at the rancher. They saw no signs of life. No signs of a normal church either. Stock pulled his gun out of his holster and pointed it skyward. "Best if we don't surprise him. This'll let him know that two of his parishioners are here." He fired two shots into the air, and then one more.

"I'm a parishioner?"
"You are now."

In time, a bearded face peeked out of the door. Not much else about him was apparent. The beard was long and bushy and covered what clothes he might or might not be wearing above his waist. Cowboy's first thought was to hope the guy was dressed.

"We're here for your blessing, Padre. Is the church open?"
"Always, My Son. I'll be right out as soon as I get dressed."

*Wonderful. He's a nudist who preaches about butterflies.*

In time, the padre emerged. He was wearing a black padre coat – the kind that has tails. This particular coat had a large butterfly image over the heart which on closer inspection proved to be hand-painted, and not very well. Naturally, the padre wore a Stetson. He also wore blue denim cut-offs, mismatched knee high socks, and flip-flops.

"My friend here is interested in joining your church. You can call him Cowboy. He used to be my deputy. I can vouch for him."

"One of your deputies, Stook? My goodness, my heart is all a flutter. Let's go into
Padre Butterfly led them into the middle of the hay field and pointed with his left hand at the field. "Take any pew you want."

Stook adopted a cross-legged sitting position on the ground. The hay stalks now came up to his head. Cowboy did the same. Padre Butterfly remained standing. He took off his Stetson and raised it into the air. Cowboy couldn't help but notice that the padre was bald. With all of the hair on his face and dropping to his belt buckle, not a single one had made it up his head.

"Life is like a butterfly," he intoned and re-Stetsoned himself. "Most of us live in this world as caterpillars. Vile creatures. Eating away endlessly at the Earth's natural resources. We consume everything in our path. When shown the way to salvation, a caterpillar will mutate and, with sufficient help from above, will become a butterfly – a beautiful creature that pollinates the plants and gives man his food. If all men were like butterflies, the world wouldn't be full of such evil."

Stook nodded his head. "Amen to that, Padre."

"Would you do the honours, Sheriff?"

The sheriff took out his gun and once more fired a shot into the air.

All around them, butterflies flew into the sky.

"Behold the butterflies. They welcome you into this church, Cowboy. Are you prepared to give up all of your worldly goods and donate them to the church?"

"I don't think so, Padre."

"Nice try, Padre."

"Then I will make you an associate member of our flock by blessing you."

Padre Butterfly put a hand into the inside pocket of coat and pulled out two sticks which he flicked and they became hand-held fans.

"Behold, the wings of a butterfly are here to bless you."

In fact, the paper fabric covering the fans did have hand painted images of butterflies. The padre circled Cowboy and gave him a good fanning while chanting something that sounded very much like Go Buffs Go. Adopting a more indigenous theme, he began circling Cowboy, beating his chest with his fans then raising his hands to the air, stomping the ground with his flip-flops, and chanting Hoopa-doopa, Hoopa-doopa.
He continued his dance around Cowboy until the hay in his path had been beaten flat.

"From this day forward, this part of the hay field will always be known as Cowboy's pew."

"How many faithful do you have now, Padre?" Stoop asked the question as he rose up out of his pew.

"Not counting you and your deputy, four."

"I see you added the native dance. Is it working?"

"No. My flock still hangs around chanting with me. I can't get rid of them no matter how hard I try."

"Go Buffs, Go?" Cowboy asked.

"University of Colorado sports teams are known as the Buffaloes. Stook and I played basketball together."

"Hoopa-doopa?"

"That's what we chanted in the locker room when we wanted to get energized," Stook answered.

"Did we fool you?" Padre asked.

"A bit. Religions like this do exist and you do present a believable image of a crazy man."

"Good," the padre replied. "Let's go inside and I'll show you my father's correspondence files."

"I called ahead," Stook explained. "I wanted you to have the full religious experience."

###

Padre walked his two guests through a narrow aisle in the living room between what can only be described as mounds of rubbish. "I collect plenty of things. You never know when something could be useful."

"Camouflage," Stook corrected. "Anybody who walks in here will believe that Padre is a nutcase as well as a packrat."

"I object to the use of the word nutcase. I'm eccentric."

"Did you or did you not change your legal name to Padre Butterfly?"
"Yes, I did," Padre hastened to explain. "After my dad got himself lynched, I didn't want to have anybody thinking that I knew anything about stem cells. The name Sailor could have been lethal. I approved of him being lynched by the way. He was buying tissues from murdered babies and he knew it. He was a terrible man, at least by my moral standards. You'll have to slide sideways into the kitchen, Cowboy."

The kitchen was less congested but a pigsty nonetheless.

Stook acted as host. "Grab some brews out of the fridge, Cowboy. We'll drink in a more comfortable environment. I always worry that I'll be buried alive when I come through that living room."

Cowboy opened the fridge door and paused. "Are you aware that somebody has put a bomb in your fridge, Padre?"

"Yeah. It is triggered when somebody opens the fridge door."

Cowboy shut the door.

"Too late. You're dead and your body's tissues and fluids have been plastered against the opposite wall," Padre said.

"Your remains will fit right in with the natural decor of the place," Stoop suggested.

"I only arm it when I leave the house to go into town. Grab the beer. It's safe to jostle the bomb."

Cowboy did. Then, Padre pulled the fridge away from the wall and motioned that Cowboy should climb down the stairs that had become visible.

"OK. Now you have me really curious. Who are you?"

"A very dangerous man," Stoop replied. "He a forensic accountant that works secretly for law agencies under a fictional name. Even his clients don't know who he is or where he lives. But, some nasty people are looking for him. If they find this house, they'll find the bomb too. What house burglar doesn't look in the fridge?"

"You're not some delusional conspiracy theory wacko who hides in the basement wearing wire antennas and wondering when the space aliens will come and operate on you?" Cowboy with the question.

"Do I look like a wacko?"

"Yes," both men answered.
"Is this a basement of a wacko?"

Cowboy looked around. Row after row of filing cabinets lined the walls of the basement, which had the same floor space as the entire house above it. Two large screens were on either wall. One twelve-foot long desk filled the center. A small bedroom had been carved out of a corner. The edge of a toilet was visible from a small room beside the bedroom. A rudimentary kitchen was also visible. Everything was neat and tidy.

"Yeah, it's a basement of some crazy lunatic accountant who doesn't know when it's time to eat, or sleep, or exercise," Stoop observed.

"I get lots of exercise pretending to chase butterflies."

"Why are you hiding underground, Padre?"

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So, Cowboy heard how Padre had started hiding in this house in Boulder because he had to hide from would be Sailor killers. He continued to work as a mid-level accountant for what was the federal government before a consortium of banks called in their debts during The Troubles and bankrupted the country. After that abomination, the banks were all blown up as part of the revolt of the 99% versus the 1%. As Colorado came out of the troubles, law enforcement struggled to re-establish itself and organized crime started taking over. Padre helped Stoop out on a number of cases that he'd never have solved otherwise and the partnership was off and running. Deep underground.

"If you have crooks hiding behind their books, a forensic accountant is equivalent to a sheriff tracking outlaws through the wilderness. Think of John Wayne with a spreadsheet instead of a pair of pistols." Padre sounded almost normal for a man with a beard down to his navel. The shirt had come off; were the cutoffs next? "Tell me about the set of books you found."

# # # # # # # #

"You have useful information from the perspective of an investigator," Padre observed. "But the data are totally useless in a court of law. Don't even think about bringing the spreadsheets up in court even if you could somehow arrange to find the books legally. There's nothing of value in what you found."
"Even if I could find this HAHF and linked the payment in Richardson's books to them?"

"Not even then. You can't prove he paid a large amount to anybody because you have no documentation formally describing the transaction."

"Documentation?"

"Receipts or invoices. A paper trail from the company you're doing business with that can be considered reliable. Say you go to your private detective boss and say, I ran up $500 in travel expenses. You own me $500. He's not going to pay you because you have to prove that those expenses are real. For an accountant, any claim that comes in for payment has to be proven by supporting documents; otherwise, nobody gets paid."

"That's how Padre catches them," Snook added. "The crooks forget to have a formal explanation for everything. Once you find one mistake, the whole crime can be revealed."

"Then, I have nothing, even if I do find HAHF. The books are useless."

"Yup."

"Doesn't mean you can't convict him with normal sheriff work," Stoop encouraged.

"Tell me about your dad, Padre."

###

Boiled down to the important parts: Padre's father knew that the tissues he was ordering were from near end-of-term babies. He called them *prime tissues* as a code word to other stem cell scientists that they were as close to full term babies as they could get. The source was a man in Australia named Oscar Garouch which Padre remembered clearly because it reminded him of the old, old Muppet character Oscar the Grouch. Singer received several packets of tissues from him but something happened in Australia and the supply dried up. Singer messaged Garouch to ask about his business but received a cryptic reply to the effect that his people were being murdered and there'd be no more shipments.

Richardson was a few years older than Padre and visited Professor Singer at home numerous times. Padre was old enough to form reasonable opinions of him. He
remembered him as being a man who showed no interest whatsoever in people; only in himself and his future fame. If had to sell his grandmother to get there, he'd do so in a heartbeat. Padre got the impression somehow that he had had a rotten childhood.

Singer gave Richardson some fetal tissues as a wedding present and Richardson took those up to Canada as a start to his research. Later, Richardson messaged Singer that he could use another set of tissues, and Singer ordered that on his behalf and had them sent to his new address. He told Richardson that he'd have to pay for those ones.

Padre pulled out his father's correspondence files and let Cowboy work through them, putting down dates and addresses but he didn't see how this would help. Cowboy might know that Richardson had been working with illegal tissues, but knowing it and proving it in court were two separate things.

Cowboy went back to Denver with Stook and then took off for Toronto. The sheriff promised to send word to him if he heard anything from his sheriff buddies in Colorado about HAHF. The words faint hope would be appropriate here.

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Chapter 31

Back on the other side of the world, Granny and Winnie had been following four upstanding youths as they, for the sake of a better word, prowled the trolley cars looking for a desirable short-term soul mate who just happened to be alone or almost alone and one of the last passengers on the car. Such situations required patience, but our fine upstanding young men had plenty of that. So did Granny and Winnie. Winnie had her plan and she wasn't going home until she met these fine upstanding young men again under situations that were to her liking and definitely not to their liking. Think of it as a way for East to meet West, engage in a joint enterprise, and through a better understanding of each other's perspectives, cement a temporary but impactful relationship. What I've just said will make sense to you later in the chapter.

Patience bore fruit on the evening of Wednesday March 30. The men's target? A young woman of marriageable age. What else? She had a companion – an older brother or cousin perhaps. The car had emptied out very nicely in the previous stop and the four upstanding young men had deployed as you would expect. The driver had scurried away after feeling the nick of a long blade on his throat. The three others were engaged in negotiations with the older cousin/brother. He could lie on the floor face down, hands behind him while one of them had a knee in his back and a knife pressing against the back of his neck. Or, he could watch without making a fuss. This was not a likely choice but they wanted to give him several options to choose from. The third option was to skedaddle which in layman's terms meant – run like the blazes and live without any noticeable scars.

The astute observer of our four upstanding youth will have recognized the addition to their repertoire of prowling equipment and skills. Knives and the threatening thereof. This was a result almost certainly from being on the receiving end of two knives earlier. That's the problem when the forces of good confront the forces of bad. Whatever the forces of good do, the forces of bad learn from it. This is a fact of life.

Fortunately, the forces of good in this case also had learned and had come prepared to deal with the inherent weakness of the knives: namely they are only a threat if
you are prepared to slit a throat or two as an example of how smart it would be if
everybody cooperated. Also a knife, even one as threatening as a ceremonial sword, does
put you within reaching distance of unsavory characters and the numerical odds were two
against four. Winnie and Granny came prepared with weapons that the bad guys didn't
know anything about. For example, our intrepid duo had become an intrepid trio. They
had also brought with them the material that Winnie had gone shopping for at the
country's equivalent of a local hardware store.

So here we are back in the trolley car. The driver was gone. The older
brother/cousin had a blade at his throat courtesy of one of the thugs while another thug
behind him had pulled the brother/cousin's head back for easy slitting purposes. The
young woman also had the edge of a knife on her cheek, the threat being to go through
life known as *Scarface*, or agree to go out on a short date with four upstanding young
men. See what I mean about thugs learning?

The car shifted slightly as two new passengers joined the date. One was a
diminutive young woman with a decidedly undiminutive bazooka on her shoulder. The
other new passenger was elderly, but the automatic spray weapon she was holding at hip
level looked pretty young and attractive.

OK. That's not the way it happened. But, that's what some people would do to
counter the forces of evil. Bring a bigger a weapon. Which would mean the next time ....
You know what I'm talking about, right? An arms race in a passenger trolley car.

In fact, Winnie and Granny had boarded the car with no weapons at all, not
counting the sling weapons they always had but they weren't planning to use. They did
have two backpacks but neither of them contained weapons, unless you call building
supplies a weapon.

As the building contractors boarded the trolley, all eyes were on them. There must
have been something inherently boring in this encounter because all four upstanding
young men became four not-standing young men. They were flat on their backs, snoring
gently. I did mention the bit about the duo becoming a trio, right? Marie had been
overjoyed to join the date night festivities.

Marie remained invisible while Winnie motioned the two almost victims to leave
the car. Granny, being familiar with how horses operate, steered the car into a patch of
desolate darkness. Marie materialized and began lowering the clothes covering the bottom half of the victims – a task more appropriate for a voodoo queen than a young impressionable almost-a-teenage girl.

Together the three unpacked their backpacks and began mixing. Granny and Marie took care of modifying the appearance of the four thugs while Winnie gave directions. "You missed a spot." She wanted to give a hand in the operation but both Marie and Granny were strongly opposed and she gave up after several whining Please entreaties.

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Let's skip forward a bit and look at what is happening on the other side of the world. Madhuri is waving goodbye to Annika who is waving back. Madhuri is on her way to the university hospital and her overnight stay. Annika has been counting down the minutes when her mom would finally leave. She too had an appointment, otherwise known as a date. One that her mother didn't know about. Let's just say that Annika would not be a fine upstanding young woman for very much longer.

After waiting long enough to make sure that her mother hadn't forgotten anything that would require a return trip to the apartment, Annika removed a certain key from its hiding place. Off she went to her bedroom where she pulled out a backpack that had been lying in the dark for far too long, at least in Annika's estimation. She left her apartment and carefully climbed the stairs to the third floor, listening carefully for the sounds of anybody coming down the stairs that would have prompted a quick reversal in direction. Nobody interrupted the up-sneaking.

The hallway door didn't have a window in it, but it did open noiselessly and a few peeks later, Annika was tip-toing down the hallway. She had debated about wearing her bedroom slippers but chose a pair of athletic sneakers instead. Equally as noiseless and far less conspicuous. The key in the lock turned noiselessly and Annika pulled it open. "Cowboy? Are you there?"

No response.

Annika pulled the door further open. "Cowboy? Sweetie? Are you there?"
I'll skip describing the details of Annika entering Cowboy's bedroom, opening his closet and drawers, touching and, well let me say it, fondling his clothes.

I'll also skip the details of how she pulled back the covers on the bed and pulled the sheets tight and fluffed up the pillows.

I won't describe any details about the part where she went into the bathroom, took off all of her clothes and had a shower. After drying herself with Cowboy's towel, she pulled one of her mom's fancy nighties out of her backpack and slipped it on. But I won't describe that.

Back to the bedroom closet she went and pulled out one of her favorite Cowboy shirts. She buttoned that shirt around one of Cowboy's pillows and plopped it on the bed. Turning off the light by the bed, she also plopped herself down on the bed, found Cowboy the pillow, and pulled it to her. Sighing deeply, she went to sleep, his empty sleeves wrapped around her.

Time to yo-yo back to Asia. It's a healthy time later. I mention this because what you just read was not healthy Not healthy at all. Speaking of healthy, the scene you're about to read is in a hospital. Two young nurses are huddling together whispering. In other parts of the hospital, other small groups of nurses are also whispering. We'll listen in on one such whispering.

"It was the darndest thing I've ever seen. Four guys staggered into the hospital and said they had to see the emergency doctor. They were holding their crotches and were walking with tiny bowlegged steps."

"I heard that they wouldn't tell anybody what had happened but insisted on seeing a doctor."

"I know the nurse of the doctor who treated them. She said that they had trouble taking off their trousers. The doctor had to help."

"Did you hear what he found?"

"Yes. I can't believe it. No wonder they were holding their crotches. The weight
alone would have made it difficult to walk let alone the fact that this is a very tender area for men."

"Is it true that the doctor refused to treat them?"

"Yes. He said that they weren't injured. They can still pee. But, they had to avoid moving around quickly. Also, they shouldn't walk around without supporting themselves."

"So, they have to walk around holding their crotches?"

"Yes. For several weeks."

"I heard that they begged him to let them stay in the hospital."

"They did. Doctor said that the beds were for sick people, not for stupid young men who should never be entering daring contests."

"That what they said? They dared each other to do this to themselves?"

"Yes, but nobody believes that. The doctor didn't and none of the nurses I've talked to believe it either. We're going to ask around. These four could be the ones who've been assaulting women in the trolley cars."

"Is it true that nurses will be assigned to remove the concrete from around their genitals?"

"Yes. It will take two weeks for the concrete to cure properly. Then they can come back."

"They wanted Doctor to do it, but he said this is a job for nurses."

"I wonder how they will pick who does it."

"Head nurse will choose two volunteers. She said that one nurse will hold the chisel, and the other will use the hammer."

"That's the only way to remove concrete?"

"Apparently."

"I hear that there's a lot of concrete to remove."

"Yes, that's why they were walking bowlegged."

"I wonder what would happen if the chisel slipped."

"I hope they use a blunt chisel and a big heavy hammer."
After a very satisfying night's sleep, Annika dressed and made sure that Cowboy's bedroom and bathroom were exactly as she had found them. She returned Cowboy's shirt to the hanger it had been on. In doing so, she saw an older worn shirt in the far end of the closet and put it in her backpack. She was intent on making sure that she was back home before her mom returned from the hospital and so, after one last long look over her shoulder, she opened the hallway door and popped out without thinking. Turning to insert Cowboy's key into the lock, she became aware that Old Man Morgan was standing at his door and was looking at her sudden appearance. This was not a contingency that Annika had planned for. She turned to the open doorway and blurted out what she had been dreaming about.

"Kiss, kiss sweetie. I'll be back the next time Mom is away for the night." Then she closed the door and stared defiantly at Old Man Morgan. "We're in love. Don't tell anybody we're sleeping together or you'll get Cowboy into a lot of trouble. I'm way underage."

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Friday morning, Cowboy found himself once again at the U of T's personnel office and asking to talk with Madhuri Lee. Madhuri began spewing her thoughts about Richardson's quality of care before the interview room door had clicked shut. 

"He was by my bed, his knees actually touching the sheets when I woke up, Cowboy. He was watching me sleep! I couldn't believe it."

"Did he touch you at some point in the night?"

"I don't believe so. I'm a light sleeper, but the thought had crossed my mind how easy it would have been for him to put something in the unnecessary IV in my arm."

"Why did he have you on a drip?"

"Something about being hydrated, but it wasn't like I was recovering from an operation. They did some non-invasive tests when I arrived and repeated them first thing the next morning. He was touching my bed, Cowboy! I'm not going back there again. This man is creepy."

"The results of the test?"

"Lucky me. I'm eligible to receive a miraculous cure that will allow me to walk again."

"Did you sign anything?"

"I'm not crazy. I did bring the papers home so that you could see them. It's all legal mumbo-jumbo about participating in a research study. There is a clause within that mumbo-jumbo that absolves him of any blame should the study not live up to expectations or if I'm harmed in any way."

"And the treatment he'll give you? You asked for clear English, right?"

"This is where it gets very creepy. He asked me if I was still fertile and I said that I was. I can't walk because of damage to my spine; there's nothing wrong with my internal organs. He knew that. I think he just wanted to confirm."

"He didn't ask for details?"

"No. Instead he talked about how when women become pregnant, their bodies start sending out hormones to prepare the body for the pregnancy. Everybody knows that.
But he claims that some of the hormones that are sent throughout the body in the first six months are dedicated towards making the woman's body as healthy as possible. He talked a lot about one enzyme – the patulamic dulama – that might be able to reverse the damage done to my spine if my body could be stimulated into producing more of it. I'm going to look that term up when I get home."

"Don't bother. According to a medical professor at York University, there's no such thing. How was he planning to stimulate your body?"

"By making me pregnant. Artificially."

"If this patulamic dulama actually existed, all pregnant women would have a perfectly healthy body every time they gave birth. That doesn't happen."

"But that's because most women only give birth to one child at a time. He's going to give me four children. Back in the 1930s, one woman gave birth to quintuplets. Richardson claimed that this mother's body had cured itself of emphysema by the time the quints were born two months early. He offered to show me a medical report, but I said I don't understand medical jargon. He said four babies would be enough according to his research and he'd remove them well before I started to get uncomfortable."

*Multiple sources of fetal tissues. He is desperate.* "There's been nothing in his published research about the benefits of multiple child births," Cowboy said.

"That's what he said too. I'm the breakthrough case for the revolutionary new treatment of Plasma Surgery. Since my spine is so close to the babies, the benefits of the patulamic dulama will be easily conveyed. He offered to let me accompany him to the Nobel Prize ceremony as his guest. He seems very confident that I will have a complete recovery."

"Do you believe him?"

"No."

"Good. Don't go back to the hospital. When he contacts you, and he will, tell him that you don't want to go ahead with his research. Your religion forbids you from having abortions, even early in the babies' terms."

"What religion am I supposed to be following?"

"The Butterfly religion."

"Does it exist?"
"Yes, it does actually. If he asks for details tell him your padre is a nudist and you
don't want to talk about it any more."

*What if Madhuri Lee isn't the only woman that Richardson wants to impregnate
for fetal tissues? Would he be desperate enough to do that?*

# # # # # # # #

"How's Annika?" Cowboy asked.

"Annika's good, but she has been acting strangely lately. I believe she's in love.
I've seen her doodling little hearts on her homework assignments. She's certainly not
thinking about homework when she's supposed to be."

