

STREAMS OF BEAUTIFUL TERROR

Book Two of the *Streams* Trilogy



C CLIFTON JONES

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Streams Of Beautiful Terror

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The Man



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Chapter 1

She took another sip of coffee and settled back into her chair, viewing the changing colors of the trees through the big picture window at Carla's Coffee Shop. Red, gold, and a few stubborn green leaves fluttered in the gentle breeze on a beautiful October day in her sleepy little town of Oak Pines.

It was her first day back from a fun-filled vacation that had sadly turned into a traumatic disaster. *I feel so discouraged*, she thought to herself. *In fact, I'm downright depressed.* But then her gaze was broken by a man entering through the front door across the room on the right. She turned her head as he marched up to the counter, ordered a latte, and paid for a newspaper he grabbed off a stack lying in front of him. The man wore a dark suit and a bold blue tie, and shiny leather shoes – unusual attire for anyone meandering through her small town. *Must be a visitor. Maybe he's just passing through. Never seen him before.* He folded the paper and tucked it under his arm, grabbed his latte, and headed for a table near the door. Ellie couldn't help but watch the man, not because he did anything interesting, but because of his unusual appearance. He sat down, folded his legs, opened his newspaper, and began reading.

Ellie went back to gazing out the big picture window at the dangling leaves. *Most of them will soon fall to the ground. One woosh of wind, and down they'll go. That's how I feel today -- ready to be swept away by the coming winter.* Suddenly, a sense of uneasiness broke through her despair. She looked over at the man. He looked back at her over the top of his newspaper. He quickly lowered his eyes onto the page and slowly moved the paper upward. "That's creepy,"

she mumbled under her breath, comparing it to a much more adventurous experience just a few months ago with a very different kind of man she caught admiring her. She watched a little longer, but the man and the paper didn't budge.

The man lowered his paper and stared at Ellie. She instinctively looked away but couldn't help glancing back at the man who sat staring. Keeping his eyes on her, he slowly folded his paper, placed it under his arm again, broke his gaze from Ellie, got up, and began walking toward the door he had previously entered. She couldn't shake the feeling that somehow he wanted her to see him watching. He exited without looking at her. As she watched out the big picture window, the man crossed the street and got into the back seat of a big, fancy, black car with plenty of shiny chrome trim. It was a limousine-looking vehicle. It surprised her that she had not noticed the car sooner. The driver pulled out into traffic and sped away. She strained her neck to watch the car for as long as she could until it disappeared from her view.

Ellie finished her coffee, lukewarm now, and walked up to the counter, stuffing a couple of bills into the tip jar. She carefully looked around outside as she exited the coffee shop.

When Ellie got home, her brand-new husband, Jobe, slept in a recliner not far from the front door. Her entrance awakened him. "Oh, Ellie, you're home. I thought maybe we could talk about where we go from here after our unexpectedly wild and crazy trip."

"Great idea, Jobe, but first I gotta tell you what just happened at Carla's."

Jobe brought the recliner to a full upright position. "You look bothered. The trauma of the trip is still on your mind?"

"Yes." Ellie sat down on the couch adjacent to the recliner. "I'm not sure I will ever fully recover from Charlie's horrible,

violent death.” She shifted to the edge of the couch, turned, and faced Jobe.

“What is it?” asked Jobe.

“There was a man at the coffee shop.”

“What kind of man?” probed Jobe.

“Tall, wore a dark suit and a tie.”

Jobe sat back in the recliner. “Probably just an out-of-towner, or maybe one of the local lawyers getting his caffeine fix on court day.”

“That’s what I thought, at first.”

Jobe looked at Ellie. “But...?” he said, then he paused.

“But ...” Ellie continued, “he was looking at me over the top of his newspaper.”

“Oh heck, that’s how we met back in August, except my angry friends surrounded me, not a newspaper. I noticed you! Remember?”

“Yeah, but that felt different. You were intriguing – this guy was creepy.”

“In what way?” Jobe’s voice got intense. “Did he follow you out?”

“No. He left before I did in a big, black fancy car, sat in the back seat, and had his own driver.”

“So, he’s rich. What’s creepy about that?” asked Jobe.

“When I first caught him looking at me, he quickly pretended he wasn’t. But, shortly after, when he got up to leave, he stood up slowly and looked right at me as if he wanted me to know he was watching.”

“Uh ... yeah, that is creepy.”

Ellie's voice trembled slightly. “After what we just went through in Las Vegas, I’m worried that there might be a connection.”

A rush of fear surged through Jobe, but he didn’t want Ellie to become further stressed out. The trauma of having her foster dad and life-long mentor brutally murdered in the same RV they

were traveling in, on what was supposed to be a fun road trip around the States, was already more than Ellie could handle. Jobe exhaled with his mouth slightly open. His cheeks bulged slightly. “Do you remember what Officer Armstrong told us at the police station the day after Charlie was shot?”

Ellie paused and began to rerun the conversations of that horrible day. Still traumatized, she could hardly remember any details. “It’s all kinda foggy.”

“She told us the thugs that killed Charlie were gang members, hired by a crime boss to take Charlie out for his old gambling debts never paid.”

“I remember now,” said Ellie. “She also told us they probably weren’t after us and we had nothing to worry about.”