"Any idea who the boy is?"

"No. I don't want to pry. My mom did that with me and she made me really
embarrassed when she teased me about it. She'll tell me when she's ready."

"All girls go through this, right?"

"Yes, she had a boyfriend when we lived in BC, but we moved before it could go
anywhere. She hasn't had another boyfriend since. I think it's serious. She'll be dreaming
about him. Fantasizing about holding hands, that kind of thing."

"You won't mind a boy friend in her life?"

"No. I've been expecting this. Just so long as he's close to her age. Somebody in
the same grade, perhaps one grade above. Nobody older than that."

"Why?"

"Older boys aren't satisfied with holding hands. She's not ready for anything more
than that. I believe she'd probably break it off if he even hinted at something more than
handholding. Annika is quite shy when it comes to boys and sex."

...

"How's Bean?"

"Freaking out about exams. We hardly talk because she's binge studying and that's
OK. The York professor made an interesting comment. She said that if Bean wanted
something that was more oriented to saving people's lives, she should consider York's
accelerated program for medics. I think it would be a good idea because they need medics
in the military and Bean's had that kind of experience. It would be like going back into
her previous life but with the focus on saving lives. Of course, the professor didn't know about that, so I think she was just giving out general advice. You knew about Bean's military background, right?"

"Yes. Annika mentioned it to me. Bean told her when they were off at the shooting range one night."

"Does she ever go shooting now?"

"No. Typical teenager. She has one interest for a few weeks, and then moves on to something else."

"Perhaps that will be the fate awaiting her boy friend."

"I don't believe so. She asked me yesterday if she could buy some perfume. She's planning to spray it on her sheets. That way, there'll only be a faint smell on her body. Some girls put way too much perfume on. Annika is too sensible for that."

..."

"Was that York professor helpful in your investigation?"

"Yes, very. I tried to reach her when I got back to town, but she'd didn't answer. She was planning to be out of town visiting family, so I wasn't surprised."

...

"I heard that the police found that boy from Annika's school that had gone missing."

"Is he back in school now? Will Annika have to be cautious?"

"Annika said that he had been murdered and the police were in the school asking questions. She thinks it was the mother."

"How'd he die?"

"She didn't say. Mothers murdering their children! Have you heard of anything worse?"

Yes, I have. A father kidnapping his twin daughters and hiding them somewhere so that he could use them to produce fetal tissues for his research. That could be why he abducted Lylah and Lohla. I may have my motive. Would he be that cruel and uncaring?"
Chapter 33

Winnie came back from her holiday abroad with a fresh desire to link Dr. Richardson to some form of crime – any crime would do. She knew in her heart that he had been using tainted fetal tissues; she just couldn't bring him to justice on that. She hadn't been able to bring those four hooligans to justice either for their assaults. But, she had made them pay. Sure, they didn't receive the same trauma as what their victims had experienced. But their names and their faces were going to be very well known. People would be talking and that might deter them the next time. The concrete underpants idea was a one-time thing. That was good enough, in Winnie's eyes. She didn't know that the Head Nurse in that hospital was scratching her head over how she would choose who had the pleasure of wielding the hammer and who was the lucky recipient of the chisel. Every nurse in the hospital wanted the duty. She was even fielding requests from other nurses in other hospitals.

Cassie wasn't interested in going after Richardson again. She was back to staying in Granny's big house where she had turned one of the bedrooms into an office of sorts. Her mother had given her all of her lawyer instruction bots in case she ran out of things to read. Cassie wasn't much interested in them – she took them to be polite. She was binge studying right now to take her high school examinations in two of her subjects; she'd work on two other subjects in May and June. The stone carving was on her desk in the converted bedroom. It served as a paperweight that was mostly forgotten.

Granny wasn't interested either in pursuing Dr. Richardson. She wanted a rest and a chance to catch up on some of her gardening. She didn't tell anybody that she was exhausted from having to keep up with Winnie day after day.

Winnie had dropped into Toronto to see Lucas after returning. She didn't expect him to want to join with her on her Richardson quest, but she did want to look at his face when she mentioned the twins. The best way to describe it was a face made of stone. She saw anger, but not the target of his anger. There certainly wasn't any love, or even interest in the twins. If he had hardened his heart at the twins for dumping him, that hardening had spread to his face. She talked with him about the upcoming spring break. He would
spend it in Montana with the cadets. Old Stone Face was interested in that at least.

TG was busy saving the Earth's atmosphere. Marie was off somewhere, nobody knew where. Doc listened to Winnie railing on about nobody wanting to right a wrong with him and finally asked her, "What am I? Too much of a doddering old fool to handle a little TiTr'ng?" That's how the investigation into Richardson got back on track. Winnie and Doc TiTr'd back in time so that she could set up some drones inside and outside Richardson's house and lab. After that, he took her to the North Pole so that they could determine once and for all that Santa's house had melted. He happened to bring some fishing rods in case she was interested in catching her own food for a change.

# # # # # # # #

Cowboy was spending all of his time reviewing his notes, looking for something that he might have missed. He now suspected that the twins were being used to generate fetal tissues for their father's research. Suspecting and proving were two different things.

Cowboy went back to his notes looking for mini-mysteries that had not yet been solved. Why had Richardson lied about Lohla not being around him when she had been working all summer for him? Had he been planning on abducting her for some time? Claiming that she hadn't been around the lab for years would generate a good alibi for him. Nobody else could say otherwise, unless some neighbour had seen her there. Should he canvas the neighbourhood, such as it was? Why not? Only one neighbour would have had a partial look into the yard. It wouldn't take long.

... It didn't. Nobody in that house had seen two blondes last summer and that was now ten months ago and memories would be sketchy at best. Back to the notes.

Why did Richardson tell his daughters that their mother had run away and tell the university that Mrs. Richardson had died? Something to do with collecting insurance? If so, it wasn't much of a crime. It only meant that Richardson wanted money.

Collecting fetal tissues from the twins would mean that somebody would have to create Lohla and Lylah babies. Then the two mothers would have to be confined in such a way that they couldn't escape. Cowboy couldn't create any kind of imaginable situation where the twins would agree to what their father wanted. Perhaps that was why they left...
their bras behind. Were they trying to send a message that there was something sexual about their captivity with their choice of clothing?

???

Probably not. They left their bras behind because Richardson would not notice that they had removed this kind of clothing.

How did Richardson overpower his daughters? The assumption that they would not participate willingly in this stage of his research meant that they would have struggled. Two young women against one old man? A copter parked right in the yard? They'd have escaped easily. But Richardson had an operating room in the lab. Operating rooms come with drugs or injections that would render the girls unconscious. Something in the food probably. It would have been something that ordinary labs would have. Lillian would know. Once again, she didn't answer his call.

Assume that Dr. Richardson had been planning for some time to use his daughters for a new supply of laboratory tissues. Would he use drugs to immobilize his daughters?

???

Yes. He would have had something on hand. Everything about that abduction would have planned down to the last detail.

How did the twins get from the lab to their new prison? It must have been planned in advance and then that plan would have been executed within a couple of days. A transport company of some sort? Unlikely. It would be hard to disguise the drugged bodies of two gorgeous girls. Could it have been some organization that was used to operating criminally? Padre Butterfly's need to hide came to mind. Such organizations existed.

Where would they have been taken?

???

A place where they could be confined without fear of them escaping. A place that could arrange the conception of the babies. Would that be by sexual assault? Unlikely. Dr. Richardson had no history of using that degree of violence. Besides, forced sex would not be scientifically reliable enough for conception. Artificial insemination would have been the laboratory kind of answer Richardson would look for.

Then, somebody would care of the mothers for several months at least. At some
point, the babies would be removed. How long would the babies be left in place? No way to answer that. But, there'd be a scientific determination of the optimal time to extract the babies. The most amount of tissues for the least amount of harm.

   Least amount of harm meant that this would not be a one-time event.
   What kind of place could do all of that? Had to be a hospital.
   Not a large public hospital. Something smaller? Something that wasn't described as a hospital but could be converted into one for this particular need?
   Would the twins be the only two patients?
   Possibly, but if so, that hospital was doing other illegal operations too. This was not a one-of situation. This was an underground organization with multiple customers. They were acquiring stem cells the difficult way and that's why Richardson had been paying them steadily. Could Padre Butterfly have come across this organization before?

   ... Unlikely. He knew Cowboy was looking for anything to do with fetal tissues and would have told him.

   ... This organization had been in business for a long time. Richardson had been buying stem cells from them since 2059. If it were a hospital, the building would be at least thirty years old.

   ... 
   Hospital begins with the letter H. HAFH? H.A.F. Hospital?

   ... Back to the notes.

   ... Padre had mentioned that crooks fail to document all the tiny things that had to be documented. What did Richardson fail to document?

   ... Or, what did he document that could lead Cowboy to the H.A.F. Hospital?
Chapter 34

Cowboy was waiting outside the university's personnel office door when it opened at 8:30, Monday morning, April 4. Madhuri Lee arrived at 8:32, saw him standing there and immediately bustled him into the interview room.

"You look ill," she said. "What did you find out?"

"The man is a beast, but I can't prove it. I have perhaps one chance. Your files show that Richardson's wife was deceased. The files also show that he had named Lylah as his beneficiary. Would he gain financially by having his wife dead?"

Madhuri put the professor's file onto the big screen and then started thinking out loud.

"As per their contract, all faculty members have a life insurance policy. By recording his wife as dead, that allowed him to name Lylah as his beneficiary. But he could have done that at any time. He didn't need to declare his wife dead. The pay out from the life insurance policy would go to Lylah, but only if her father were dead, so I don't see how that would help him."

"Does he receive any other benefits from his contract that would change if his wife were dead?"

..."No. I don't see anything here."

"What about his pension? Does that change if she's dead?"

"He structured his pension so that his wife would receive his pension when he died. He won't get any more on his pension because she died before him."

"He had to benefit from her death somehow. That's the only thing that makes sense. Otherwise, he could have explained her disappearance as a runaway with another man."

"His type of pension would have changed. The pension would now end on his death. Pensions that include a continuation to a spouse are more expensive. There'd be a slight increase in his take home pay because the costs for a single pension are less."

"Would his salary have gone up for any other reasons associated with her death?"
"His medical coverage would have been cheaper after she died. That would raise his salary a fair bit."

"Anything else?"

"No, he doesn't have any other money coming off his salary. But, if his salary went up while he was working, his pension would also go up after he retired too."

"So, declaring her dead gave him how much more salary?"

....

"$152.46 per month. That's ...... $1829.52 per year. And over the fifteen years he had left before he retired when his wife died, that's $27,442.80. That's not counting how much more he'd make from the higher pension. I can't calculate that."

"This is more than enough for Richardson to take the risk of declaring his wife dead when she wasn't. Would the university have caught him falsifying her death?"

"If she showed up and complained to us, I suppose. Otherwise, the computer would keep spitting out his salary until we told it to stop."

"But you wouldn't take his word that his wife was dead, right? You'd want documentation. Some form of proof."

"Of course. He would have had to submit a formal death certificate."

"Please tell me that there's a death certificate somewhere in that file."

"There's no death certificate in the file, Cowboy. You and I would have seen it already."

###

Winnie and Doc began their review of the data from the ranch's surveillance bots from the day that Richardson and his wife moved into their new house. September 2051. With thirty-eight years worth of data to work through, they were fast-forwarding through the years quickly.

For the first three years, the couple followed a predictable routine. He would walk over to his lab and stay there all day. She would copter to the University of Toronto where she was taking courses in organic chemistry. She graduated in June of 2054 and from that point on remained at home helping her husband in the lab. By September of '54, Paula was visibly pregnant. Doc estimated that she was three months into her term at that
point. They figured the birth would be in March of 2055 and they'd find out what gender
the child was and what name she or he would have. Lucas had never said anything to
Winnie about the twins having an older sibling, so she had some curiosity about it.

The mystery became even more curious. Paula was no longer pregnant in March
of 2055 but no baby was in the house. Winnie was monitoring the lab's bot and started
skipping back in time, but in short intervals. Doc was watching the house bots, but
stopped when Winnie said, "Whoa."

"What?" he asked.

"Paula just climbed on top of a piece of plywood that had a sheet on it. It's
surrounded by medical equipment. Now she has an IV in her arm."

Doc saw the set up as well as what Richardson had in his hand and took over the
surveillance. "You should step outside, Winnie. I'll call you when I know more."

Of course, that made Winnie want to watch even more. Doc had to physically
push her out of the bedroom in Granny's house that they were using. "Grandfather abuse,
grandfather abuse," she accused. That brought Granny up the stairs and a quick mind
message later from the granddaughter abuser, Granny was taking Winnie outside. She
told her in her stern, I'm not kidding voice, to stay out of that bedroom. She then went
back inside and looked over Doc's shoulder.

"How many babies?"

"Four," Doc replied. "I'm going back about eight months. There's only one
explanation for this."

# # # # # # #

"There's has to be an explanation for this," Cowboy said. "We know that Paula
was declared dead in this computer file; there has to be confirmation of that here."

"It's not here. We both looked."

"Walk me through the process. You've received an electronic file saying that
Paula Richardson is dead. What happens now?"

"Nothing. Death certificates are valid only in paper form. There's a seal at the
bottom of the paper that shows the origin of the certificate."

"OK. I am Thomas Richardson and I bring in this paper death certificate and tell
you that my wife is dead. What do you do?"
    "I scan it and put the image into the computer file."
    "But it's not here."
    "No."
    "What happens to the original?"
    "Documents like that can't be shredded or destroyed. It will go into an old-fashioned paper file in an old fashioned filing cabinet. ... I have to wheel down to the basement but it won't take long."

    # # # # # # # #

    "I'll find Winnie," Granny said. "It won't take long."
    It didn't because Winnie was sitting on the floor outside the bedroom door. She took one look at Granny's face and said, "Are you kidding me? She had four babies?"
    "There's more to it than that," Granny said. "Doc will tell you."
    "A week after his wife graduated, Richardson made her pregnant artificially. I saw the operation. He must have included some hormones to stimulate multiple births. I don't know exactly how he did that. At thirty weeks, he removed four fetuses at the thirty-month mark. That's what I didn't want you to see. Lots of blood, lots of scalpel work. Thirty-week babies can survive if they receive good medical treatment quickly. Richardson cut the umbilical cords and watched them die. He wrapped the bodies, put them in the lab freezer, and patched up his wife who was under sedation the whole time. He busied himself at a lab station until he heard his wife stirring. They had a brief conversation."

    Granny took over. "She asked him how many babies she had had. He answered that four babies had been extracted. She asked about the genders. He told her that the genders were not important. What was important is that he now had enough fetal tissue for several years of research."

    Doc finished the report. "Richardson ignored his wife who staggered back to her bedroom where she stayed for several days. Richardson spent that entire time in his lab preparing the tissues from his dead children for long-term storage. If he had any sympathy for what his wife was going through, I didn't see it."
"I didn't see it," Madhuri announced as she re-entered the interview room.

"Did you find a paper file at least?"

"Yes. It held his transcript of marks from Denver University. That's another kind of official document that we have to keep. But there was no death certificate."

"There's something going on here that we don't understand."

"I haven't been working in this office all that long, Cowboy."

"Can you message somebody? Ask for help on a theoretical case? I don't want to get you in trouble for giving me confidential information."

"I know somebody who will help."

...

"I'm confused on a filing complication, Bess. Let's say that somebody on staff has lost his wife."

...

"No, this has nothing to do with the York University death. I haven't heard anything about that."

...

"That's so sad. She had been hospitalized since January? So the family must have known it was coming."

...

"Terminal cancer can be excruciating if you aren't on meds."

...

"At least she didn't suffer."

...

"So, say that one of our professors comes to me with a death certificate for his wife. I file that in the professor's file, right? It can affect things like his pension."

....

"That's what I thought too. I'd hate to make a mistake on something like that."

...

"I'll check into that."

...
Madhuri terminated the call and looked at Cowboy. "We got him," she said.

"We got him," Winnie said. "He used fetal tissues that were more than twenty weeks old."

"It's not that simple, Winnie," Doc explained. "He used his own children's tissues, so he obviously approved of the abortion as their father. The mother obviously gave him permission to abort the babies. It doesn't matter how old the babies were when they were aborted, all Richardson has to say was that the two of them had agreed to abort the babies for the health of the mother. You can't prove otherwise."

"We have thirty-one years to go. He's going to make a mistake. I can feel it."

"I'll help," Granny offered. "I don't care what religion you believe in, this man has no right to kill his own babies for experimental research. We'll find what we need."

Madhuri found what they needed. The missing death certificate was filed under the name of Mrs. Paula Alison Richardson who had been a student at the U of T – something that neither Cowboy nor Madhuri had known. Since it was her death certificate, it would stand to reason that it would be stored in the file with her name on it.

The seal on the death certificate indicated that her death had occurred in the Home Away From Home Care Facility, otherwise known as HAFH.

From the certificate itself, Cowboy learned that the date of death was April 2, 2079 and the cause of death was heart stroke. The doctor who signed the signature was Dr. Edmund H. Ferguson, Chief Medical Officer, HAFH. The letterhead was indecipherable except for the area code for the hospital. The area code was 402.

"We got him," Cowboy agreed. "The Denver sheriff can use that 402 area code to find the HAFH building. I'm almost certain that Professor Richardson kidnapped his twin daughters so that they could provide him with fetal tissues that he needs for his research. That was the missing motive. I'll find the missing twins in that building. After that, it will be straight police work to rescue them."

Madhuri looked at him with an arched eyebrow.
"Artificial insemination, I believe. This place would be like a hospital prison."
"That man is evil."
"He probably doesn't see himself that way."

...

"Are you a glass half filled person or a glass half empty person, Madhuri?"
"You mean, do I see things positively or negatively? I can't say. It depends on the circumstances, I guess. Why?"

"I don't believe that Richardson's wife ran away with another man. I believe he overpowered her, imprisoned her in a storage shed in his lab, and had her sent to this HAFH organization. I don't know why Richardson suddenly acted as he did, but I do believe that he sent her to HAFH for the same reasons he kidnapped his twins: to provide him with lab samples. Paula's age would have meant that the HAHF people would be taking bone marrow stem cells."

"How would this be a glass half full?"

"When I find this place, I may find Paula and her two twins living together. That's not much of a positive given what they've gone through, but finding each other may have been something they all wanted. Perhaps it has helped them."

"The half empty part?"

"I've been considering this death certificate as a fake that this Ferguson doctor provided to Richardson to enable him to get more money. What if the death certificate isn't a fake? What if Paula Richardson did die on April 2, 2079? She would never have seen her twins again. The twins would never have seen their mother again."

"She's alive. The glass is half full," Madhuri said. "You?"

"I believe good ultimately triumphs over evil. The glass is half full."

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Monday afternoon and Cowboy was finishing up his packing for an extended trip that would start in Denver. Right now, he was storing two suitcases and two backpacks in Bean's copter. He had left a note for Bean on the kitchen counter telling her where he was going and how long he might be (a couple of weeks max). Also stored in the copter was his sniper rifle but he didn't even consider taking his pistols. There'd be more than enough firepower from the local police.

The timing was just right. Cowboy had finished loading the copter, he had changed into his cowboy persona, and here was Annika returning home from school.

"Annika," he greeted as she approached the building.

"Cowboy," she replied and looked at him from under her semi-closed eyelids. Like she was shy or something and didn't want to look him full in the face.

"Give my house key to your mother, will you? I've locked the place up and will be gone for a while. She said you guys would keep an eye on the apartment like last time."

"OK," she said and smiled. "Did you and Mom talk about that hospital operation she might have? Will she be going back in do you think?"

"Yeah we did talk. She's not going to follow up on that."

"Oh."

"You look disappointed."

"I am. Cause she won't be able to walk without an operation."

"Your mom seems quite content in her wheel chair. She asked me to tell you that she'd be home at the usual time."

"Oh, goody."

# # # # # # # #

Granny, Winnie, and Doc were calling it a day. They stopped after they had seen a second set of abortions in August 2058. Again, four babies died while Thomas Richardson watched. Paula staggered back to her bedroom and stayed there for days. The only thing different this time was that she cried a lot.
"We need to move through this faster," Winnie said.

"We need to slow down," Granny contradicted. "Paula is changing her mind about what she's doing. We should listen in to more conversations. Look for angry emotions. Sad emotions."

"I'll ask Cassie to give us a hand," Doc said.

"We should be doing this while we're floating over Richardson's lab in case we need to check something," Winnie suggested.

Granny had the solution. "I'll ask Reese to bring the Wilizy/Europe from Zurich to Toronto. It's a short hop."

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Tuesday in Denver. Cowboy arrived early in the morning and got right down to business. First thing was to tell Stook what he suspected. Then he told him what he could prove. That second part didn't take long.

Stook summarized. "You believe three women related to Thomas Richardson have been kidnapped and are being held captive in area code 402 somewhere. That area code covers northeastern Nebraska. You believe that the twins are being forced to bear children so that our Dr. Richardson can continue to do stem cell research. The wife may also be subjected to bone marrow operations. Since he can't find any providers like Garouch, he's making his own stem cells."

"Ay'up."

"If I didn't know you, I'd say that you've been spending too much time in the hot sun. You think that he's killing his own babies so that he continue his research!"

"You know what Padre thought about Richardson."

"Cowboy, I'm thinking of arresting you for slandering the good name of Professor Richardson?"

"What?"

"Private citizens can't make those kinds of accusations with no proof."

"I can get proof if I can find the HAFH building and sneak inside."

"Threating to break and enter. The charges are piling up."

"But,..."

"Stop before you incriminate yourself any further. You are under arrest. I have no empty jail cell at this time, so you are ordered to remain within my sight. To help me keep an eye on you, you will have to attach this shiny piece of metal to your shirt."

Stook slid a deputy badge across his desk. "Do you promise, etcetera."

"Yeah, I promise etcetera."

"Good. You're no longer a private citizen. You are operating as an undercover agent of the Denver Sheriff's department in the investigation of a suspected kidnapping operation. You are now free to slander Richardson's good name with impunity."
"Why didn't you just ask me? Why go through the fake arrest?"

"There were so many times when you were working for me that I wanted to arrest you for all the corners you cut. I couldn't resist."

"Do you know any sheriffs in Nebraska, Stook?"

"I know one and that all I need. He'll know them all."

By mid afternoon, formal inquiries had been sent to sheriff departments in Beatrice, Bellevue, Blair, Columbus, Crete, Elkhorn, Fremont, Hastings, La Vista, Lincoln, Nebraska City, Norfolk, Omaha, Papillion, Seward, South Bend and York. These were the towns in the 402 area code. The message read.

"The Denver Sherriff's office is looking for a runaway girl who needs her meds. We believe she may be travelling to an organization in northeastern Nebraska called Home Away from Home Care Facility or it may be known as HAFH. Your assistance in helping us to locate her will be appreciated. Please keep this inquiry confidential. If she hears that we know where she is, she'll disappear again. Contact Sheriff Stookenhap at your earliest convenience."

"Now we wait," Stook said. "Did you ask your girl friend to marry you yet?"

"I never told you about her."

"A good detective uses all of his senses."

"What?"

"You've started to iron your shirts. What's her name and why is she so special?"

###

On Tuesday, Winnie and her group made it from 2058 to 2061. The relationship between husband and wife continued to be strained. They listened in to numerous arguments between them. The underlying theme was whether Paula would be able to keep any of the babies. She claimed that Thomas had agreed that she could take the first pregnancy to the end of term. He said that four babies were too much for her to handle. She said that he could always help. He said that he had more important things to do. She said that he had promised that the second batch would only have two babies. He said that they needed four sets of tissues; a breakthrough was imminent. She asked for the next pregnancy to be the normal way: one child with the father sleeping with his wife. He said
that conception was too hit and miss that way.

"Then inseminate only one egg," she pleaded.

"I'll see," he said.

Paula gave birth again on July 15, 2061. This would be her third pregnancy. She was twenty-nine. As before, she was prone on a sheet of plywood when Richardson used his scalpel.

"I thought you'd let me have a normal delivery."

"Why would you want to go through all that pain for nothing."

"You said I could keep one."

"I need all four."

#

Wednesday in Denver passed slowly. Almost all of the Nebraskan sheriff offices had replied that there was no HAFH business in their areas. South Bend's reply came in at 4:45 p.m. "HAFH is a long standing care facility on the outskirts of South Bend. I'm sure they'd be willing to cooperate with you. Sign in with us first when you arrive. Sonny Skies, Sheriff."

"We can go at first light," Stoop suggested. "It'll be a five or six hour flight. We'll take my copter. What do you want from our supply room?"

"Camping equipment, food, camouflage tarps and uniforms, extra guns and ammo. Nebraska is dry, right?"

"Ay'up."

"Bring water and lots of it," Cowboy instructed.

"Break and enter tools?"

"I have my own. Bring you own if you want."

#

During Wednesday's data search, the four Wilizy managed to plow through three years of data. Paula refused to give Thomas any help in the lab. Instead, she sat in the living room looking at a blank screen. He'd come in expecting to be given food and she'd tell him to make his own. She had gone shopping so he should do some house chores too.
The house became a pigsty but Richardson hardly noticed. Paula moved into the second bedroom and ordered a bed from Toronto. Thomas told the delivery copter guys to take it back. To her, he warned that if she wouldn't be a wife to him, she could sleep on the floor. Paula did, with sweaters and winter wear for padding. From a medical perspective, she probably fell into depression, at least that's what Doc was seeing and he was watching her closely.

Granny warned them that the next pregnancy would soon be needed; Richardson's tissues in the freezer were running out. He told his wife that it was time and she should come into the lab for insemination. She refused. He carried her in bodily, but she wouldn't stay on the table. He tied her down as tightly as he could but he couldn't stop her from twitching away from him. Artificial insemination is a tricky operation and it shouldn't be attempted when the object of the insemination was giving the doctor a moving target. At least, that's what Doc said.

Richardson untied his wife and let her go back to her bedroom where she went into the bed-less bedroom and barricaded the door. Richardson went to the local hardware store and bought some construction supplies. He spent one full day installing something in the storage room at the far end of the lab. Winnie had not been able to put a bot in the room. What happened next was an unpleasant surprise for everybody except Richardson.

Richardson pretended to go to the lab that morning but waited in the house for Paula to leave her bedroom to eat instead. When she ventured out, he lifted her onto his shoulder and took her into the lab's locked storage room and left her there. He visited the shed once a day with water bottles but each time he emerged alone. On the sixth day, he brought her comatose body out and laid it on the plywood board. After the tricky part of the operation was done, he started an IV. She was well enough to stagger on her own to her bedroom two days later.

Doc said that she had entered a state of deep depression.

This part of the surveillance was very hard on Doc. It was all Granny could do to stop him from interfering. It would have changed the future and the Wilizy had all sworn to never do that.

During the pregnancy, Richardson made efforts to feed her and restore some of her health. Paula ate, but it's doubtful that she was aware of it. Her husband collected the
fourth litter of baby tissues on November 12, 2064. Paula didn't resist. She just lay there, staring at the ceiling.

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Chapter 37

Stook and Cowboy arrived in South Bend at 1:30 p.m. and immediately checked in at the Sheriff's office. Cowboy was in uniform, his Denver deputy badge over his heart. And yes, the shirt had been pressed with an iron that had a sign attached to it declaring, Property of Denver Sheriff's Office, Do not remove. Stook believed that if you looked like a law enforcement officer, the public and your colleagues would treat you as one. The South Bend officers worked under the same philosophy as dictated by Sheriff Sonny Skies, a muscular man with a buzz haircut that kept his red hair close to his scalp. He had two deputies in his office with him, both of them younger versions of himself. Law enforcement can often be a family business in the justice wilderness.

Introductions were made all around and they sat in the sheriff's air-conditioned office, four chairs in a semicircle around a solid looking and well used desk. "First questions first," the South Bend sheriff opened. "My parents named me Sonny because I was their first son, not because I had red hair that looked like the sun. They named their second son, Sonny Too. Fortunately for everybody concerned, they had no further sons and no daughters. They had no patience for frivolous things like fancy names. I have no patience either for frivolous things. We're helping you with this idiot runaway girl who didn't have the sense God gave her to take her meds with her. Scotty here will take you out to HAF-Huh and help you get her on her way home."

[Narrator: HAF-Huh = the pronunciation of HAFH.]

Stook told them why they were in Nebraska in broad strokes. Two possibly three kidnapped women. No mention of fetal tissues.

"I don't mind the subterfuge," Sonny said. "I'd have done the same thing. However, you're barking up the wrong tree. HAF-Huh has been here for years and years. They're solid citizens."

[Have you noticed that some people use expressions that are completely unrealistic for their environment? Take 'barking up the wrong tree,' for example. Nebraska was in the center of a huge landmass that was par-broiled in the summer and baked the rest of the time. No trees could be found anywhere in South Bend, let alone in
the rest of the state. South Bend received its water from the Platte River, which derived its water, ultimately, from the Mississippi River. By the time it arrived at South Bend, no water was available for frivolous things like trees."

"Tell me what you know of the facility," Stook asked.

"It was established in 2061 as a care facility for people who were no longer able to care for themselves. Seniors with dementia for example. Now they're taking in people with mental illnesses that pose high demands on their families for their care. They'll have twenty to twenty-five patients most times. Capacity is thirty as per the fire chief's instructions. The nursing staff lives on site. Perhaps ten of them. Other medical staff and company executives live in town. The dementia patients could cause trouble here in town so their facilities have a security system to control access in and out of the building."

Stook and Cowboy exchanged glances at the security information.

"Sounds like you keep a pretty close watch on them," Cowboy ventured.

"Not actually," Sonny replied. "We've never had any trouble whatsoever from them. We're required to check the facility for safety issues once a year and we're always been welcomed when we do. Patients are out on the porch with staff ensuring they don't get fried. We go wherever we want in the facility, do our job, and leave."

"Do they happen to have an operating room?" Cowboy asked.

"Yeah, a little one in case a patient has an accident. Falls are common with the older people. Not much they could do to prevent that."

"Food?" Stook asked.

"Prepared by the nursing staff; grocery supplies delivered weekly to their back entrance."

"Funding?" Cowboy taking his turn.

"From fees charged to the families. It is expensive to stay in HAF-Huh because they give twenty-four hour care. They have a charitable component for those patients who can't afford to stay there."

"Do you inspect on a schedule?"

"Of course. That guarantees that we satisfy the law. Even if we didn't go by a schedule, the HAF-Huh CEO asked us to give them warning when we were coming so that they could prepare their patients for visitors. Some of them don't react well to
strangers, them being somewhat crazy in the head as many of them are."

"Family visits?"

"Strongly discouraged. Mental and demented patients need routine. They become upset when they face changes in their schedule and in their care personnel. Those nurses have been there since the beginning."

"Mortality rate of their patients?"

"No more than you'd expect for a facility with a lot of old people."

"You don't know the numbers though."

"They're not required to report that information. They have their own cemetery."

# # # # # # # #

From the bot images, Doc estimated that Paula was in deep depression for most of 2065 and 2066. Her physical health deteriorated too. When she became physically and emotionally unable to get out of bed, Richardson finally noticed and began paying attention. Granny suggested that this was solely because his source of fetal tissues was going to disappear. She was probably correct on that.

But Paula did react to the attention and to the food that he brought everyday to her pad on the floor. One day, he brought her out of the spare bedroom and back into his bedroom. She walked to the bed on her own and climbed in.

By 2067, Paula was physically healthy again. Doc had no way to gauge her emotional health from the bots. She resumed cooking for her husband. She also resumed taking short trips in the copter to buy food supplies. At times, she'd extend the trip to spend time on the sandy beach in their little village. Occasionally, she'd walk into the water until she was waist deep and then stare at the far shore of Lake Simcoe. But, she never walked in past her waist, and by 2068, she wasn't wading into the water at all.

In February of 2068, she followed her husband into the lab and climbed onto the plywood bed. Eight months later on December 14 2068, Paula produced five, count them five, sets of fetal tissues. The stress on her body must have been tremendous - these were regular sized babies when they were delivered. Granny suggested that Richardson upped the numbers because he wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to rely on his brood mare. Nobody in the ship disagreed with that sentiment.
If you're keeping track, and Winnie certainly was, by the age of thirty-six, Paula had delivered twenty-one almost full term babies, all of which Richardson had watched die.

Back in Toronto, Annika was walking to school when she felt a presence behind her. She turned.

"Are you following me?" she asked the man.
"Yes, I am. I thought we should talk, Annika."
"I have nothing to say to you."
"But I have something to say to you. You should listen. Cowboy would want you to listen."
Annika didn't move.
"You know how you told me that I shouldn't tell anybody about how you were having sex with Cowboy? You said it would get him into a lot of trouble since you are, what thirteen years old?"
"I'm fifteen," she corrected.
"Whatever. You're underage. I've been thinking about you and Cowboy rolling around in his bed, and I'm finding it difficult to keep my mind on not telling anybody."
Annika said nothing and remained motionless.
"When I think of you and Cowboy, I feel these urges. I'm keeping them under control right now, but I'm not sure how much longer I can keep my mouth shut about Cowboy. If I don't have sex soon, I'll probably blurt out something about Cowboy having sex with you. Like to your mother."
Annika said nothing and remained motionless.
"You could probably help me deal with my control issues."
Annika said nothing and remained motionless.
"What's it going to be, Annika?"
"I like to go for walks in Toronto Park when the weather is good. I'll slip a note under your door the next time I have one planned. I don't want anybody seeing you with me, so stay well behind me. Bring a blanket or a sleeping bag with you."
Thursday evening, just about nightfall, Sheriff Sonny Skies climbed up the back side of the bluff where Cowboy was lying flat on his stomach under a camouflage tarp. The tip of his sniper rifle was pointing at the front of the building about two hundred yards away. Snook was sitting on his butt below the top of the bluff draining a bottle of water.

"See anything?" Sonny asked.

"It's what we didn't see," Snook replied. He had been taking turns with the sniper scope. "We didn't see any of the residents sitting on the porch being cared for."

"It's been a hot day."

"Perhaps. I admit we have no hard information. We would have felt a lot better about this HAF-Huh place had we seen the residents walking around freely. Cowboy will take a closer look as soon as it's dark."

"You won't be making any unauthorized entries into a private building, will you Sheriff?"

"Don't get your knickers in a knot, Sheriff. We know what we're doing."

[Narrator: This is not a country saying if my readers were wondering about Nebraskans being accustomed to walking around with their knickers in a knot. Stook read a lot when times were slow in Denver. Knickers is a word that was used frequently in British mystery bots when people were upset about something that was not important – knickers being a British word for women's panties. There was also an implication that the person being overly upset was a women. After a long afternoon in the sun, Stook wasn't feeling very friendly to a man who had just came out of an air conditioned office to check up on them with his uniform still fresh.]

"No need to get your panties in a bunch," Skies retaliated with American women's underwear. "We operate by the book in South Bend."

[Narrator: Why do men feel the need to use women's underwear in sayings that have nothing to do with women's underwear?]

"In Denver, we don't warn people ahead of time when we're going to inspect them. It defeats the purpose of inspecting them."

As I said, Stook wasn't feeling overly friendly.
Later that night, Cowboy returned from his excursion after the knicker-knotted sheriff had been long gone and sat down next to Snook who asked, "Did you see anything?"

"I didn't see the twins, but I could only look in the windows of rooms on the ground floor. I did see nurses preparing patients for bed. Some really needed the help."

"Anything else?"

"I saw something that I've never seen before. The patients were all wearing a thin black necklace of some kind. It was tight around their neck. The nurses had one too. The one doctor making rounds didn't have one."

"Could it be part of the building's security? Could the necklace be something electronic that tells the staff where everybody is in case of emergency?"

"That would explain why the nurses were wearing them. It could be a way to notify them of those emergencies."

# # # # # # # # # #

After the birth of the fifth litter in December 2068, the problems between the Richardson's gradually disappeared. Paula remained sleeping with her husband. There were some attempts to have normal husband-wife sex, but Paula complained about pain. "Something inside is not right," she said and Richardson didn't try again. He acknowledged to her that the last litter had been too large; he wouldn't take that risk again. He pointed out to her that she was in her late thirties and so some decline in her fertility could be expected. From mid 40's on, there might be some risk of birth defects. But these defects would not affect their research, so this wasn't something she should be concerned about. By now, Paula was back to working in the lab, so this was just two scientists having a scientific conversation about the collection of baby eggs that their brood mare still had available for fertilization.

Early in September 2070, Paula climbed onto the plywood sheet and her husband had sex with her, artificially of course. Four babies were planted.

The early stages of pregnancy did not go well. Paula notified her loving husband in late November that she was sure that she had lost one. The same thing happened two weeks later. This was one of the risks of women her age becoming pregnant so
Richardson was not too concerned. He'd harvest the remaining two in May and, instead of waiting three years between pregnancies, he'd shorten the interval to two years. Problem solved.

As April approached, Paula began taking precautions – no sitting on a hard stool in front of a microscope for hours on an end, for example. She backed off on the lab work and the housekeeping. But she still maintained her weekly schedule of shopping for food and having a nice stroll on Franklin Beach.

# # # # # # #

You gotta see this, Cassie sent to the other Wilizy viewing the data from the various bots in their schedule for today. One of Cassie's responsibilities today was watching the yard – normally a nothing job. They all clustered around the screen showing the feed.

"I don't see anything," Winnie said.
"Me neither," Granny agreed.
Doc held back. He knew Cassie wouldn't have called them over to watch an empty front yard.

That's the point. Paula left for her weekly shopping trip three hours ago. She normally returns before two hours is up. That yard should be showing a copter.

"Fast forward," Doc instructed.

Still not back by 7 p.m., Cassie informed the group.
"What's Richardson doing?" Doc asked.
"The same as always. He has his head buried in a microscope."
"Copter malfunction?"
"Copter accident?"
"She's gone for a runner."

Winnie provided reassurances. "She'll be back. You'll see."

# # # # # # #

Paula hadn't returned in the next few days. Meanwhile, Richardson was searching for her. He borrowed a neighbour's copter but found nothing. There was no sign that she
had gone shopping. No sign that she had gone to a hospital for help. No sign even of his copter.

Two months passed. Richardson gave up the search and busied himself in his lab. Each week, he grudgingly had to walk into town to buy groceries. This took him away from the aging microscope that he treated more carefully than he had ever treated his wife.

Friday, June 5, 2071 was Paula's 39th birthday. She celebrated by landing the family copter in the Richardson front yard and bringing two bundles of joy into their home for the first time. A grim-faced father was there to vent about how hard it had been for him to keep the business going without a copter. Paula stopped him before he could start.

"They're twin girls. I named the older twin Lylah and the younger twin Lohla. Their birth certificates are hidden where you'll never find them. You can't kill these babies; I have proof they were born."

She entered the house and put the girls down on the master bed.

"We'll need some furniture for the second bedroom. Plus clothes. Lots of baby supplies. I've prepared a list. In the meantime, the babies will sleep here with me. If you block me on this, I'll set the girls' bedroom up in the laboratory where they are likely to cry incessantly. Good luck getting any work done. Here's the list."

...  
"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Those are Lucas' girlfriends," Granny said.

"Yes," Winnie answered

"Does Lucas know that you're after their father?"

"Yes. He didn't want to be involved. Says it's none of his concern. The girl friends are long gone."

"You'll be juggling frogs soon."

"Excuse me?"

"Juggling frogs is the same as being on a sticky wicket."
"What?"

"It's like a situation where a husband's wife and his secret girl friend both end up at the same pregnancy clinic and are sitting beside each other with lots of time to kill."

"Oh, oh."

"Exactly. You never heard this from me. I believe that Lucas is still in love with one of those twins. I don't know which one."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"That's a good question," Doc said. "We'll leave you with it, won't we Granny."

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Chapter 38

Friday, Stook and Cowboy took turns surveiling the HAF-Huh facility. Not once did any patient come out the front door. Cowboy's attempt to use the scope to see through the windows didn't work. There was too much glare.

Both were sitting in relative shade at their campsite well out of sight of the facility when they saw Scotty Skies trudging towards them. He was out of breath, perhaps from being pudgy, or perhaps because of the load he was carrying on his back.

"Where'd you land?" Cowboy asked.
"Don't worry. I stayed low all the way in. I put down about a half mile back."
"What's in the pack?"
"Hot food and cold water. My wife thought you would need something around now."

"You told your wife about us?"
"She operates the radio when she's not running the sheriff's office. Irish will be along in a bit. He had the bigger load. Dig in. I've already eaten."

Irish turned out to be Scotty's younger, more brawny brother. Both had red hair, of course. Turns out that Sonny Skies' parents weren't the only ones who chose quirky names for their children. Scotland and Ireland as boy's names? Really? Irish showed up as Stook and Cowboy were digging into a fresh gooseberry pie.

"May I marry your wife, Scotty?" Cowboy asked. "I love pie."
"Irish's wife may have something to say about that."
"Why?" Stook stepped right into it. "Are they lesbians?"
"Worse," Irish said. "She the city's head (and only) prosecutor and two men being married to one women is an official No-No in Nebraska. We're not Utah. She's very firm about that. We try to keep any special night time operations a secret from her."

"Night time operations?"
"You're going to break into the HAF-Huh building tonight, aren't you?"
"Yeah."

"We'd do the same if we were in your situation. Irish brought you everything that
"we thought you might need."

"Does your dad know about this?"

"Officially, no. But *Yes* otherwise. He also knows that we botched that security check. He's been running background checks on the company executives that live in town to make up for it."

"And?"

"My cousin in the land office knows how much they paid for their homes."

You have a cousin in the land office?"

"Sure. We also know that they didn't take out a bank mortgage and there's no other lender in town."

"Another cousin?"

"My sister-in-law is the assistant bank manager. She also says that the CEO of HAF-Huh earns an awful lot of money. Far more than what you would think a charity would bring in."

"Any other relative with insight?"

"How about the cashier at the local food store?"

"Niece?"

"Daughter. She says that the nurses in that place never receive any time off. They're not allowed to leave the building in case there's an emergency."

"The food store would know this how?"

"Her boy friend is the local pizza delivery man. The nurses have a standing order every Friday night for pizza. He has to leave the pizzas inside the back door by the kitchen. They're not allowed to come outside. Same thing on his weekly grocery run."

"What's in the box?"

"Lassos in case there's something on the roof we can loop a rope around. That way you'd be able to get up on the roof and then dangle down and look in the windows."

"The operative word being *You, Cowboy.*" Stook with the observation.

"Yeah, we can't be directly involved. We have a grappling hook that will probably make too much noise. And then, these are probably what you'll want to use." Irish pulled them out and displayed them for comments.

"I give up. What are they?"
"Suction cups with hooks. The cups will attach to the outside wall and you can climb up the wall without making a sound. You can use the hooks to hold onto, or once you're up, you can attach a rope to a hook and then a partner can pull himself up. They're pretty solid."

"And you would know this how, Scotty?"

"In my courting days, I may have used them to visit my sweetheart who wasn't allowed to see me."

"The pie maker?"

"The same."

"I'd have climbed that wall too."

...

Later that night, Cowboy used the suction cups. He found two blondes in the bedroom that was second from the left on the top floor. They were twins. At the time he peeked in, they were sprawled on a blanket on the floor leg wrestling.

Cowboy took the time to peek in every room, but didn't learn much more. He saw a mix of middle aged and old patients. The twins were by far the youngest. Each room had two single beds. Also two bureaus. One open closet revealed a blue shift hanging on a hangar. The woman sitting on her bed was wearing a white shift. Lohla and Lylah had both been wearing a white a shift. Obviously, HAF-Huh didn't spend much money on patient clothing.

Cowboy shared the good news on his way back to the camp – Stook had been serving as a lookout at the care home just in case.

"I'll wait until morning and then go into town and start the rescue operation. The Denver posse should be here by evening tomorrow."

"Are you sure about that posse?"

"It's hard to say No to a man who funds the governor's re-election campaigns."

Cowboy also shared his bad news. "There's a discernible hum at the level of the gutters. It doesn't change in tone, volume, or pitch. I wondered about the gutters because there's no need for them here in Nebraska. I felt around but couldn't find any wires. I did feel some low level vibrations though."

"I wonder if the Skies family has a relative working in a security company."

"You better hope so. The only way I know how to beat a security system is to shoot out the power to the building. I don't see any power poles with transformers anywhere near this building."

"The roof has solar power panels," Cowboy informed. "With all this sunlight, their back up batteries will be fully charged even if we could disconnect the solar panels, which we can't."

"Do you think we could get a warrant?"

"Worth a try but we have nothing but suspicions."

"Sneak in with the pizza or the groceries?"

"That may be the only way past the security system."

# # # # # # # #

The first couple of years after Paula brought the twins home were the best years of her marriage, as was evident from the bots. Every night before falling asleep, she would snuggle up to her husband and kiss him on the ear. Every morning after waking, she would kiss him again on the ear. Her life revolved around the girls and she gave up working in the lab. Richardson didn't complain, but he did start to drop hints that he was almost out of tissue what with the twins not being available to him. Paula agreed to have one last batch and they were implanted in 2073 when she was forty-one. Sadly, Paula miscarried all of them early in her pregnancy. Richardson revealed that he had another source of tissues that would do in a pinch.

The tissues from that source were only good for three years, so it was early in 2076 that Richardson began dropping hints. Paula resisted, saying her body would not be able to handle it. Richardson complained about the quality of the tissues he had received from the other source. They were substandard stem cells from bone marrow extracts from elderly people. Paula's tissues were much better. She agreed to try one more time. Again, all four miscarried.

Once again, Richardson was forced to use this other source of tissue, which he continually reminded Paula was substandard. "It's not my fault that I'm old," Paula would counter. "You know that women of my age are prone to miscarriages." Paula by now was
forty-four years old and the twins were five.

# # # # # # # #

The next significant date in the family's life together occurred in February 2079. Once again, Richardson was dropping hints that he'd need some good tissues from Paula. She resisted; he persisted.

"I'm forty-seven," she argued.
"You haven't had any births since the twins were born. Your body is perfectly able to handle a pregnancy."
"I had two sets of miscarriages. Have you forgotten about those?"
"You were too active. This time, you'll confine yourself to your bed."
"And who will take care of the twins? You're certainly not going to do it."
"We'll board them out at Schnauble and you'll confine yourself to your bed."
"I won't abandon the twins."
"The school will take care of them. Your first loyalty is to your husband. I need you to produce more tissues."
"I'll have more miscarriages. It won't work."
"No, you won't. You'll be healthy."
"Oh yes, I will have more miscarriages."
"You will produce more tissues. My mind is made up on this."

Perhaps it was the heat of the moment that caused Paula to put too much emphasis on how certain she was that she'd have a miscarriage. Or perhaps, Richardson clued in on his own on what had been happening. He said nothing further that day.

The argument continued the next day although the field of battle had shifted slightly. Richardson had won the first battle. His wife would be impregnated regardless of the chances of miscarriages; the twins would live at Schnauble full time rather than at home. Their noise and interruptions would be gone; Paula would work in the lab again. But one more part of their school still had to be decided.

"I'm telling the school to register Lylah in grade four," he informed his wife.
"She's supposed to be going into grade two."
"She's way ahead of her class. It'll be a waste of time. She's going into grade
four."

    The master had spoken. The decision had been made.

    Not so fast there, Master.

    "Lohla is as smart as Lylah. She should go into grade four too with her sister. That way they'll be together."

    While identical in appearance, the twins were not identical in personality. Lohla was constantly being a behavioural challenge when Richardson wanted her to work in the lab. Short of tying her to the lab stool, he couldn't get any work out of her. She'd rather play with her friends. Lylah didn't argue. She'd do what she was told to do. It was important that this obedience continued. If she hung around too much with Lohla, she could start behaving like her.

    "Lohla is nowhere near as smart. She doesn't have the intellectual ability to concentrate."

    "She's seven years old."

    "So is Lylah and Lylah can concentrate. You need to face up to the truth. One girl is smart and has a chance to have success; the other is not smart and will be a failure. She doesn't know how to work hard."

    "You don't see Lohla except when she's in the lab."

    "I see enough. She's irresponsible and lazy."

    "The twins need to be together. The school houses their students by grade level. They won't be in the same class or in the same dormitory. The twins are extremely close. Lohla needs Lylah as much as Lylah need Lohla. I won't let you separate them."

    That was the wrong thing for Paula to say. Richardson needed them separated. On top of that, Paula was beginning to act like Lohla. Argumentative. "We'll talk about it later," he said.

    "That won't do you any good. Thomas, I've grown a spine. Both parents have to agree on where Schnauble is going to place the girls. I won't allow you to advance Lylah without Lohla with her. The school will end up putting both girls into grade 2."

    

    "#

    Monday, February 20, 2079. Paula had copter ed the girls to Schnauble as usual
and was hopping down from the copter.

"There's something in the lab you should see," Richardson said to her.

"Data problem?" she asked.

"No. The microscope is acting up again. I can't get it to focus."

"It's old. I'll look at it."

While she was hunched over the scope, Richardson slapped a hypodermic needle into her neck and pressed the plunger. The Wilizy watched him carry what looked like a dead body into the back room. He returned in a few minutes, refocused the microscope properly, and resumed his work.

Monday afternoon after he brought the twins home from school, Richardson told them that their mother had run away to be with another man. They broke into tears. They'd get over it. That evening, Richardson asked Lylah to make supper for the family. He'd have to wait until September to move them into the boarding houses at the school. Lylah would be in grade 4, Lohla in grade 2.

A transport copter arrived Wednesday morning while the twins were in school. The Wilizy watched as Richardson entered the back room for the first time since he had injected something into Paula's body. He was carrying a bed sheet with him. He emerged from the back room with a body cocooned inside the sheet hanging over his shoulder. He tossed Paula's lifeless body into the cargo area of the copter, handed the pilot a sealed envelope, and returned to his lab. The pilot lifted off and took up a southward heading.

"We've got him for murder," Winnie said.

Granny disagreed. "That pilot is going to dump Paula's body in some lake where she'll never be found. We could find it, but you wouldn't be able to explain how. How will you prove that he murdered his wife without producing a body? By now, that body has decomposed."

Do we want to pursue this place where he has been getting bone marrow stem cells?

"I don't think so, Cassie," Doc said. "We could never prove that collecting stem cells was a crime."
"So Richardson will get away with murder?" Winnie asked. "Where's the justice?"

"Without a body, we can't prove to a judge that he murdered her," Granny responded. "That's always been our standard for planting murderers."

* I have a stone carving and I know how to use it. *

"Then you'll become a murderer," Cassie. "What will that do to your future afterlife?"

"We still have ten years of data to look through," Doc interrupted the argument just as Winnie was about to erupt. "Don't give up yet, Winnie."

"I'd like to see what happens with Lylah and Lohla," Granny said. "I know about these girls through Lucas. Ten years shouldn't take long. They're not anything like I had thought they'd be."

"If we don't get any leads, we can always TiTr that transport driver. Richardson gave him a sealed envelope. Perhaps we could find proof in that."

Winnie wasn't buying it. "We can't steal or tamper with that envelope, Doc. That would change the future."

"Richardson has ten years to incriminate himself," Granny offered up another faint hope. "Let's focus on that for now."

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Chapter 39

While Cowboy was copterizing to Denver, the four Wilizy were continuing to study the video feeds from the bots in Richardson's home and lab. They had ten years worth of data to view and it was slow going because they stopped skipping and started listening whenever there was an argument. They had to stop frequently.

The girls took a long time to recover from their mother abandoning them which Richardson reinforced every chance he could get. The girls were seven, going on eight. Of course, they would believe him. It didn't help that Richardson told them that their mom left because Lohla was so argumentative, noisy, unfocused and lazy and you know the rest. This was part of his goal to split them apart so badly that Lylah could not be influenced by Lohla's argumentative personality.

While they were still living at home, he succeeded. But after Richardson moved them into Schnauble (grade 2 and grade 4), his influence disappeared. Lohla drove the housemaster to distraction with her wheedling and arguing and the school eventually gave up and allowed Lohla to move into the Grade four dorm with her sister. From that point on, their relationship improved and, to cut a long story short, it became as strong as it is today. Inseparable is the word you need to focus on. With their mother off somewhere with her lover, and with their dad never paying them any attention, they became their own family. Yes they fought, but they also mended their fights and found solutions. The boyfriend pact being one of them – a necessity when they both became teenagers and boys started pestering them.

The two months of summer were the only time that Richardson was in their lives. When she turned nine, Lohla flatly refused to go into the lab and threatened to break equipment if he tried to force her. Lylah played the peacemaker, working there for the two of them. She also served as the house maker. Lohla did the shopping – a task that allowed her access to the family copter, which meant that she, was gone about twelve hours each day. Lylah didn't mind because she became interested in science and her father encouraged her. Through this, Lylah received the fatherly attention she craved. Lohla received the independence she craved.
Most of this was hidden from the Wilizy's view since they had no bots in the school or in the dorms. The Wilizy's most important discovery in their review of their video feeds was the legal contract between Lylah and her father which he forced onto her when she turned nine. My readers will have already read about that contract and you know the clauses, so I won't repeat them. Granny and Cassie studied them carefully.

"He has the authority in this contract to run her life the way he wants. He can stop her from having a boy friend and even having a marriage with children," Granny said with alarm.

_This contract wouldn't be legal, would it?_

"No. She's far too young. But she believes that it's legal and that's all that Richardson needs for now. The question is: Will Lylah recognize what he has done to her and break the contract when she's older and wiser?"

_He can make her do anything with the last clause._

"Fulfill other responsibilities as identified by Dr. Richardson if they were needed to advance the research on Plasma Surgery," Granny re-read the clause. "You know what he'll make her do, don't you?"

_Provide him with stem cell tissues the way her mother did._

"Richardson was already planning to do this to her when she was nine."

###

The next pause that the Wilizy took in their data review was in the summer of '88. Lylah was working in the lab as required by her contract, but Cassie immediately noticed that Lohla was with her, both of them wearing white lab coats with the words _Richardson & Associates_ on the left breast pocket.

_Why do you think Lohla is working in the lab, Granny?_

"I thought that she had absolutely refused to go in there."

_She had. Now she's working side by side with her twin and she's been there every day so far this summer._

"Side by side is right. The two of them are crammed into that work station."

_They could spread out if they wanted to._

"Hmmm."
"Winnie, can you give me a night time shot of their bedroom?"

"Sure."

"They have two single beds in that room and they're sleeping together in one single bed. Did you notice that?"

_I did. They always have their legs and feet touching in the lab._

"And in bed, they're snuggling so close I'd be boiling hot myself."

_Ghosts don't have to worry about that. What are you suggesting?_

"Twins develop together in the womb. They're always touching each other before they're born. This summer, it looks like they went back to the womb. They're comforting each other all day long. They probably don't even realize that they're doing this. It's just natural for them want to touch the other's body."

"Let's keep going."

_We won't see much now that it's fall. Richardson is on his own._

..."We're not learning anything new. Let's skip through more quickly."

"I'll be glad to be finished. This man gives me the willies."

_Hang on. What have we got here?_

"Lohla and Lylah are landing a copter in the yard. Coming for a visit? Time stamp?"

_Saturday, February 26, 12:13 p.m._

...

_That didn't take long. Lohla ripped into him as soon as he was close enough to hear her._

"I don't believe that's Lohla. That's Lylah. See - she's talking about her contract and how it's illegal because she was too young to understand. She says that she going to break it!"

...

"Now she's blasting him for blaming her and Lohla when their mom ran away. She didn't run away. They know that he had murdered her."

"He's denying it."
She looks determined. Lohla just nodded at her.

"I'm not going to be a criminal any longer, Father. I'm going to tell people what you've done with Mom and all the babies. So is Lohla. I've grown a spine."

"Growing a spine. Isn't that what Paula said to him?" Doc asked.

"Word for word. When was that?"

Searching... February 20, 2076.

"Almost exactly ten years ago. He's talking now.

"I can prove that I didn't murder your mother. The evidence is in the lab."

Don't go into the lab with him, girls. Stay out of the lab.

"They can't hear you, Cassie."

I know, Doc. DON'T GO IN THE LAB!

...

He's killed them, Doc.

"I don't think so. Hurt them, though."

He grabbed the first thing he could see and slammed them over the head. Two blows and they didn't have a chance to react.

"I hear moaning. What's he doing?"

He's out of shot. I have another long-range view. He's unlocking the storage room door at the back.

"He's coming back to the girls. He just heaved Lylah onto his shoulder. Putting her into the storage room."

Lohla's turn now.

"Did he kick her in the ribs before he picked her up?"

Yeah. She's out of view now too.

Grabbing some chains.

He'll be immobilizing them somehow. He can't keep them in his storage room forever.

"Off to the house now. Can we follow him?"

I have all the house shots up now. Where is he?

"Kitchen."

What's he doing?
"Cheese, bread. Bacon. He's making lunch. Grilled cheese sandwich."

"He just ordered a transport copter pick up for Monday morning."
"I can follow that transport in TiTr mode. Doc, will you come with me?"
"Definitely, Winnie."
"There's no point in following them if they're dead. Fast forward to Monday so we can see."

They're alive. I can see them trying to kick him.
"They were gagged and still tied up when he tossed them in the copter."
"Winnie, don't try to rescue them. We don't know where he's taking them."
"I'm calling Lucas now. We'll need a military operation. Granny, once we return to present time, I'll let you know where we are and you can sling to us."

I'm coming too.

#
#
#
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#

"Hail the camp," Lucas called.
"Identify yourself," a voice replied.
"My name is Lucas. I'm with the Saskatchewan army. We have a common interest in the people in the building you've been observing. I'm moving into your sight now."

It was early Saturday evening, so the men sitting around the campfire had no difficulty seeing the man approaching. He was wearing military fatigues and showed no signs of carrying a weapon. He approached the camp with his hands away from his body. This was a good idea since a number of rifles were trained on him.

"Stop there," the same voice said. "Check him out, Bill."

A man in a Stetson rose and did a quick pat down. "No weapons, Boss."

Lucas put his hands down and approached the group. He noticed that all the men in the camp were wearing Stetsons and cowboy boots of varying shades and colours. The pat down man was also wearing blue jeans, a checkered, long sleeve shirt, and a bolo tie around his neck. The man referred to as Boss was wearing a sparkling white shirt and a blue jean jacket to go along with the same attire as the others two. The other five men all had shiny badges on their light brown shirts. Everybody in the group had at least one
holstered gun and numerous rifles were lying within reach. These armaments were why Lucas had identified himself early.

_Talk to me, Winnie._

_The man who is acting as the boss is not really in charge. He believes he is because he's rich and he always gets his way. Plus, he's Lylah and Lohla's uncle and he is very intent on being the one to rescue his sister's daughters. Everybody is referring to him as Howard. They're all on a first name basis although they represent three different groups. I'll fill you in on the rest later. Right now, Howard is bound and determined that he and his two security men are going to kick the front door of the care facility house down tonight when everybody is sleeping. The deputy with the long blonde hair has been warning everybody that the security system may not be as easy to beat as that. He did some nighttime surveillance of his own and saw that all the people in the facility were wearing thin black collars around their neck. He's never seen those before._

_Safe Haven style?_

_Yes. Doc has confirmed that this place is a Safe Haven style ranch. The uncle is pushing his plan to invade the house and is not listening to anybody. You need to shut him down. Then, you and I need some time to talk. Cassie sent you the clip of Lylah and Lohla being kidnapped, but there's background to follow. The men are waiting for you to sit down and talk._

"Mind if I sit?" Lucas said.

"Grab a piece of sod. What are you doing here?" Uncle Howard asked.

"Saskatchewan is a long ways from here."

"I am in charge of a military unit that has been investigating a man named Thomas Ellison Richardson. He is currently living in Ontario. We have reason to believe that Richardson has sold his two twin daughters to a medical company that will put their lives in peril. Our investigations led us to the building on the other side of this hill."

"That building is known as the Home Away from Home Care Facility. The South Bend Sheriff's Department is investigating the company managing that building. We have learned that two young women are being held inside. They are likely the twins you're looking for. Since this is our jurisdiction, we'll be coordinating any rescue attempt that might be initiated. I'm Sheriff Sonny Skies. What's your rank, Soldier?"
"That information is confidential, Sheriff. Who can tell me about the defenses of that building?"

A man wearing a Stetson, cowboy boots, a bolo tie and a badge put up his hand. "I'm Sheriff Charlie Stookenhap, of the Denver Sheriff's Department. There's some kind of security system surrounding the building. It is most noticeable at roof level."

"Do you have wings hidden under that shirt, Sheriff?"

"No. We had climbing suction cups with hooks, courtesy of our South Bend friends. Show him, Cowboy." The deputy with the long blonde hair held up the equipment. Lucas looked at him closely and then raised an eyebrow. He received a wink in reply.

"What is Denver's interest in this?"

"Thomas Richardson was born and raised in Denver. My deputy has been working on a missing person's report."

"What missing person report?"

"The twins lived in a Toronto boarding house and their roommates reported them missing," Cowboy answered. "I followed their trail from Toronto to here."

"Security systems are the same everywhere. We break in. That sets off an alarm that alerts the local sheriff's department, which for us will just happen to be in the vicinity. We set everybody free, and the sheriffs here arrest the people running the company. Bing, bang, bong, we're done."

"So long as everybody in the facility is alive after you break in. Do you know that the patients are alive now?"

"Cowboy saw live patients in the building."

"What were they doing?"

"Some were getting ready for bed. Nurses were moving around helping. The twins were in the same bedroom and were alive and healthy."

"Did you notice anything unusual?"

"Everybody in the building was wearing an electronic device of some kind. Sonny was telling us about it before you came down."

"HAF-Huh's Chief Medical Officer told me that the patients all wear this black electronic necklace that reads their vital signs and location. The necklace information is
available to the nurses who have a similar device. They know where every patient is and what their health status is."

"Did you see it in action?"

"No."

"We're wasting time here. I've told you our plan. If you don't want to participate, then don't. My two boys here and I can do it all on our own."

Everybody looked at the guy wearing the army uniform.

"Sonny, how many people are in the building including nurses?"

"We don't have an accurate count because the nurses sleep in the basement. Call it thirty but that's probably a low estimate because our surveillance has been spotty."

"Are the nurses all black?"

"Yeah. What of it?"

_Gete Haven slave girls, Winnie?_

Could be. I've only seen a couple but I have had no time to do a full count.

"Nothing. Just curious. Do you have a coffin maker in town, Sheriff?"

"The local hardware store owner handles everything for us."

"Tell him to start building thirty coffins."

"Why?"

"Because this idiot will kill everybody wearing that necklace when he breaks that door down."

# # # # # # # #

The person in charge of the operation was quickly determined after Lucas indicated that his staff were on their way and knew how to disarm the security system. They'd do that first and then the two sheriff departments would take care of moving patients and nurses out of harm's way. Saskatchewan would neutralize the company executives and then turn them over to local law. Uncle Howard and his two men would guard the empty camp.

"I protest," Uncle Howard protested. "That's my family in there."

"Which means you should be very happy that qualified military men and women will be rescuing them. You and your posse have no qualifications for engaging in this
rescue. Sit down and shut up or I will ban you from the area."

   Did that shut him down enough, Winnie?

   Yeah. Big blowhard. What are you going to do now?

   I know that blonde dude – he's the deputy from Helena who we worked with. He recognized me from the cadet camp. I'll talk with him away from camp to learn how he got here all on his own. You have a plan, right?

   I have an idea.
   How long to make it into a plan?

   Granny, Doc and Cassie are already here. We can walk in tomorrow morning.
   Walking in is not much of a plan.
   You don't need much of a plan so long as you don't try to do it with force. I'll ask TG to drop by to help.

   You'll sit in on the meeting with the Helena guy, right?
   If you didn't ask me, I was going to do it invisibly.
   I know. You should come.
   Well, I will be playing a key role in our little drama.
   Not another Star Trek excursion, I hope.
   Nope. This one is a western.

   # # # # # # # # # # # # #

   Two hours later, Granny mind-messaged Stu.
   We could use a lawyer, Stu. One day max. Do you have some time?
   Sure.

   We're running a rescue operation here in Nebraska that should be over before noon tomorrow. Winnie has been reading faces and she says that the folks here in South Bend Nebraska believe in quick trials and quicker consequences. We could be in trial tomorrow afternoon.

   Who do I talk to about the case?

   Winnie will brief you on what some of us have been doing as part of a Wilizy operation. A private detective who used to work as a sheriff in Helena has been investigating from a different approach. You'll need to talk with him too.
I know him. Good man.

Use your GPS tracker to find South Bend, Nebraska. Bring an anonymous Wilizy copter when you come. We need to have a believable explanation of how some of us arrived here.

That evening, Stu spent most of his time listening. First to Winnie; then to Cowboy. Both indicated how difficult it had been to catch Richardson in the act of doing something explicitly illegal and without being caught in a he said, she said situation. Since he wouldn't be part of Winnie's rescue plan and the necessary planning meeting, Stu left the camp to prepare his legal case against Richardson. Like Winnie, he had an idea.
Chapter 40

"May I help you?" a female voice said through the speaker at the front door of the HAF-Huh building. It was 10 a.m. Sunday morning, April 10.

"Yes, you may," the voice of an almost-a-teenage girl replied. "I need your help with my granny and grandpa. Can we come in?"

The lady who came to the door was wearing a blue skirt with two deep pockets, white blouse, and white sports shoes. She had her brown hair done up in a bun and tied up with a white ribbon. She appeared to be in her thirties. A nametag on the blouse indicated that her name was Carol and she was the Client Manager. The only other thing worth noting was the tip of a black electronic wand sticking out of her left skirt pocket.

What she was looking at through HAF-Huh's two sliding glass doors was more remarkable. A young teenager was next to the call speaker. She was dressed in faded blue jeans and a faded blue T-shirt. Her black hair was set in pigtails and her bare feet were enclosed within a pair of home made beaded moccasins as befitting her aboriginal appearance.

Standing on the porch were two elderly aboriginals, both dressed in full regalia, which meant they were wearing home made beaded moccasins, deerskin trousers and long sleeve deer skin shirts. The woman had what can be best described as a war bonnet on her head complete with feathers cascading down her back. For those who were familiar with her customs, this meant that she was a chief of some kind. The woman answering the door was not familiar with her customs since all of this country's aboriginals had been massacred during The Troubles. All who hadn't managed to hide, that is. In spite of her cultural ignorance, she was impressed with the headdress. The elderly woman was also leaning heavily on a long bow.

The elderly man had a shock of white hair above a wrinkled face. That face carried brush marks of some form of war paint.

[Narrator: Doc had complained that Granny was getting feathers to wear; why couldn't he dress up with feathers too? Since they had used all the feathers from the crows they had ambushed that morning, feathers were out of the question. Charcoal from
the ashes of last night's fire would have to do. Winnie had cautioned them as they approached the building not to say "How." That might be going too far.

Carol, the client manager, also saw an anonymous copter sitting on the grass in front of the building. "You said something about needing help?"

"I need to dump my grandparents somewhere," Winnie said. "Can you take them off my hands? I can pay."

Carol opened the door. Grandparents were a good source of income, albeit not for an extended period of time. Sunday was a slow day. At the least, she could interview them. The big woman with the bow stumbled a bit as she walked through the glass doors and had to hold one door open while she recovered her balance.

# # # # # # #

Winnie was sitting in a small boardroom right behind the reception area giving Carol details about her grandparents both of whom had been left in the reception area. Winnie wasn't mincing words about the problems HAF-Huh would encounter.

"I call Grandpa Doc because he used to be a doctor. Doc's pretty much senile now," she confessed. "He does talk some, but mostly in grunts. He's stubborn. Very stubborn. When he wants something, he will keep trying to get it. He won't be talked out of it. You'll have to switch his focus."

"What kind of things does he want? Food?"

"Some foods, yes. Ice cream is a big hit. But mostly, he wants women."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He becomes amorous after he's had anything to eat. Some people get sleepy; Doc gets amorous. Nothing overly creepy, although I haven't had much success keeping a female caregiver on staff for more than a month. But he likes to fondle, so there's a certain degree of tolerance that your staff will have to accept."

"I'm not..."

"Granny now, she's still pretty sharp. And sharp is the key word here. You'll need to keep her away from sharp objects. In her day, she was an excellent archer – that cane she's using for example is her favorite bow. I don't let her have any arrows because then she'd shoot them. That would have consequences for the local bird populations; cat and
dog populations as well. So, no arrows for Granny or anything that can be made into arrows. She likes knives of all sorts and when she's cranky, you'll want to approach her carefully because she'll steal them and hide them in easy to reach places in the house. She doesn't much care if Doc is manhandling women staff, but she does get irked if they resist too much, because then Doc would turn his attentions to her. She doesn't want that. I've found that two big beefy caregivers are the best combination, preferably both male. Do you have male nurses?"

"No. All of ours are female."

"How many?"

"Twelve."

"Young? Old?"

"All started their careers with us when we opened in 2061, so they're about fifty years old now."

"They'll still be agile enough then. Skin colour?"

"Black. Why is colour important?"

"Doc can be quite rude to white people what with them trying to bushwhack him when he was younger. Black is good. He probably won't be rude to you because you have the big hooters. That's what he calls them, by the way. [All Wilizy: Staff consists of twelve black nurses in their fifties.]"

"They need to be agile because your grandfather will grope them and your grandmother may fling knives at them."

"Well put. But they're healthy and have no serious illnesses or ailments. They'll entertain themselves most days. Doc likes to carve wood figurines; Granny likes to bake. She'll probably want access to the kitchen. Best to put a lock on the knife drawer."

"They may put quite the strain on our staff."

"What you're trying to say politely is that we'll have to pay more than the normal rate."

"Well put," Carol said. She was beginning to like this little girl, taking care of her grandparents and all. "How long have you been taking care of your grandparents?"

"About six months and I've had it up to my back teeth. Old people should just disappear and die privately so that they don't inconvenience others. I have a life to live
and I plan to live it to its fullest. I have an inheritance to spend."

Carol began to re-evaluate the little witch. "An inheritance?"

"I plan to party, party, party. Anywhere, anytime. I know that the old geezers will cost extra, so I brought what should be enough for you to take care of them for a year or two."

"What did you bring?"

"These." Winnie pulled a leather thong and sack from under her white blouse and put it on the table. Then she loosened the thong, pulled out a good-sized pebble, and handed it over.

"A pebble?"

"A diamond."

Carol's eyes went ka-ching. "Really?"

"Yeah. Diamonds aren't shiny when they first come out of the ground. They look like this. This one is a bit bigger than most. It's easy to test for a diamond by measuring its specific gravity. You'll find easy tests described on the Internet."

Winnie opened the pouch even further and pushed it across the table.

Ka-ching, ka-ching, ka-ching.

"How many diamonds are in the pouch?"

"I didn't count. I have a whole bedroom stuffed full of them at home. I also have diamonds in closets, cupboards, and under the bed. There's gotta be thousands of them. Doc found these diamonds yesterday. He left the smaller diamonds in the ground. They weren't worth bending over for. It took about fifteen minutes to mine them."

"Doc found them?"

"Yeah. He has this thing about diamonds. He says that he can smell them, but I don't know how he does that. He found these in a moraine about two miles from here. Moraines are easy to find. Yesterday, he walked around one sniffing. Then, he pulled out his garden trowel and dug a little. This is the result. Whenever we go for walks, he hangs his trowel around his neck with a leather thong. We call those walks Troweling for Diamonds."

Winnie restored the pouch to its hiding place.

"What's a moraine?"
"It's from the ice age eons ago. This whole area of prairies in the center of North America was made flat in the ice age by huge glaciers that carved up the land when they spread from the north. When they started melting, the glaciers receded but in doing so, they left ridges full of rocks and minerals that the glaciers had carved apart and transported with them at their bottom. The moraines are those ridges. Doc finds diamonds in those moraines. That ridge across from your front door? That's a moraine. There are probably diamonds within troweling reach. Doc will only trowel for you if he likes you. Palefaces like you won't get far unless he likes you."

"I think that I should ask all of our key people to come in and meet you and your grandparents. I don't have the authority to admit your grandparents given their strain on our resources. May I keep this diamond to show them?"

"Sure. While we're waiting, you can give us a tour of your facility. Doc and Granny will want to see everything and meet everybody."

All Wilizy: the head cheeses will be coming into work this morning. We'll be having a grand tour. Lucas, what's the progress at your end?

Cassie found the pain transmitter and TG used William's lock picker to enter what is labeled as the Electrical Room. He says he's able to disable the transmitter now.

Tell him to wait for my signal.

How are Doc and Granny?

Bored right now. They'll be going into their act soon. I predict that Carol will be feeding Doc some ice cream, one spoon at a time, while we're on our tour.

###

Carol, Winnie, Doc, and Granny had started the tour of the ground floor with the dining room. Carol pretended not to notice Granny sliding two sharp knives off the tables and into her pocket. Granny pretended not to notice Carol not noticing these thefts. Then it was into the kitchen where the big freezer door was unlocked and opened wide. Carol brought out a big tub of ice cream and Doc grunted in appreciation. She took a big dish out of a cupboard, filled it full, and locked the freezer door. With a spoon in hand, they started on a tour of the main floor – Carol with her left arm around Doc's waist. Every five steps or so she would stop walking, fill the spoon, and hand feed Doc – in the
process pressing her chest against Doc's arm. Granny and Winnie rolled their eyes. When
the ice cream ran out, Carol stopped to wipe Doc's chin with her finger. He took the
opportunity to nuzzle her ear.

The next stop, he nuzzled her other ear.

The next stop, he nuzzled both ears while Carol slid Doc's hand down to her butt.
She looked a question at Winnie who nodded in approval.

Then it was up to the second floor and they came to the second bedroom from the
left.

"Most of our patients are downstairs enjoying themselves on the main floor.
These two patients are spending the day up here. They're two young women. I'll let them
know we're going to look in. I want you to see how comfortable the room is for a
couple."

She tapped on the door, peeked around the door, and then walked in. "We have
some guests, Lylah and Lohla. They're looking around the center and may be joining us.
They are looking at the rooms. We won't be long."

As she turned back to her guests, she let the electronic wand slip back into her
pocket and she opened the door for the guests to walk in. The twins were plastered
against the far wall.

"Twin blondes," Doc spoke-grunted for the first time. Then he opened his arms
wide and tottered towards them.

"He's senile," Carol said with authority. "He won't hurt you. Just let him hug you."

Doc stepped between them, put one arm around each, and pulled them to him.
They resisted a bit. Then he nuzzled one neck, and then he nuzzled another neck. Four
pupils grew bigger as he did this. In part, the growth was because Granny had stepped
behind Carol and had flashed them with the ceremonial sword she had hidden inside her
deerskin trousers. Meanwhile, Doc was whispering while he nuzzled. That whispering
had an impact on pupil size as well.

_Lucas is downstairs and is organizing your rescue. We'll be disabling the pain
necklaces. You'll hear a double tap on your door when it's safe for you to come out._
By the time the upstairs tour had been completed, the five key executives of the HAF-Huh care facility were waiting in the dining room. I'll remind you of the Chief Medical Officer's name – Dr. Edmund H. Ferguson. By position, the other four were: the Treasurer, Staff Manager, Building Facilities Supervisor, and Client Manager.

Introductions were made although Doc wasn't too interested in those. He was standing stoically in front of the locked freezer door waiting for it to be opened. Granny was sorting the knives in the knife drawer and checking on their sharpness. She found a sharpener and was carefully honing a blade.

"I want to see how your staff live, Carol," Winnie said.
"It's their private area," she replied.
"So were the bedroom upstairs, but you didn't worry about that. Let's have a meeting downstairs where we can't be interrupted. If any nurses are down there, send them up. We can go through things like menu, regulations, contracts, payment schedule...that sort of thing. These old fools are good where they are."

On the way down... "Did you test that diamond?"
"The Chief Medical Officer did."
"And?"
"It's a diamond."

Several things happened almost simultaneously after the door to the basement stairs closed behind the management staff.

First, Doc fell down in the middle of the dining room. Probably from ice cream deprivation. Granny panicked and called out, "Heart attack, heart attack. He's dying, he's dying. Help, help!"

All the nurses within hearing distance rushed to the rescue. Since Winnie had ensured that the off duty nurses were out of dormitory, that meant that twelve nurses were in a circle looking down. Doc took that opportunity to have a miracle cure, opened his eyes, sat up and said, "You need to look behind you."
A big man with brawny arms and a big chest was in the doorway. He was wearing clothing that revealed that he was in the military, which probably was why he knew how to quiet everybody in the room with a single word. "Silence!"

Then, in the quiet that followed, he spoke with authority. "All of you have been kept here against your will. The patients have been badly mistreated. The nurses have had no choice but to watch it happen. The men and women responsible for this have been tricked into going downstairs. They will pay for how they have treated you, but first, you have to leave this building."

"Nurses: We have disabled the machine that sends electric pain through your necklaces. You can walk out of the building without fear of being punished. Please help the patients who are not mobile or are not capable of helping themselves to leave the building. For you patients who do not need nursing help: Leave the building now but do so calmly. People are outside to transport all of you to safety. Folks, we need to have all of you out of the building within fourteen minutes."

... Meanwhile, at the exact time that Lucas was issuing his orders, TG was double tapping on a certain bedroom door and entering.

"TG!" Lohla said in surprise. "How..."

"No time to talk, Lohla. Hi Lylah, I'm Lucas' brother. The pain transmitter you've been wearing has been disabled. You're free to leave the building. Your uncle from Denver will be waiting for you outside the building."

"Our mom is downstairs."

"We didn't know she was here. She's probably outside by now."

*Only six patients are in their bedrooms, TG. You have plenty of time to escort them out.*

*Thanks Cassie.*

*I'll tell Winnie about their mother. We thought that she had been murdered.*

### Winnie let the executives lead the way up the ground floor. Everything had been agreed. She told them how happy she was to be finally free of those old geezers.
The old geezers in question were waiting for the door downstairs to open. Doc was blocking their way out of the staircase. "Ice cream," he grunted.

"I'll take care of him," Carol offered and led the way down the long hallway to the reception area where the contracts would be signed.

Granny waited for Ferguson to pass her and then she stepped next to him and kept pace. "That's a nice gun you have there. Have you ever thought of using knives? I like knives. Do you like knives?"

Ferguson tried to ignore her but she kept up the questions until the group entered the foyer where they found South Bend's Sheriff and two deputies waiting there. "You're all under arrest for Forced Confinement," Sheriff Sonny Skies said.

"I hope you pull that gun out of your holster," Granny said conversationally. "I'm looking for an excuse to use this."

Ferguson was too busy looking down at the honking big ceremonial sword poised at his throat to answer.

With only one gun toting executive to watch, Winnie relaxed and shut down her sling weapon array. They didn't know how many holstered or hidden guns this group would bring to the care facility. That's why she was at the back of the line.

Five minutes later, the HAF-Huh facility was empty. Winnie's anonymous copter was still parked in front of the reception area. Doc did a final check for patients with Cassie's help and came back to the plane with the ice cream bucket and three spoons.

*No point in letting it go to waste,* he said.

*No fair,* the ghost who couldn't taste anything complained.

*We can let some of it melt in a bowl and you can go swimming in it,* Winnie said.

*Deal,* the ghost accepted.
Chapter 41

Noon, Sunday morning. The patients and the nurses were settling into their temporary accommodations in the South Bend High School gym. Community volunteers with transport copters were bringing beds out of HAF-Huh to handle the new arrivals. Other volunteers had raided HAF-Huh's food stocks and were cooking up a Welcome to South Bend lunch. The full story of what had been going on in that building was coming out. Necklaces were being cut off and given away to the town folks as souvenirs. The five arrested executives were sitting in the Sheriff Office's cells eating food from that very same welcome meal, but without the welcome part.

In the back room of Carl's diner, a decision about a trial was not that far away. In attendance were: the mayor, the town sheriff, the head prosecutor, the Denver sheriff, the private investigator from up north somewhere, the rich guy from Denver, the soldier guy, and the little in'jun girl. At least, this is how the community was referring to them. We know the head prosecutor as Irish's wife. Her name was Frances. Missing from the back room was the judge who would be adjudicating any trial the city conducted. He was in the diner handling the cooking. His name was not Carl.

Frances, the prosecutor, was arguing that this case was not cut and dried. She would have to look through the HAF-Huh books to make sure that the rumours circulating around town were true. The bit about the remains of a donkey being found in the basement was probably not true. She would lay charges when she was good and ready.

Nobody was expecting an actual donkey skeleton to be in HAF-Huh's basement. Donkey was the code word the South Benders used for a visiting democrat that might have been mislaid. Democrats were a political party that had been obsolete in Nebraska for some time. Nebraska was solidly Republican and although they did not currently shoot Democrats on sight, there was a certain animosity towards them that deterred any such fool from staying in Nebraska more than an hour or two. That animosity included plucked chicken feathers and some molten tar.

The discussion on the upcoming trial was disrupted when Deputy Irish messaged
the sheriff that they had just picked up a Dr. Thomas Richardson who had been stumbling around in the outskirts of town. Irish had arrested him for *Walking outside without a hat on*. This law had been on the books for a long time but had never been used before. It was enough to hold him in a jail cell for a day. Walking in the Nebraskan sun at high noon was akin to committing suicide, which town fathers frowned on.

Irish reported that he had deposited Professor Richardson in the food storage cooler of the city's long abandoned Dairy Queen. This was the sheriff department's back up cell, their current cells being fully occupied. Scotty was standing guard, or more accurately, Scotty was sitting guard. Richardson was sitting as well, quiet for now since Scotty had threatened to close the door on the cooler if he kept on complaining. With the cooler being air tight, that might have had some consequences on Richardson's health in a while.

Irish reported that he and his brother had found Richardson wandering a few miles west of town on old Highway 66. They were acting on a tip that a drunk would be fried to death in an hour. Richardson was wandering down the road, dazed. He didn't know where he was and when told that he was in Nebraska, he refused to believe it. Irish checked his ID and found the name Richardson. This name had been the topic of a lot of conversation around some peacekeeping campfires recently, so Irish noted the funny accent, the ID that revealed his name and address – Ontario Canada – and concluded quite correctly that this was the man that the Denver deputy had been investigating. The man's confusion could be put down to impending heat stroke.

"I can identify him if you wish," Cowboy offered.

*You're up,* Winnie messaged the next actor. She was serving as lead actor plus director in the little show that she had thrown together.

There was a tap-tap on the wall next to the beaded curtain that served as the door between Carl's Diner and Carl's Back Room. A face with a brand new Stetson perched above peered through. "Sorry to interrupt," the mouth in the face said. "I'm looking for Winnie. I was told she was here."

"Stu," Winnie exclaimed in mock surprise. "What are you doing here?"
"All rise. Court is now in session, the Honourable Cloudy Skies presiding."

[Narrator interlude: A little background is probably in order. I hope you appreciate the legal jargon pun that I slipped in there. You've met the judge – he was Carl's long time cook, also the city's judge, also the grandfather of Irish and Scotty Skies, also the father of Sonny Skies and Sonny Too Skies, also the brother to Overcast Skies (boy) and to Rainy Skies (girl). Cloudy Skies was given this name by his father Friendly Skies, who had been so named by his father Fred, who worked for United Airlines was when airlines still existed and advertised widely through slogans. (Fly the FRIENDLY SKIES of United.) If you're going to blame anybody about these names, blame Fred. Don't blame me.]

My readers may be asking, "How did we get to trial so soon?"

Well, that's a fabricated story in itself. Stu had met Cowboy some months back when Stu was selling Stetsons in Montana. He had taken a number of hat orders from an army cadet camp where he had met Lucas and Winnie. Today, he had his Stetson stock with him, and was on his way from Montana to Minneapolis when he heard that Lucas and Winnie were in South Bend. He was here to give them their Stetsons. Naturally, he was asked to set down for a spell, which is Nebraskan for sitting down and having a chinwag. No spelling quizzes would be administered. [They sat down for 'a spell.' Stay with me now.]

The conversation in the back room returned to Richardson and the kinds of charges that could be brought against him. Cowboy's opinion was that they shouldn't do anything about the baby deaths because the law was not clear. Winnie suggested that they go after him for what he had done to his wife and daughters – selling them in some fashion to HAF-Huh where they had been confined against their will. What also had happened in that facility was not yet public knowledge, but some nurses were talking about the seniors receiving operations that they did not need. The full truth what HAF-Huh executives had done to their residents would be common knowledge by that afternoon. For a town that received no rain, it was remarkably leaky.

Lucas warned that what they had against Richardson would come down who would the judge believe? Richardson, or his wife and daughter?
Winnie turned to Stu and asked, "What do you think, Stu? You used to do some lawyer work, didn't you?"

"I did a long time ago when I hadn't realized how sleazy some lawyers could be, present company excepted, Ma'am. I was referring to defense lawyers. I did my time as a prosecuting lawyer. There's nothing lower than a defense lawyer." [Stu can lie like a sleeping cat, him being a defense lawyer all of his life.].

That generated plenty of head nodding.

"Lawyers should tell it like it is, I say," Stu added.

More head nodding.

"Nothing worse than a man who can bend the truth with his words."

More head nodding.

[If I may bring some reality into this scene. You have now seen how defense lawyers are assumed to be lower on the scum scale than travelling salesmen. Politicians, if there were any left, would be even lower on the scum scale. They didn't talk about bankers because Carl's back room didn't have any spittoons.]

"Do you think you could prosecute this case for us, Stu? Frances is totally tied up with investigating the HAF-Huh case."

"I could do that, Winnie. I'd need some time with the people who know this guy. I'll just tell it like it is."

###

The next group meeting occurred in front of the cooler at the abandoned Dairy Queen. Sheriff Skies had dropped in to write up a report on the crazy professor and Stu had tagged along.

"So, the last thing you remember is working in your laboratory this morning. What time was that?"

"Just about 12:30. I remember looking at the time because I usually eat my lunch at 12:30. I was getting ready to shut the lab equipment down."

"And so you were kidnapped at about 12:30 and brought here to South Bend. Did you resist? Did you see the person kidnapping you?"

"I don't remember any of it. I was in the lab and then I was here."
"You were unconscious the whole time?"
"Yeah."
"Does your head hurt? Do you have any pain anywhere from a needle going into you?"
"No."
"Take your shirt off."

...  
"You have no signs of any needle mark. And you woke up to find yourself lying on the side of a road. You got up and began walking."
"Yeah. I don't drink so I wasn't drunk. I was woozy from whatever put me to sleep. I looked at my watch. It was 12:05. The deputies found me about five minutes later."
"That was at 12:10 and that's what the deputies say too. Your pinky ring converts time to Nebraskan time automatically, right?"
"Yeah."
"So somebody put you to sleep, dumped you on the side of a road, disappeared in whatever copter he used to bring you here, and you wandered towards town not knowing where you were or what you were doing here."
"Exactly. I was kidnapped and brought here against my will. I should be released. I wasn't wearing a hat in my lab, and I certainly didn't know about your law about hats, but I would have followed it if I had known. It was hot."
"And you know nothing about the Home Away from Home Care Facility?"
"I've never heard of them before."
"May I, Sheriff?"
"Certainly, Stu. Mr. Richardson, this here guy is the prosecutor for your trial coming up this afternoon. He's a Stetson salesman, but knows a bit about legal things."
"I'm going to court for not wearing a hat?"
"No," Stu replied. "You'll be on trial for assault, forcible confinement, conspiracy to commit a kidnapping, and being a party to a kidnapping. You're facing three charges on each crime."
"Who did I supposedly kidnap?"
"Your wife and your two daughters. They were here in the HAF-Huh care facility."

"That's wonderful! Can I see them?"

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Stu and Dr. Richardson were sitting on stools around some decrepit tables in the DQ customer service area. Scotty was back on patrol, but the sheriff was still in the DQ, listening to Stu talk.

"I know this sounds incredible Tom, finding your long lost wife, learning that your daughters had been kidnapped and were now with their mother. But you are facing a trial. And no matter how strenuously you tell it, the story that you've told the sheriff here won't work. You say you were kidnapped at about 12:30 p.m. Toronto time. That makes it 11:30 a.m. South Bend time. The deputies picked you up at 12:10 South Bend time, meaning that you were in some copter for about forty minutes. South Bend is about one thousand miles from Toronto. I looked it up on Google map. You can too. In order to travel from Toronto to South Bend in forty minutes, you would have to fly at fifteen hundred miles per hour. That's over twice the speed of sound. A good copter would probably have the capacity to fly two hundred miles an hour if you were lucky. Look it up."

Tom, Stu's good buddy, looked it up and said nothing.

"I'll be asking you some questions in the trial, Tom. I'll be starting with this one. How did you fly at twice the speed of sound? Did you have some sort of superfast way of flying through the air?"

"There's no way to fly fifteen hundred miles per hour. Nobody can do that." Tom Richardson admitted the impossibility.

"Are you wearing a superhero suit that flies you through the air, Tom?"

"No."

"So that means that you didn't come down here this morning. Nobody will believe that part of your story. But there's more that they won't believe. Tell me, when did you eat breakfast?"

"Usual time, 8:30."
"So, I'll be asking you in court how you could have been unconscious the whole time that you were supposedly flying at supersonic speed. There is no evidence of you being knocked unconscious. There are no needle marks that would suggest you were drugged. You said that you were getting ready for lunch, so nobody could have secretly drugged your food at 8:30 a.m. and have the drug kick in four hours later. What made you unconscious?"

"I don't know. I just know that I have no memory of flying down here."

"Can you make yourself unconscious and then, while unconscious, wake yourself up?"

"No."

"Did a witch of some kind fly around in your lab invisibly and cast a sleeping spell on you that would make you unconscious?"

"Of course not. That's ridiculous."

"Your story that you somehow became unconscious is also ridiculous. Nobody will believe your story. Certainly not the judge. The truth has to be that you flew down in a normal copter to arrive here at about 12 noon. You were stiff from flying for so long. You could have been dehydrated or hungry. That's why you were stumbling around. That story the judge will believe. The lie you're currently telling us is impossible to believe. I can't believe that a man as smart as you would make that up."

"Why are you telling me what you're going to ask me?"

"I'm looking at a confused man with a touch of heatstroke. You trapped yourself into a panicky lie and now you can't get out of it. When I ask you this question in the trial, tell the truth. If I have to drag it out of you, the judge won't believe a thing you say from that point on and I'll be late for my sales call in Omaha."

"I don't know what to say."

"I have my first appointment with your wife and two daughters at 2:00 p.m. I expect to talk with them for the rest of the afternoon. The sheriff here has to talk to you about the trial."

###

"The question is not if there's going to be trial, Dr. Richardson. There's going to
be a trial. The question is when and where the trial will be."

"But I'm innocent."

"That remains to be seen. The South Bend prosecutor wants to have the trial at the end of this week. That will give her time to go through the HAF-Huh books. She'll be digging into them hard because the town is upset about what those people were doing to their patients."

"I don't know anything about them."

"That remains to be seen. She wants to try you and the HAF-Huh people at the same time. She's expecting to find your name in those books somewhere. Your wife was quite optimistic about that too."

"When we were together, she wasn't all there. Her condition may have worsened since."

"That remains to be seen. By the end of this week, we'll have time to find you an experienced defender, and the town prosecutor will be ready."

"But?"

"But your brother-in-law wants a trial in Denver. He'll be able to have his sister and your daughters thoroughly examined by medical specialists plus he will have a full team of expert prosecutors on hand. It will be up to you to find a defender. You can probably get one from the Public Defender's office. They usually have a law student that would like the experience of defending a capital crime."

"That's my choice?"

"Pretty much. We'd be able to put you on trial here with Stu's help, but there's no lawyer to defend you. We can't release you because of the serious nature of the charges against you. Conspiracy to commit a kidnapping and being a party to a kidnapping are hanging offenses in Nebraska."

"You say that guy is a travelling salesman?"

"I don't know him personally but I did see pictures of the Stetsons that he sells. He delivered Stetson to two of the people who rescued your wife and daughters, and he's out right now trying to take orders. I'm buying a black cavalry hat myself."

"Why don't we have the trial today. I'll defend myself."

"What time?"
"Why don't we make it for 2:00?"

Back to the Table of Contents
"All rise. Court is now in session, the Honourable Cloudy Skies presiding."

"Dr. Richardson, please stand," the judge said.

"I understand that you have waived the reading of the charges and that you are acting as your own lawyer. Is that correct?"

"Yes, it is."

"I caution you that acting as your own lawyer is not wise. You may make mistakes. Courtroom procedures can be complicated. You should be represented by somebody who knows the law."

"I'm smart enough to represent myself, your honour."

"Well, let's get on with it."

Judge Skies' comment certainly reflected the sentiment of the community. Get on with it. With the high school gym changed into a dormitory, the town of South Bend was woefully short of big indoor venues where a trial could be held that would have the capacity to hold all the spectators that had lined up outside the courthouse. Sheriff Skies looked around town, saw the abandoned Wal*Mart, checked for rats inside, saw no droppings, and started the South Bend Tornado network. Five people contacted five people who contacted five people who contacted.... This time the message was: Trial at Wal*Mart, bring your own chair. Volunteers created a small stage in the center of the empty store, and that was it. Spectators streamed in, depositing $2 in the baskets at the entrance to help pay for the meals for HAF-Huh residents and staff and then setting up somewhere in the big circle set aside for spectators. In addition to camp chairs, they brought coolers full of drinks and snacks. Children sat on blankets under the threat to keep their yap shut while the trial was on or else. "Else" meant being relegated to cooking on the barbecues outside the store and not being able to see to the biggest show in town since Betsy-Lou and her Travelling Flea Circus had come through town followed soon afterwards by the Public Health Flea Control mandatory check ups.

Judge Skies was sitting in front of a teacher's oak desk borrowed from the school. He was sitting on a teacher's chair as well but somebody had thoughtfully put a big green
sofa cushion on it to help him with his arthritis. Both attorneys sat behind folding tables provided by Hank's Septic System Clean Out company which had attached signs to the tables reminding citizens that May would be their 10 per cent off sale month. The witness chair was a rocker provided by Granny Rainy Skies who also provided a blanket to sit on for those who did not have buttocks of steel.

"My name is Stu," Stu said. "I'm the prosecutor who will be trying to convict the defendant, Dr. Thomas Richardson of the charges against him."

As he spoke, Stu took off his Stetson and pointed it at the defendant so that young children would know who the villain was. He put the Stetson back on and looked around. It was like a Stetson convention had just hit town. Everybody from about three years old and up had a Stetson proudly mounted on top of his or her head. *I really should be a travelling salesman for Stetson*, he thought. Winnie was sitting in the front arc of the circle wearing her new duds that she had purchased that noon hour. An ink black, long-sleeved blouse, a square dance skirt, a bolo tie, and a black Stetson. Paula, Lylah, and Lohla were similarly attired except their blouses were in red, white and blue, courtesy of Winnie who had managed to wrangle a 50 per cent discount when she mentioned who she had brought into the store with her. The owner took a picture for promotional purposes later. Lucas had brought the sofa from the care center for them to sit on. Paula was sitting in that sofa sandwiched between Lohla and Lylah who had their arms around her waist. Anybody who had a GPS tracker as part of their brain plug would know that Lucas and his invisible stone face was now sitting in the rafters at the very back of the store where he could see the blonde hair of the twins, but nothing more.

Stu went into a full description of the charges making sure to stress how heinous they were and how Dr. Richardson could be hung if found guilty. Then he closed. "I will prove that Dr. Richardson is guilty of planning to have his wife kidnapped, and then entering into an agreement with a third party who kidnapped her from her home in Ontario on February 20, 2079 and incarcerated her in the HAF-Huh Care Facility. I will also prove that Dr. Richardson is guilty of planning to have both of his daughters kidnapped, and then entering into an agreement with a third party who kidnapped them from his house in Ontario on Monday February 28, 2089 and incarcerated them in the HAF-Huh Care Facility."
For a man who had not had the chance to interview his clients yet, the prosecutor was very well informed. Richardson noted the dates but was unconcerned. He stood and declared, "I don't know what he's talking about. I'm completely innocent."

This exchange between the prosecutor and the defendant rippled through crowd. It was like somebody had arrived at a popcorn party and declared, "I have extra butter. Does anybody want some?"

Stu waited for quiet to descend and then stood and announced, "I call my first witness, Dr. Thomas Richardson."

Judge Skies intervened. "You can't have the defendant as your witness, Counselor."

"I thought that Dr. Richardson might like the opportunity to tell the good people of South Bend about himself. It would be quite difficult for him to call himself to the stand. Nothing that I ask him will have anything to do with the charges against him."

"This is a most unusual request," Judge Skies responded. "Dr. Richardson, you are not compelled to testify against yourself."

"I will answer background questions," Richardson answered and moved into the rocking chair.

Stu led Dr. Richardson through some innocuous questions: where he had been born; what school he had gone to; what university he had attended; what his degree was; what a research scientist did; why he moved to Canada; where he lived; what the weather was like; whether it was easy to understand the Canadian language or not. The stimulating part of the discourse began as follows.

"Do the Canadians have a government where you live?"
"The city of Toronto does."
"Do they elect people to that government?"
"Yes. There are seven municipal councillors and voters decide who sits on council for three years."
"So, it's like a democracy then?"
"Yes. It's definitely a democracy."
"Do you agree with what the Toronto people do? Having a democracy?"
"Definitely. I'm all in favour of it."
"So would it be correct to describe you as a life long democrat?"

More than three hundred chests inhaled and paused.... waiting for a response. Richardson was too busy being friendly and informative to notice.

"Yes, that's what I am."

Five minutes later, Judge Skies managed to restore order. At least guns had remained in their holsters. "Counselor, you're warned."

"What? What did I do?" Stu asked with all the innocence he could muster. Richardson was still plastered against the back rung of the rocking chair, shocked at having hundreds of people on their feet screaming and shaking their fists at him.

Welcome to the big leagues, Rookie.

# # # # # # # #

"Prosecution calls its first witness, Paula Allison Richardson."

"Objection!"

"What's the basis for the objection, Dr. Richardson?"

"The witness is my wife, Judge."

"I had that figured out already, Doctor."

"Wives aren't allowed to testify against their husbands."

"Mr. Prosecutor, would you care to weigh in?"

"Thank you, Judge," Stu said. "The prosecution would argue that in a situation where a spouse has learned something that might be damaging to his or her spouse who is under arrest, it might be appropriate to stop that spouse from testifying on the basis that she or he had confidential information gained through the spousal connection. However, in a situation where a spouse has brutally attacked another spouse, to take an example, then the spouse that had been attacked certainly has the right to testify against the other spouse."

"Thank you, Counselor. Dr. Richardson, your objection is overruled."

Dr. Richardson was beginning to think that his opponent might know more about law than he had let on.

"We'll ask Paula Richardson to take the rocking chair now, Judge."

"Objection!"
"What is your objection now, Doctor?"
"My wife is crazy as a loon, Judge. She has a ...."
Stu interrupted as quickly as he could. "Chambers, Judge."
The judge nodded and looked around. "We'll have a private meeting in the old McDonalds."
...

The meeting lasted about fifteen minutes. Dr. Richardson pointed out that his wife had been incapacitated by mental illness to the point where she had lived in her bedroom and had been unable to function without his care. She was currently in a care facility of some kind, perhaps because of continuing mental illnesses. She was unfit to give testimony.

Stu countered that it didn't matter what had happened years ago, what was important was whether she could testify competently now. Did not her background include a university degree? Did not her background include working with Dr. Richardson in his own lab and to his satisfaction? Somebody should ask her questions about her background and use her answers to determine if she was capable of testifying.

The judge asked Richardson if that background was true and he had to acknowledge that it was. Richardson didn't ask how Stu could have known that but he did wonder about that.

"What do you suggest, Mr. Prosecutor?"
"First, Dr. Richardson should not be able to question his own wife about her capacity to be a witness. He will harass her and degrade her in an effort to unsettle her."
"Agreed," the judge said. "But neither can you give her easy questions. An independent party has to ask the questions."
"Yourself, Judge?"
"Alright. But I don't have a background in assessing mental capacity. What questions would I ask?"
"If I may suggest, Judge, if a person is suffering from diminished capacity, would not one of the last things to go be her professional knowledge? The things she learned in university and applied in her work career spanning decades, for example."
"Makes sense to me. What did she study in university, Dr. Richardson?"
"Organic chemistry. I can give you a number of questions, Judge."

"Perhaps somebody from the community would be more objective?" Stu responded quickly to Richardson's generous offer.

"I doubt that anybody in South Bend would have a knowledge of organic chemistry, Judge." Richardson was just as quick with his response.

"How about the town pharmacist? He'd understand organic chemistry. Does he have a good reputation?" Stu posed the questions exactly as Winnie had written.

"Ferguson? He knows what he's doing."

"Perhaps....?"

"Dr. Richardson. I'll ask our pharmacist to develop, let's say, five questions on organic chemistry that I will ask Mrs. Richardson. He'll also provide me with the answers. I will rule that answering those questions correctly will establish her as a competent witness."

"Don't let Lylah pass any signals to her mother, she knows some of the subject. Plus, my wife needs to get five out of five to pass."

"Why don't we try four out of five, Judge? Anybody can make a mistake, and if they do, that doesn't mean that they're crazy as a loon."

"Four out of five will be a pass."

Winnie, the pharmacist plan is a go. He will devise five questions on organic chemistry. Lylah may know the answers. Paula needs to answer four of them.

"Judge, I'll need a recess to prepare my client for this challenge."

"You can have until Ferguson comes up with his questions."

Winnie was already on her way outside where she would get a breath of fresh air. All by herself.

With nobody around to see her.

When she suddenly disappeared.

#

The Wilizy never did figure out what Stu said to Paula in the old McDonalds, which didn't have a farm, by the way. He told Granny that he just spoke to her gently, informed her what was going to happen, and assure her that he wouldn't let her husband
bully her ever again.

Well, the pharmacist took over twenty minutes to come up with the five questions, so Stu had to be doing more than that. Before the recess, she looked like she couldn't even sit up straight without her daughters holding her. Both of them had to walk her into the old McDonalds and would have stayed with her except that Stu insisted that she'd be fine and it would be better if he could talk with her alone. Granny was hovering invisibly over them when they came out and both were really worried about their mom because she had been shivering in what was not a cold store. Whatever it was that Stu did, Paula walked on her own to the rocking chair, turned it so that she couldn't see her husband, and sat down. Whether or not she'd remember anything from her courses thirty-five years ago was another matter. Stu was worried about that as the family heard from his exchanges with Winnie and Cassie.

_Did you see the questions and answers the pharmacist wrote, Winnie?_

_No. He was a huncher, Stu. He was shielding his page with his body because he didn't want anybody around him to see anything. But I'm visible now and I'm in a place where I can see his face. He'll be thinking of the answer._

_Cassie?_

_I'm on Paula's head, Stu. As soon as Winnie gives me the answer, I tell her. She'll think that the answer just popped into her head._

_You can't count on seeing the answers from the judge, Winnie. He'll be using a blank piece of paper to reveal only the question and then the answer. He's being ultra cautious._

_That's something I would do. On something this important, he won't want to make a mistake._

_Thanks, Granny and Doc. I think we'll be OK._

Judge Skies explained to the audience what they were doing and why. Then he added. "This little test is not to say that Mrs. Richardson is crazy as a loon as Dr. Richardson has claimed. However, he has the right to ask the court to verify that Mrs. Richardson is OK now."

The crowd shifted collectively in their lawn chairs. Quiz night was a popular feature in South Bend. They had well established trivia teams and at least one bar, or
restaurant, or bingo hall would be having a trivia night each weekend. The rules were straightforward. Trying to listen to the other team as they tried to guess the answer was considered cheating. It was also cheating for a team to accidentally on purpose let the other teams hear them considering a wrong answer. What this meant was traditionally noisy venues like bars, restaurants and bingo hall would have one-minute intervals in which there was virtually no noise whatsoever. That was the environment in which Paula Richardson would sit in her rocking chair and try to remember course work from thirty-five years ago.

"You will have one minute to answer each question. All five are multiple choice." The judge said this loudly enough to quiet the children who were still talking.

"Question 1 is about covalent bonds: Which of the following statements about a hybridized carbon SP is false?

a. It is divalent.
b. It forms bonds that are linear.
c. It has two p orbitals.
d. It always forms triple bonds to carbon."

_Cassie, D is false; D is false._

With thirty seconds to spare, Paula said, "D is false." The crowd gave her polite applause even though they didn't understand the question.

"I hope I pronounced everything properly," the judge said. "I can re-read the questions if you wish. Question 2 is about molecular structure and spectra. When an external magnetic field is applied, what happens to the protons in a sample?

a. All protons align with the field.
b. All protons align opposite to the field.
c. Some protons align with the field and some align opposite to it.
d. All protons assume a random orientation."

_Cassie, the answer is C. The answer is C._

With thirty seconds to spare, Paula said, "C is correct."

The crowd responded enthusiastically and Paula even turned around, smiled and nodded at them.
"Question 3 is about hydrocarbons."

At this point, Ferguson took a call and started making his way to the exit. His mind was focused on the call, not the question. Winnie had to move from the back of the audience to the front where Lylah was sitting. She also had to do this in a way that did not attract attention. Good luck with that.

"Which of the following occurs during the initiation stage of a radical mechanism?

a. Nonradicals are formed from radicals.
b. Radicals are formed from other radicals.
c. Radicals are formed from nonradicals.
d. Nonradicals are formed from other nonradicals."

Winnie? Winnie?

I can't see Lylah's face yet.

The judge, Granny?

He has the answer still covered.

"Is the answer A?" Paula asked.

"No. The answer is C."

The crowd groaned. Some started to call out, "You can still do it." Others started a chant. "Go Paula Go, Go Paula Go."

The judge let it go on for a minute and then banged his gavel on the teacher's desk. By this time, Winnie was in position to see Lylah's face.

"Question 4 is about biological molecules. I apologize ahead of time if I mispronounce this question. Which of the following compounds does NOT undergo mutarotation?

a. Glucose.
b. Sucrose.
c. Ribose.
d. Fructose."

Cassie, Lylah is thinking the answer is B. B as in Bob.

"Judge, the answer is B," Paula said. "Sucrose does not undergo mutarotation."

"That is correct."
The crowd stood and began the Go Paula Go chant again. Lohla and Lylah exchanged high fives with Lylah telling her sister that she had known the answer too. By the end of two minutes, Paula was vibrating in time with the chant.

The gavel came down and the crowd sat down. "Question 5," he intoned. "This question is also about biological molecules. I will have to spell out some of the words. A glycoside – that's G L Y C O S I D E is the carbohydrate form of an

a. Ether.
b. Acetal, that's A C E T A L.
c. Aglycone, that's A G L Y C O N E.
d. Alcohol."

Lylah doesn't know the answer. She's thinking A or D. She doesn't know.

"Judge, the answer is B, acetal," Paula said confidently and the judge agreed. The crowd erupted and the judge had to call a recess to give them time to calm down.

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Chapter 43

Stu used the recess to meet with TG who had joined Lucas in the rafters. Granny, Doc, Winnie and Cassie also joined them there.

I hacked into the HAF-Huh computers and can confirm that artificial insemination had been scheduled for Lohla and Lylah next week. I found no indication who would conduct the operation or where the sperm would come from. I also looked up Paula's medical records. They've been taking bone marrow from her on a regular basis and shipping the stem cells up to Toronto.

Any chance of using that information in the trial, TG?

None, Doc. We wouldn't be able to explain how Stu knew.

I'll hang around after the trial and Stu can introduce me to the prosecutor lady. I'll help her get into the files. I've put them under an easy to break password. All of the other patients were sources of stem cells too for other researchers. We have names and addresses if we wish to pursue them. This was a very lucrative business.

Good job on prepping Paula, Stu. What did you say anyway?

Not much, Granny.

A different woman came out of the McDonalds than went into it.

She's very resilient, as you know.

At that point, the gavel sounded and Winnie went back to her sofa.

You're very quiet, Lucas.

Not much to say, Granny. I just want this trial to be over so I can go home.

With Richardson's objection to his wife testifying quashed, Stu was leading Paula through her life with her husband. We'll join him at the point where it got interesting.

"If you weren't using your professional skills in the lab, what was your job?"

"I found out later that my job was to make babies."

"How many babies did you make?"

"Twenty one, not counting the twins."
"Over how many years?"
"I had my first set of four when I was twenty-three, I had the twins when I was thirty-nine."
"Set of four?"
"Thomas inseminated me artificially and made sure that I was carrying four. One time he gave me five and I was never the same after that. He tried to keep to the same three year cycle, but I couldn't handle it."
"You must have needed a very big house what with all those children."
"No, all of them died."
"That's hard to believe. How'd they die?"
"Thomas would operate on me before they came to full term. He said that there was no law about when a baby was considered a baby and when it was not. He'd wait as long as he could and then cut me open. He'd sever the umbilical cord, put the babies in Petrie dishes, and then watch as they died."
"Objection, your honour."
"On what basis?"
"She's lying."
"You'll have your opportunity to cross examine her."
"I object on relevance, Your Honour. This has nothing to do with the crimes that I have been accused of."
"Mr. Prosecutor?"
"I am not accusing Dr. Richardson with any crimes associated with the births and deaths of these babies. I am introducing this testimony strictly to show motive for the kidnapping that Dr. Richardson engaged in."
"Allegedly engaged in."
"If you say so."
"Objection denied. Mr. Prosecutor, you may carry on with your questions to Mrs. Richardson."
"Five times he made you pregnant, five times he sliced you open, and five times he watched as his children died from neglect."
"Yes."
"Did that bother you?"

"Not the first time, because I thought that I was being a good wife and helping him to create a revolutionary form of medicine. But each time he did this to them, it was harder to continue especially because of my religious upbringing. The research wasn't going anywhere, I tried to resist but he kept on telling me that I was killing thousands of people by not letting him continue his research. He could save those thousands, but I'd hear the new borns gasping for air. Some of them would cry a little, and he'd just watch them die. He said it was important that he freeze their tissues as soon as they died."

"And you? Did he attend to you?"

No. I was left on my own."

"What was your worst time?"

"I was thirty-two and I had refused to help him in his lab. I moved out of the bedroom and he made me sleep on a blanket on the floor. I couldn't do anything around the house, I was so sad. He told me that he was running out of fetal tissues and I needed to come to the lab. He carried me into the lab and tried to tie me to the table so that he could inseminate me. I refused to lie still. He finally let me go, but attacked me later as I was going for food and carried me into the tool shed at the back of the lab. He put me on the floor and held me down with his knee in my neck. He attached both of my wrists to a chain that was itself attached to an iron ring that was deeply embedded into the floor. He left me four bottles of water and one empty bucket within reaching distance and left. I think I lasted a week without food. I woke up to find myself on the operating table again. I guess I had passed out. It was after that that I went looney."

The crowd was on its feet again. Richardson was on his feet too. "Objection. Objection. All lies, all lies."

Recess, recess," the judge ordered. Nobody heard him. Sheriff Skies pulled his pistol out of its holster and put a bullet through the skylight above him.

"Half hour recess," Judge Skies ordered. "The three Richardson women can stay here. Scotty, take Dr. Richardson into the old McDonalds. Everybody else has to leave the building. Nobody comes back in unless they leave their firearms at the door. Denver sheriffs, please assist with crowd control."

Winnie was alone in the courtroom with the Richardson women, but invisible.
Lylah and Lohla had surrounded their mother and were alternately weeping and hugging and then hugging and weeping, all the time repeating, "You should have told us, you should have told us." Winnie was weeping right along with them. It was one thing to see images on a large screen - they weren't people. They were just images. But to hear Paula relate all the horrible things that had happened to her in such a steady unemotional voice – it was like she was talking about somebody else. A stranger.

With Lohla and Lylah holding onto her for dear life, it was Paula Richardson who held them up and kept repeating, *It'll be OK*, much like Stu must have told her. It was at this time during that recess that Stu asked the South Bend sheriff if his deputies could check on something for him.

"So, you got better," Stu resumed leading Paul through her life with her husband. "It took a long time. I found myself doing anything to please him. I had hated myself for bringing twenty-one souls into existence so that they could be killed. I hated myself even more now. I asked myself, why would I do such a thing? I had the power to change things; it was my body. I made a plan."

"And?"

"In 2066, I let him give me five babies so that he would trust me. I didn't fight. I didn't complain when he killed them. I did everything he wanted for three years. I took care of the house; I worked in the lab; and I bought groceries in town. In late 2070, I let him plant four more babies and I lost two quickly, probably because of what he did to my body with the previous five babies. But I still had two inside me when I faked going to the grocery store and ran away."

"I took Thomas' copter and flew to Western University in London, Ontario. I knew that our University of Toronto health care plan would cover my medical expenses there, so I faked some distress and they put me into emergency. When they examined me and saw all the scarring, and when I told them that I had a history of miscarriages, they kept me until the twins were born in the normal way. I made sure they were legally registered. That would stop him from killing them. Then I went home and told him how our family life would be from then on."
"Did he try to give you more babies?"

"He did, and I pretended to go along with it. But I had learned how to induce miscarriages and I did that to myself in 2073 and 2076."

"Life was good?"

"Mostly. I had my twins. He didn't pay them any attention, which suited me fine. We enrolled them in a private school that could give them the education they needed. As far as I was concerned, both girls were extremely smart and had wonderful futures in front of them. Thomas and I didn't see eye to eye on that. He wanted to split them up in school, which I knew would completely devastate the girls. They were showing signs of being able to sense what the other twin was thinking – a form of ESP, I suppose. In becoming so close, they were at risk if they were suddenly split apart. I warned him that I wouldn't let him split the girls up. I had grown a spine and I meant what I said. The next thing I knew I was in the care facility here in Nebraska. I thought that I'd never see my twins again. Then, they showed up in the care facility too and they were wonderful young women in spite of how their father must have treated them."

"What were you going to do if your husband didn't agree to letting the twins stay together?"

"I was going to tell the world what he had done with those twenty-one babies."

"Did he know that?"

"Of course he knew that. I whispered what I would do in his ear every night before we went to sleep. The next morning, I'd wake him the same way. Touch my girls and I'll see you lynched just like Bill Sailor was lynched. He was the man in Denver that Thomas worked with and who gave us fetal tissues as a wedding present."

"I believe you'll agree, Judge, that Dr. Richardson had ample motive to arrange for his wife to be kidnapped. Your witness, Dr. Richardson."

###

"Judge, you've heard this woman admit to being insane, or in her words loony. She never sought professional help. It was only through my care and attention to her needs that she came out of her insanity, at least for a while. It doesn't surprise me that she can't make a distinction between reality and what her deranged brain has invented. I point
out that the prosecutor has not offered one shred of tangible evidence to support these wild claims of an insane woman. I have no questions for her. Her wild ramblings are evidence enough of how twisted her mind is."

###

Stu brought Lohla to the stand next. Again, he started with questions about her background and what she was doing now. All were intended to put her at ease. The tough questions came when he asked how she reacted to their mother's disappearance.

"Neither Lylah nor I believed for an instant that she had run off with another man like he had said. She never had another man in her life. She had no life away from home. I doubt if she knew any men, let alone a man that would be in her life often enough for there to be a relationship. Lylah and I were eight at the time. We knew what *being with another man* meant. If she had run away, she was running away from our father and how he treated her. But then we looked in her closet and drawers. Everything was there. Mom would never disappear like that without a plan. She was always planning. She was always on time when she dropped us off at school and when she picked us up. We didn't understand the concept of reliability, but we did know that Mom had not run off. The more we thought about it, the more we realized that he had probably killed her. We believed that until we woke up in the HAF-Huh facility to find our mom there."

"How did you get along with your dad?"

"I hated him. He was always praising Lylah and criticizing me. I was stupid. I was lazy. Lylah was a genius. Lylah was taking care of the family while I was being irresponsible. That favoritism messed us up badly, but we got over it once we started rooming together at school. I was earning better marks than Lylah ever did, and she started praising me. I saw how upset she was with Mom gone and I tried to help. We finally agreed that the only person we could count on was each other."

"Did you goad your father?"

"Yeah. I was fourteen and anxious to escape from him. So, I did everything I could to get kicked out of the house. By this time, I was out of the private school and living at home while going to school in the city. Lylah was the responsible one so she had access to his copter so that she could commute to university and back. He kicked me out
off of the house with no money and no place to stay. Lylah raided her savings and found me a place to live for a month. Then she talked our father into letting her stay in the university dorms instead of at home, but she'd need her own copter. Of course he agreed. I moved in with her and we lived off the same food card for a full year. When I was old enough to get a job without lying too much about my age, I found my own place to live and paid my own way for as long as I could. I moved back into Lylah's boarding house when we both realized that we needed to be together."

"You never saw your father again?"

"I saw him last summer. Lylah was working in his lab but she was really hurting. A boyfriend thing. I had messed her up and we weren't getting along at all. She asked if I would help her out by staying with her while she worked in the lab. Father had asked her if her monthly periods were nice and steady and that had creeped her out. It would creep me out too. We became close again. I saw him again the day Lylah confronted him. That didn't work out too well for us. We woke up together here in Nebraska."

"Lylah confronted him? How?"

"That's Lylah's story to tell."

"Your witness, Professor."

"Once again I must point out to the court that the prosecutor has not offered even a shred of tangible evidence to back up what my irresponsible daughter has said. I remind the court that she admitted in her statement to lying and to hating me for a very long time. Everything that she has said in her statement loses credibility in the face of those two admissions."

####

Lylah was now in the witness rocking chair. As with his other witnesses, Stu brought her slowly into her story. He asked her about her reaction to her mother's disappearance and Lylah mirrored what her sister had said. She thought the mother was dead and that's why she had taken on the duties of cooking. Stu asked about the contract that she had signed with her father and he had walked her through the clauses.

"Did you believe that the contract was legal?"

"Yes, at first. I took it very seriously because my father had trusted me to be part
of this great future he was promising. I'd be able to go to the ceremony where he was awarded the Nobel Prize. He let me come to some science conferences and since I was interested in science, I didn't mind the contract. It didn't affect me when I was nine or ten years old."

"And later?"

"I began to understand that my father was in the position to control my entire life. He could dictate the person I married, for example, and whether or not I had kids. I was only thirteen at the time, but I began to think about boys and wondering if I would meet somebody who I might want to marry. Lohla was always talking about how the contract wasn't legal and I should forget it. Especially the bit about working every summer. But I liked being paid and I liked the work. So, I didn't do anything. I stayed with it because I had made a promise and I keep my promises."

"And then?"

"I met this boy. I was helping to coach an upcoming basketball star and he knew her. He started trying to get my attention. He had my attention the very first time I saw him. A voice in my head said – This man is your future husband – and I believed that. He continued trying to date me. I made excuses. I really liked him. I was dreaming of marrying him. If he didn't ask, I would."

"But you couldn't."

"No, because my dad controlled who I married and he'd never agree to this boy because he was aboriginal. My father is a raving racist. I couldn't tell my friend about my dad, I couldn't tell my dad about my friend. We dated secretly for a while and I felt even more strongly about him. That was tough because we were both keeping secrets."

"You were hiding your dad. What else?"

"I didn't want him to know that we were a criminal family. I never mentioned anything about my mom and he noticed that."

"How were you a member of a criminal family?"

"My dad had killed my mother. Neither Lohla nor I had turned him in. We were as guilty of murder as he was."

"No court would have found you guilty of that."

"He's right, Miss. I would never have found you guilty."
"But Judge, my father was a criminal and that made our family criminal too. If I were going to marry my friend, I'd have to tell him this. I wanted to run away from my father and never see him again; I wanted to move to where my boyfriend's family was. But at some point, I'd have to tell him that he had married a criminal, if not intentionally, a criminal by not doing anything about my mother's murder."

"What did you do?"

"I tried to tell him my secret in little steps. I wanted to tell him a little bit about my family and he'd tell me a little about his. But he was very secretive and I made the mistake of asking my father to get information about my boyfriend's family from the private school that he had attended. My father said that my friend belonged to a criminal family from the west that were moving into Toronto and taking over the city's criminal enterprises. I was stupid. I believed my father. I broke up with my boyfriend. I treated him very badly in the way I did that."

"Which takes us back to the contract that you had with your father."

"Yes. I knew that I had to break that contract. I had to be free from him. I had to be free from being a criminal. Lohla had always been encouraging me to grow a spine, and I had been working on that, so I told her I was going to confront my father. She offered to go with me."

"What day was that?"

"Saturday, February 26."

"Whose copter did you go in? Yours or Lohla's?"

"Lohla didn't have one. We went in mine."

"I bet, being twins, you were planning to buy identical copters."

"Yeah, we agreed to do that way back when I bought mine."

"And the colours would be...?"

"White with a pink stripe over the fuselage."

"So you flew your white and pink copter up to your dad's house. What happened then?"

"I told him the contract was illegal because I was too young when I signed it and I was going to break it. Then I told him that Lohla and I knew that he had murdered our mother. He said that she had run away, so I went through all the reasons why he knew he
murdered her."

"What happened next?"

"He continued to deny it. Lohla looked at me, and I looked at her. We had talked about what I would do next. So, I said it."

"What did you say?"

"I had rehearsed this speech: *I'm not going to be a criminal any longer, Father. I'm going to tell people what you've done with Mom and all the babies. So is Lohla. I've grown a spine.* It wasn't as hard to say as I thought it would be."

"And then?"

"He told us he had proof of his innocence in the lab, we followed him in, and we woke up chained by our feet to a big iron ring in the floor in his storage room. Both of our heads were hurting but we still had enough sense to know that we were probably going to die that night. In our mind, he had killed Mom and we had no reason to believe he would spare us. Three light cartons of test tubes were within reach. We hid some evidence to show that we had been in the storage room. We didn't expect this to save our lives. We just hoped that somebody would come looking for us and find this. We actually prayed for this. Mom had taught us how to do that when we were very young. He came back into the storage room with two hypodermics and we woke up in Nebraska. With Mom."

"Do you regret anything that you did? Accusing him of murdering your mother for example."

"No. He didn't murder her, but with what we've heard today, he might as well have. He abused her, he forced her to be a baby factory, he starved her almost to death, and he had her kidnapped. What kind of person does this to a spouse?"

"I can't answer that question. The judge will."

"I do have a regret though. I had a boy friend and I messed up. I made a mistake and I didn't fix it. I would have married him in a heartbeat if he had asked and if I had grown my spine earlier. I still love him so much that I can't bear to even see him – it hurts so bad. I know that he'll never want to see me again."

The news hit the rafters hard enough to cause mini earthquakes that would shake anybody or anything sitting there, including Old Stone Face. Turns out that you can get
water out of a stone after all.

# # # # # # #

"Your witness, Dr. Richardson."

"As I've said before, the prosecutor has brought no tangible evidence to the court that I am guilty of the false accusations I have forced to endure. I never killed my wife and seeing her here is evidence that what I've said is true. The two twins did accuse me, but left my property immediately afterwards. I have no idea how they were brought to Nebraska. I didn't even know that this place existed. Like her mother, Lylah apparently can create fictional tragedies in her mind and then believe she is living them. Like mother, like daughter."

Richardson sat down and Stu stood up.

"The prosecution rests, your honour. As a gesture to the defendant, in recognition of your lack of experience in the law field, I'm perfectly content if when you call yourself as a witness that you don't have to ask yourself a question, and then answer it. Why don't you just talk?"

"Mr. Prosecutor? Please approach the bench."

"That offer bothers me," the judge confided.

"Why, Judge? Certainly any concerns that you might have about me making this offer to the defendant were covered in your opening cautionary remarks to him about acting as his own lawyer."

The judge thought for a bit.

"Yes, I believe you're right, Mr. Prosecutor. Doctor Richardson, it's your turn."

"Thank you, Judge. The defense calls Doctor Thomas Richardson to the witness rocker.

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Richardson settled himself into the rocker and turned it so that it was mostly pointing at the part of audience circle closest to him. "Judge, I have no evidence to present. How can I present evidence to prove something that I didn't do? What I have done is point out the inconsistencies of the testimony of the three women accusing me of heinous acts against them. These inconsistencies are proven. Mental illness is present not only in the mother but in the daughters as well. Obviously a genetic connection there. Also, I've shown a habit of lying that is part and parcel of a daughter's avoidance of hard work. How does she evade responsibility? She does so by lying. Add to that her admitted hatred of me for reasons that don't make any sense since I was the one providing her with food and shelter. And throughout all of this testimony, the prosecution has not offered a single shred of evidence to support any of these wild claims. You can't convict a person of capital crimes on the lies of three women who conspired to accuse me of crimes that exist only in their deranged or hatred-twisted minds. They say that I'm guilty. I say that I am not. It comes down to who is more believable. A man who has worked hard all of his life to give his wife and children a comfortable life? Or will you believe three women who are, frankly, twisted beyond belief by the fantasies running through their minds. If you're going to find me guilty, Judge, make the prosecutor show you tangible evidence of my guilt first."

"I wish to provide context of the environment in which my accusers lived. I am on the brink of providing the entire world with healthy bodies that can repel all forms of diseases. Everything bad that happens in our body, including mental illness such as what the women in my family have had, and even aging, occurs through the blood. With my plasma surgery, all of those human frailties can be overcome. We can live healthy lives for as long as we wish. I know this sounds miraculous, and my cure is indeed miraculous. In time, the residents of this fine town can look back and remember when the winner of the Nobel Prize for Advanced Research in Medicine was in your town speaking to you about what will soon be available for you and your children. Two hundred years from now when you're still alive and healthy, you'll be able to say, I knew Doctor Richardson
before he became world famous. I myself will be happy to return to your fine town two hundred years from now and renew our acquaintanceship on a more comfortable, and sensible, level."

"The secret with Plasma Surgery is found in the peri-natal patulamic dulama which is located ...

..."
"But I'm the defense attorney. I don't have to swear an oath."

The judge disagreed. "No you aren't. Your defense attorney called Dr. Thomas Richardson to the witness rocker where you sat down and gave testimony."

"But I don't have to testify against myself. That's a fundamental right."

"It would be if you had not already agreed to testify. The prosecuting attorney now has the right to cross-examine you on any matter he wishes. You swear to tell the truth or I'll throw you in jail for contempt. I'll get around to resuming the trial in a month or two."

"I swear but I object."

"Witnesses don't get to object. Mr. Prosecutor, you may proceed."

"Thank you Judge. We have a big hole in our understanding of this case. Dr. Richardson never explained to this court how he came to be in South Bend. I wasn't able to ask him this until now. Dr. Richardson, how did you travel to South Bend? Be sure you tell the truth now."

Richardson remembered the conversation that he had had with what he had thought was a Stetson salesman but clearly, he was not. He remembered being warned that if he told them how he had been kidnapped and brought to Nebraska at supersonic speed, he would not be believed. If he put himself in that situation, everything he had said to date would not be believed. He'd be ridiculed for claiming something that was clearly impossible. It was an easy decision. What could be the harm?

"I coptered down yesterday and took my time. I arrived at about 12:15 p.m. and got out. I was stiff from flying for so long and perhaps I was dehydrated or hungry. That's why when the deputies found me, I was stumbling around. I wasn't wearing a hat and the sun was hot. That contributed to my stumbling as well. I didn't know that you had a law requiring people to wear hats, but the deputies still arrested me and brought into town. I had no idea that my wife and two daughters were also here or that I would be accused of the crimes that have been alleged against me and not yet proven."

"Thank you, Dr. Richardson. That leads me to another question that I hope you'll answer because I'm confused. Why did you come to South Bend?"

"Why did I come to South Bend?"

"Yes, that's the question. You don't have to repeat it."
"You want to know why I came to South Bend."

"Yes. I want to know what prompted you to get in your copter in Toronto and fly over one thousand miles to South Bend. That's a very long trip. I'm sure you had a reason for it. What was the reason?"

"Every April for the last ten years, I take time off from work and go looking for my wife. She had ran off with a lover and I've been hoping that if I could find her, she'd be tired of him and would come home with me. I dearly love my wife – in spite of her insanity – and I thought that eventually, I would pick the right place to visit. She'd be there, we'd meet by accident, and our blissful life together would resume. And I was right to believe this. She was here. I just didn't know that she had suffered a complete mental breakdown or that my daughters would also be in the care facility which I assume is an asylum for the mentally insane."

"You pick a spot at random and fly there every April?"

"Pretty much. I use one thousand miles as an outer limit. If the name of the town speaks to me, I visit."

"South Bend spoke to you."

"Yes. She was here just like I had hoped for."

"That's a very romantic story, Professor."

"I'm a very romantic man, although I admit that my training as a university professor does hide that fact some times."

"Here's another question. What did you do with the copter?"

"What did I do with the copter?"

"You're very good at remembering the question and repeating it, Professor. You came down from Toronto in a copter. You landed that copter safely. Where's the copter?"

"Right where I landed it. I might have walked away from it a bit in my daze."

"I wondered about that copter, so I asked Deputy Sheriff Irish if he had seen a copter at the spot where he found you and brought you into town. He said there was no copter. How do you explain that, Professor?"

"I guess I must have wandered further in my daze than I realized."

"That's what I thought too. If we were to go looking for your copter Professor, what would we be looking for?"
"A normal copter."
"Room for how many passengers?"
"Four with space for luggage, freight, etc."
"Colours?"
"White."
"Does the copter have any signs of accident?"
"No. I'm a careful pilot."

"During a recess in this trial, I asked Sheriff Skies if his department could find your copter. You'll need it to return home, assuming of course that you are found innocent. He sent his two deputies out to search. Professor, have you noticed that the land in Nebraska is very flat?"
"Yes, I've noticed that."
"A hill would be hard to miss."
"It certainly would."
"Nebraska is so flat that a house on the prairie could be seen for miles and miles away. Were you aware of that, Professor?"
"No I wasn't."
"A copter, even a four seater, would be very visible too. Would you agree?"
"Yes, I would."
"So, when the two deputies went looking, they expected that they'd find your copter easily. Was that a fair assumption, Professor?"
"Yes, I would think so."
"Would it surprise you to find out that they couldn't find it easily at all? You had landed your copter in a dry stream bend that was deep enough so that even the rotors couldn't be seen unless you were right there at the streambed. The deputies are standing in the corner of the building by the freight entrance. Do you see them?"
"Yes, I do."
"Deputies, please wave your hands if you found the professor's copter hidden in a stream bed."
"Do you see them waving their hands?"
"Yes I do."
"How do you explain your copter being found in a stream bed?"
"I guess I landed in a different place and walked further than I had thought. I was dazed, remember."
" Wouldn't it have been easier to land on the flat prairie than in a narrow stream bed?"
"Yes, it would have been."
"But you didn't do that. A suspicious person might think that you were trying to hide the copter."
"I had no such intent. I was dazed and tired. I guess I just wanted to land the copter."
"In the only stream bed for miles and miles and miles."
"I don't know about that. I just landed it and got out."
"Do you have a sense of how far away that stream bed was from where Deputy Irish found you?"
"No, I was dazed."
"Deputy Irish, how far away was that copter?"
"Five miles," Irish answered from the freight entrance.
"That's a long way, isn't it? But that's the only place locally that a copter could be hidden from view on the very flat Nebraskan prairie. It must have taken you a long time to walk to the place where Deputy Irish found you."
"I don't know anything about landing the copter or walking five miles. I was dazed."
"The deputies thought that they would bring your copter into town for you, so that you wouldn't have to walk so far to get it if you were set free. Wasn't that nice of them, Professor?"
"Yes. I appreciate that."
"South Bend citizens. Wasn't that nice of the deputies? A round of applause to thank them, please."
The applause was vigorous. An artist was at work. This Stetson guy had Perry Mason and good old Ben Matlock beat by a country mile.
"Not to cast any doubt on the truthfulness of the deputies, I think I should ask
them to come forward so that they can be sworn in. Judge, would you oblige?"

... "Deputies, you can go back to the freight entrance. Professor, as I recall, you told the court, under oath, that the copter you used to travel to South Bend was white. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure that you don't want to repeat the question so that you can buy yourself some time to think. Are you sure it was white."

"I'm sure."

"Deputies, would you wheel the professor's copter into the store please."

By the time the copter was parked inside, everybody was standing, except for one person whose world had just been rocked. The store was deathly quiet.

"Professor, you should probably stand so that you can see your copter. Deputies, was this the copter that was hidden in the streambed? You have to swear to it."

"I, Deputy Irish Skies do solemnly swear that this copter is the copter that I helped to find hidden is a stream bed west of the city off old Highway 66 about seven miles from town."

"I, Deputy Scotty Skies do solemnly swear that this copter is the copter that I helped to find hidden is a stream bed west of the city off old Highway 66 about seven miles from town."

"Professor, what colour is that copter?"

"That's not my copter."

"Answer the question, please. What colour is that copter?"

"It's white."

"And?"

"And it has a pink stripe on the fuselage. That's not my copter."

"Are you aware that this copter's white and pink colours are exactly like what your daughter Lylah described as her copter's colours."

"That's not my copter."

"I'm not claiming that it is yet. Let me ask you though. Is that Lylah's copter?"

"I wouldn't know. I expect a lot of pink and white copters are around."
That brought a rolling round of snickers from the audience. Somebody yelled out, "We don't have any pinkos here in Nebraska, you baby murderer." That was rewarded with applause. The judge had to gavel the crown into silence. The crowd probably had it in for the professor because he wasn't wearing a Stetson.

"Lylah Richardson. Consider yourself still under oath. Is that your copter?"
"Sure looks like it from here. My copter had bald tires. I was putting off buying new ones."
"Deputy Irish?"
"It has bald tires."
"I didn't use that copter," Dr. Richardson interjected. "I'm being framed."
"Let's talk about that copter. Lylah, when was the last time you used your copter? You're still under oath."
"As I testified, I used it to travel to my father's house on the day that I decided to stand up to him. Lohla was with me."
"And you left the copter parked in front of your father's lab instead of taking it back to the university boarding house. Why was that?"
"Because we were knocked unconscious, imprisoned, chained to an iron ring, kidnapped and brought to the HAF-Huh facility against our will."

[Wasn't that smart of Lylah to remind the judge of all that her father had done to her and her twin? Dr. Richardson was always proud that the obedient twin was smart. He was probably still proud of her for that.]

"Did you escape from your HAF-Huh prison, fly back from Nebraska to Toronto using only your arms, find your copter, fly it to Nebraska, hide it, and then sneak back into the care facility?"
Lylah joined the laughter. "No. I find flying with only my arms to be too tiring."
That bought some laughter too.
"Deputy Irish. Did you find anything in the copter when you searched it?"
"Yes, we did. Some clothing."
"Bring the clothing up to the stage please."

... Stu opened the bundle of clothing and held it up. "It looks like a lab coat. Mostly
white. Well worn. Some splotches here and there. What's this writing on the front? Please read the lettering, Professor Richardson."

"It says Richardson & Associates."

"That must be your organization, Professor. Is this one of your organization's lab coats that the deputies found in your daughter Lylah's pink and white copter that somebody had hidden in a dry stream bed?"

"Yes."

"There can't have been too many associates in your organization. Lohla, how many lab coats were purchased and printed?"

"Four," she had to raise her voice to be heard over the rumble of comments that were emerging. Something like how a tsunami rumbled before it reached land. "I remember that Mom had one and he did too. Lylah and I received ours when we were older. I wore mine the summer that I stayed at the home with Lylah."

"Is that true, Lylah. Only four lab coats?"

"He never let anybody outside the family work on his invention."

"This looks to be about an Adult Extra Large size," Stu said as he held it up against himself. "Too big for me. Try it on, Professor."

"That's my lab coat. I don't know how it got in the copter."

"You probably took it off during the long flight and threw it in the back."

"I didn't fly that copter. There'd be fingerprints. Did you look for fingerprints?"

"Good question. Deputy Irish, did you look for fingerprints inside the copter?"

"Yes. Outside as well."

"Did you find Dr. Richardson's fingerprints?"

"No."

"See. I told you. I didn't use that copter."

"Deputy, did you find any fingerprints at all?"

"No."

"Surely you'd find the fingerprints of the last person to fly the copter. Why wouldn't there be fingerprints, Deputy?"

"We found signs that the interior of the copter have been thoroughly wiped. As had been the outside doors. We found fingerprint smears and grease smears."
"But no finger prints. You can't prove I flew that copter."

"How was the copter wiped down, Deputy?"

"With these." Deputy Irish held up two pieces of cloth that had straps attached.


"They'd be white, with blue polka dots," Lylah added.

"I will note that at this distance, it's impossible to see the details of what are certainly two bras. Deputy Irish, do you see any colour on that cloth beside white?"

"Blue polka dots."

"Lylah, do you normally fly your copter without wearing underwear?"

"No."

"Lohla, when was the last time that you remember wearing those bras?"

"When Lylah and I went to see him. We often wore identical outfits. We did that day too."

"Including underwear?"

"Yes," Lylah answered.

"How'd you lose them?"

"We didn't," Lylah replied. "Remember that I said that when we woke up in that back room, we were chained by our feet to an iron ring? We wanted to leave some evidence behind in case somebody came looking for us."

"So we took off our bras and hid them underneath a stack of test tube boxes," Lohla added.

"He must have found them and decided to get rid of them."

"They've just made that up after they saw the bras. They are lying. I never flew that copter." Dr. Richardson had risen to his feet to make sure that everybody could hear him.

"I'm sorry to do this," Stu apologized, "But I need one of you to confirm that these are your bras. One of you has to put a bra on and prove that they are your size."

"I'll do it," Lohla said and climbed up onto the stage. "Bring them up."

"I will too," Lylah said and joined her sister on the stage.

Now, that certainly got everybody's attention. Parents put their hands over their children's eyes. Some wives put their hands over their husband's eyes.
Both took a bra, faced their father, and put the bra on over their tee-shirt. *Guys, what did you think they were going to do? Strip in the middle of a Wal*Mart? Surely nothing is more sacred than a Wal*Mart.*

"Dr. Ferguson, your daughters left those bras in the storage room of your lab after you knocked them unconscious and shackled them to the floor of your storage room. You used those same bras later to wipe off your fingerprints in Lylah's pink and white copter that you flew down here to Nebraska and hid in a streambed. Your lab coat is evidence that you were in that copter. What do you say? Are those your daughters' bras?"

Dr. Ferguson didn't say anything. He just stared at the prosecutor.

Lylah wound up, muttered some words that can't be repeated here, and delivered a right fist down the middle of her father's face plate. Lohla, also a righty, decided not to copy her sister, muttered some choice words of her own, and executed the old knee in the groin welcome to Nebraska that was typically extended to democrats and other lower forms of life.

The audience's reaction didn't count as a standing ovation because they were already standing and were giving tribute to the twins' actions. It was several minutes before the professor could resume his place in the witness rocker and the South Bend Wal*Mart was rocking the whole time.

Stu made a final statement after the judge had restored order. "Dr. Richardson has been complaining the we could provide no evidence to the charges against him. We have now provided that evidence. The prosecution asks for a guilty verdict."

"I've been framed," Richardson said.

###

Judge Skies was ready to deliver his verdict.

"Citizens have an expectation of the scientists in our world. We expect them to respect the life of the subjects in their research; we expect them to tell the truth. Doctor Richardson, you have done neither. You weren't on trial for how you treated the babies that you forced you wife to carry. You weren't on trial for your assaults on her. You weren't on trial for how you treated your daughters especially in regards to how you treated them after your wife was out of the picture. It's a pity that you weren't facing
those charges because in my view, you were certainly guilty of them."

"Your obsession on being famous no matter what it cost the people around you is not a crime, but it was shameful. I'm ready with my verdict, but first I will give you a chance to be honest. Admit your crimes."

"Your honour, I've been framed. I didn't fly down here on my own in a copter. I lied about that. The prosecutor tricked me into doing that. I was drugged in my lab and brought here unconscious. I never mistreated my wife or my daughters."

"Last chance to be honest, Dr. Richardson."

"Judge, if you find me guilty, you will personally be responsible for all of the deaths that plasma surgery could have prevented. I'm very close to this miracle cure. Without that cure, thousands will die and you will be personally responsible for that. I urge you to declare that this farce is a mistrial. Let me finish my research and I will allow you to be the first recipient of the miracle cure. You can come with me to the..."

"Doctor Richardson, I find you guilty of assault, forcible confinement, conspiracy to commit a kidnapping, and being a party to a kidnapping. Kidnapping is a capital crime. In Nebraska, we hang such criminals."

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Chapter 45 Epilog

Prosecutor Skies did manage to find her way into the HAF-Huh books by guessing the password 123456. She found enough information to charge the executives of the organization with forced incarceration, conspiracy to kidnap, and medical-based assault on patients under their care. Seeing what had happened to Dr. Richardson, all of the executives agreed to plead Guilty in exchange for prison sentences from ten to twenty years. They also agreed to decrypt their data so that individuals who had received stem cells via forced incarceration could be identified. Those names were circulated to other law enforcement agencies that followed up with varying degrees of success depending on the quality of law enforcement in their area. Richardson's name surfaced after the plea-bargaining. His connection to HAF-Huh could not have been proven before his trial.

Speaking of Richardson being found guilty, readers may be wondering whether Richardson had been found guilty legally. The Wilizy's initial reaction to the surprises in the trial was to praise Winnie for finding a way to convict him. Winnie said that she had nothing to do with that side of the operation.

It turns out that Stu had talked with both investigative teams to find out what they had on Richardson and then he planted the incriminating evidence in Lylah's copter. Marie was the person who flew the copter to Nebraska and hid it in dry creek bed. Stu used his sling to fly Richardson to Nebraska while he was under Marie's sleep spell. Some might call that kidnapping, although Stu might argue that it was simply relocating a suspect.

Did Stu break the law? Or, did Stu bend the law so that Richardson's rights were denied to him? Richardson definitely was guilty of the charges, but was he denied the inalienable right to lie about his involvement and try to avoid being convicted? Are the people on the right side of law and order allowed to trick their suspects in order to get them to plead guilty? Stu, for example, did trick Richardson into admitting that he had coptered down to Nebraska. Would this excuse have work for him? "A Voodoo queen put me to sleep and the prosecutor then flew me invisibly to Nebraska against my will and at supersonic speeds inside his sling."
My readers will have to judge for themselves if Richardson should have been found innocent even though he wasn't. Or was he guilty even although the critical evidence in the copter was planted? I leave it to you to determine what would be right and what would be wrong. Myself, I get headaches when I try to decide what I would have done if I had been the prosecuting lawyer. I know what I would have done if it had been my daughters who had been kidnapped, or worse, if one of them had married that slime ball. But that was back in the day when justice was spotty, but quick. Richardson died one hour after he was found guilty. Paula, Lohla, and Lylah were there to say goodbye although how they did that was never recorded. They then left for Denver in Uncle Howard's high-speed copter.

# # # # # # # #

Lucas had to use time travel to find out where the twins had gone and then he went to real time and crashed the Welcome home, Paula party at the Swensen residence. The back yard was full, mostly of Uncle Howard's friends. Paula didn't know anybody there - whatever friends she had had from high school were long gone. Lylah and Lohla knew nobody of course. The three of them were sitting on a swing settee far enough away from the pool to avoid being splashed from the Swensen pastime of forced cannonballing. Paula was sitting in the middle of the settee, her two daughters on either side. Arms were entwined, hands were being held. It looked like an octopus was hugging itself and apparently enjoying itself very much thank you.

Lucas had rehearsed what he was going to say. He came dressed in aboriginal clothes, minus the headgear and feathers. Lylah's family had to know at the outset that he was aboriginal and proud of it. That was who he was.

Lucas' appearance caused quite a stir. Other than the three Richardson women, all the other guests were wearing swim suits. He marched directly to Lylah's swinging settee and began his speech.

"Lylah, I..."

"Lucas we didn't have a chance to thank you for rescuing us," Lylah interrupted. "We looked for you but couldn't find you and then Uncle Howard hustled us away. Thank you."
"Thank you," Lohla chimed in.

"I'm Paula, I'm told you were a key person in my rescue. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Ma'am. I didn't do much. Lylah, I wanted..."

This time, Lohla interrupted. "Lylah and I have decided to stay in Denver and go to school here."

"Mom is going to be living here. She doesn't want to go back to Toronto."

"Too many bad memories."

"We're going to help take care of her."

"They operated on her a lot."

"She's hurt pretty bad."

The octopus tightened its grip on itself.

"I understand," Lucas said and he did. Their mother needed her daughters. The twins needed their mother. "I wish all of you the best."

With that, Lucas turned and started to walk away, only to find his way blocked by a towering half naked somewhat flabby man.

"Not so tough without your uniform, I see."

Lucas looked up and said nothing.

"You threw your weight around. Called me an idiot. You're on my territory now."

"I'm on my way out, big guy. Have a good party."

Lucas shifted to the right only to find Uncle Howard still blocking the way.

"It can't be a good party without people being thrown into the pool."

Lucas could feel everybody staring at him.

"I'm the king of the pool, army boy. Nobody has ever thrown me into the pool."

"Rules?"

"None."

Lucas put a right jab into Uncle Howard's nose, grabbed him by his cowboy belt buckle [around a swimming suit for goodness sake] and by one knee. With one smooth motion, he lifted Uncle Howard over his head and tossed him into the pool. In weight lifting terms, this move could be called a Clean and Jerk. Lucas performed the cleaning part. Uncle Howard served as the jerk.

Lucas turned around. All three Richardson women had their hands in front of their
faces and were trying, unsuccessfully, not to smile. "I'll be back," he said.

Immediately after the trial, Cowboy headed straight back to Toronto. He arrived several days after an interesting article had appeared in the Toronto media and so he never saw it. I've reproduced it below. The bold facing is mine.

*York University announces with regret the passing of Doctor Astrid Zewinsky, Professor Emeritus of the Faculty of Medicine after a long battle with cancer. She leaves behind....*

*Professor Zewinsky was a favorite of many of York's students, since like them, she had to work outside jobs to earn her degree. One of her favorite stories was how she worked as a stripper to earn the money she needed for room, board, and tuition. In light of Doctor Zewinsky's forced confinement to her hospital bed for the last four months, many of York's students have not been able to say Goodbye. A memorial service will be held.....*

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Books in the Wilizy series

As of November, 2019, there were twenty novels in the Wilizy series. Check below to see if you've missed any.

Book #1: I Got'cha

If you think being a teenager in today's world is tough, try being one in 2081. In Alberta's It's Only Fair society, your brain-band will zap you just for chewing with your mouth open. One boy pried his brain-band off to see what living with emotions would be like. Being chased by the entire Alberta army was bad enough. It became worse when another 15 year old kid offered to help him escape.

Book #2: The Get-Even Bird

Will and Izzy are forced to flee from Zzyk's army. After months away from Alberta, they fly their sailing ship into B.C. thinking that they would be safe there. Bad mistake! Izzy is captured. All Will has to do to save her life is turn himself in for a free brain-band fitting appointment. That's what happens when you wear a Zorro costume to a dance.

Book #3: Assassination Day

A DPS technician offers to defect if the Wilizy will rescue his daughter from The Citadel – some super smart military people who are friends with Zzyk. Izzy thinks that their new recruit is an assassin, but Yollie insists that he's a decent man. Can assassins be decent men? It will take a hair-raising experience to find out.
Book #4: Hoist the Jolly Lucas

It's bad enough that Zyk pins the blame for two assassinations on Izzy and launches a full out assault on their home compound. But then, another enemy takes advantage of a security lapse to get revenge for a war that happened 20 years ago. The Wilizy are left reeling with two key members kidnapped and stashed where they can't be found, let alone rescued. For the family to survive, everybody must enter the battle. The story is as much about the past as it is about the present.

Book #5: Teenage Mutant Ninja Torpedoes (Yes, this is a Wilizy book.)

Mac disappears and doesn't want to be found. Will and Wolf use time-travel to search for her and discover secrets she wouldn't want them to know. The Alaskans attack when Will is finding out what happens to a submarine's air when it is lying helpless on the ocean floor. Between the Alaskans' impenetrable fortress and their bubblegum weapons, life is going to get a little sticky for the Wilizy.

Book #6: Bob, the Invisible Dragon

Raging hormones as well as Raging Gardeners play key roles when young Wilizy warriors are attacked and the Wilizy's scientific marvels offer no protection. The youngsters' future will rely on a different kind of warrior protecting them. Warning: events at the end of the story will move quickly. They certainly won't drag on.

Book #7: Nary, Nary, Quite Contrary

Theo and Lucas move to Toronto to live on their own. Both meet girls but neither is brave enough to introduce his new friend to the family. They wouldn't have the time anyway, what with villains trying to assassinate them and Voodoo royalty greeting them as though they were Voodoo gods. At the end of the story, Lucas receives a surprise Boxing Day gift that leaves him speechless.
Book #8: Maddy's a Baddy

Maddy had escaped from Big Momma only to find herself all alone in the cold and begging for food in Eastern Canada. While she's trying to return to her home in Seattle, the Wilizy have their own problems. Everybody in the family is intent on bringing the judge to justice for what he did to Lucas. It would have been so easy for them to rescue Maddy, but they didn't know anything about her.

Book #9: Bite Me!

Spurred on by Marie's desire to eat a meal with her former slave masters, the Wilizy plan to put Safe Haven ranches out of business. In the process, they encounter two foreign assassins intent on abducting Maddy. Theo and Nary become closer but a red-eyed chaperone does not approve. The Wilizy's war with Safe Haven starts with a bang but ends with a whimper.

Book #10: Wheelchair Moccasins!

A 13 year old girl pretends to turn to prostitution to gain her freedom from her crime boss father. In Wilizy family news, Winnie agrees not to meddle in Mathias' love life. No, the world isn't ending, so long as you don't have a green vegetable for your name. Best advice ever? If somebody wearing moccasins and sitting in a wheelchair offers to sing you to sleep... run!

Book #11: Trial by Nick

After the Scandinavians attack their home base, Winnie develops an idea for defeating Crown Prince Wilhelm that is a dramatic departure from their normal military battles. In their personal lives, the Toronto teenagers have to become snobs to keep their basketball futures alive, Lucas and Lylah begin dating, and two of EmmaGee's personalities leave her body.
**Book #12. Tickled Pink**

A man uses his unlimited wealth and power to assault women without fear of legal consequences. If they object, he'll humiliate them publicly and ruin their lives. If they don't stand up to him, their lives as they knew them will be over. But how do you fight a man who is above the law? Here's how. The Raging Gardeners help the women while Winnie attacks him where he isn't looking.

**Book #13: Second Base**

Granny and Doc enjoy a spirited life in their new Australian house while Bean has to adjust to her mother joining her in the Wilizy cadet camp. She meets a charming man with country pumpkin witticisms whose entire life is dedicated to becoming a cold blooded killer. Meanwhile, Safe Haven's impenetrable offices aren't as safe as they thought they were.

**Book #14: Old Stone Face**

Bean moves to Toronto with her sheriff who takes a job as a private detective. Before long, he's trying to bring a mad scientist to justice - the same man that Winnie is after. With both the Wilizy and a countrified sheriff after the same man, you'd think he'd be easy to catch. Too bad there are no laws about a mad scientist killing twenty-one babies.

**Book #15: Remember the Halocracy**

Reese finds Annika - his first, and only, girl friend. For reasons that nobody fully understands, he sort of kidnaps her but she willingly accompanies him to the far side of globe. Reese figures out later that she could be trying to seduce him when in fact, she's actually going to try to kill him.
Book #16: Coffee Can Kill Ya!

Convincing Paula's brother to give her a proper share of her parents' estate had seemed so easy. Turned out that it wasn't so easy after all. In the Wilizy's defense, murdering extra-terrestrials that tried to kidnap a corpse created unique challenges. To their credit, the Wilizy dealt with those. But, how do you deal with something that you can't see and don't even know exists?

Book #17: Nice Birthday Party, Governor.

Plot twists abound as the Wilizy take on the Colorado government and the NORAD military simultaneously. Maddy quits the cadet corp to run a secret operation that ends in a one-on-one battle. Melissa breaks Reese out of jail and Cowboy shows his dramatic talents, which do not include stripping. Winnie directs two dramatic productions but only one of these involves wearing respectable clothes.

Book #18: The Tale of the Scorpion's Tail.

The Wilizy have to neutralize NORAD's nuclear missiles while defeating their air force without causing any casualties. A special weapon (guided bird poop) will be needed. Meanwhile, Heaven's guardian angels are under attack from within. The key to success? Rescuing a gerbil imprisoned in an escape-proof cage. Molly Moonblossom and Nympho Maniac play key roles. One of these characters is Winnie.

Book #19: Brunhilda, the Steamroller.

Billy Bump resurfaces and plans Maddy's death. Winnie accepts a secret mission but runs afoul of Yolanda, who is sure that she has a boyfriend. Yolanda's vision that Winnie will be attacked comes true. Demonic infiltrators into Heaven escape detection when the steamroller named Brunhilda prosecutes Arthur and finds him guilty. This time, he won't be going back to guardian angel school.
Book #20: Lock Up Your Corn Starch!

While Paula, Winnie and Arthur are on a perilous mission for Heaven, the Wilizy family is trying to rescue Charlie and Sheila from prison. Wilizy forces battle demented escaped convicts intent on slaughtering innocent victims to help a brown supremacist politician win an election. If you're intent on going to Hell when you die, be sure to read this book for a preview of what's waiting for you.

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About the Author

David J. Wighton is a retired educator who enjoys writing youth novels when he's not on a basketball court coaching middle-school girls. The books in his Wilizy series peek at how people lived after the word's governments collapsed in the chaos that followed the catastrophic rise in ocean levels and the disappearance of the world's last deposits of oil.

Wighton's novels have strong teenage characters driving the plot and facing challenges that, in many respects, are no different from what teenagers face today. His novels are intended to entertain and readers will find adventure, romance, suspense, humour, a strong focus on family, plus a touch of whimsy. Wighton also writes to provoke a little thought about life in today's societies and what the future might bring. Teachers may find the series useful in the classroom and the novels are priced with that intent in mind.

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