“That’s right,” Jobe assured her. “So, you’re probably having post-traumatic jitters, and this man just happened to trigger them. If we had not gone through what we did in Vegas, would such a strange man cause you any stress?”

“I suppose not,” said Ellie. “But what about all the money we discovered in Charlie’s wooden whisky crate? Maybe they suspect something and followed us home to intimidate us!”

“I don’t think so.” Jobe reclined again in the recliner.

“Why not?” asked Ellie.

“Because they would have robbed us and maybe killed us on our trip home.” Jobe sat up in the recliner again. “But they didn’t!” He looked her in the eyes with a reassuring smile. “We’re home, free. You’ll never see that guy again. It’s your mind playing tricks on you.”

“You really think so?” asked Ellie, still harboring fear in her eyes.

“I know so! Time will heal your fears. In fact, go back to Carla’s tomorrow, the next day, and the day after. There will be no guy. I promise.” But, in secret, Jobe hoped his promise would prove true.

“I love you, Jobe. You are so good for me. I’m so glad we got married, impulsively, before we left Vegas.”

Jobe looked into her loving eyes. “Yep. It’s been less than a week, now. And it all seems a little crazy, but maybe the craziness of what we went through drove us to it. I’m glad we did, too. I know it was right.”

“Even in a Chapel of Love with no Elvis impersonator?” joked Ellie.

“For sure. Just you and me, the Justice of the Peace, and his wife as a witness. It will always be a special memory for the rest of our lives. And so, we gotta keep living our new and better life, no matter what kind of *Streams of Terrible Beauty* come our way.”

“Yep, I agree, no matter what,” Ellie replied with a hint of reluctance in her voice. “But do you really believe that God eventually makes all things *beautiful* despite the *terrible* things we go through?”

“I do, indeed,” replied Jobe. “Isn’t this what we just learned at the end of our trip, by way of an unexpected detour through Vegas?”

Ellie let out a sigh of relief. “Yes, you’re right. That’s exactly what we learned. It’s just that it’s sometimes hard to remember, emotionally.”

Jobe looked at her with his big, loving eyes in which she had become lost so many times since they first met. “That’s why we’ve got each other!”

Ellie got off the couch and climbed onto the recliner on top of Jobe, hugged and kissed him passionately as the recliner began to rock slightly. When she finally let Jobe come up for air, he mumbled, “Now this is what I call being married!”

Chapter 2

The next day, Ellie was determined to go to Carla's and face her fears, instilled in her by the creepy, mysterious man. She dressed quietly, not wanting to awaken Jobe, and slipped out the front door. *I think I'll walk to Carla's on this beautiful October morning.* Walking took only a bit longer than driving. The air felt crisp, and not a single cloud cluttered the beautiful, deep blue sky. An array of oaks and pines lined the horizon. For a moment, she felt free of all worry from the road trip that had gone terribly wrong and her troubling experience the previous day at the coffee shop.

As she approached Carla's, her pace slowed, and her pulse increased. She opened the backward-hanging door, entered carefully, and looked around. She only saw wiggling kids engaging their moms, casually dressed businessmen chatting back and forth, and a few people of differing ages absorbed in their books.

"Good morning, Gina," she said, walking toward the counter to order a latte.

"Oh, Ellie!" exclaimed Gina, as she quickly came around the counter and gave her a big hug. "You're back! You've got to tell me all about your trip. When did you get in?"

"Two days ago. Pretty late at night. I came by yesterday to see you..."

Gina interrupted. "Sorry. It was my day off."

"Wish you had been here. I had a creepy experience."

"Here?" asked Gina.

"Yep."

"Listen, I'll be on break in about fifteen minutes. Let's talk then. I'll get your latte going."

As Gina turned her back and began pressing fresh ground espresso into the latte machine handle, Ellie looked around. She stared for a moment at the seat where the creepy man sat the day before. A young child now sat there, legs dangling over the seat, with her mom helping her navigate a cup of hot chocolate. Continuing her gaze, she relived the events of the strange man entering and exiting the front door. Her eyes moved to where she'd been seated, next to the big picture window. The seat was empty and inviting.

"Here's your latte, Ellie," a voice said from behind the counter.

Ellie quickly turned around. "Oh, thanks."

"I'll be with you in a few minutes," said Gina, as Ellie headed for her favorite seat. She sat down and looked out the big window, unable to miss the beautiful blue sky and green trees. But she also couldn't help but glance over at the seat where the creepy man sat the day before. She watched as the little girl sipped her hot chocolate, holding the cup with both hands; her mom celebrated her performance. Ellie relaxed and took a sip of her drink.

After about ten minutes of musing out the window at the small-town people passing by, Gina abruptly sat down across from her. "Okay. Tell me everything that happened. You've got fifteen minutes." Gina folded her hands under her chin and waited.

"Ha!" laughed Ellie. "It'll take about fifteen hours. But let me give you the highlights – good, bad, and ugly."

"Okay. I'm ready. What about this creepy guy?"

"I'll get to that later. It might fit in with our trip."

"Really?" asked Gina. "In what way?"

"I'm not sure. But maybe so. I want your opinion when we get to it," pleaded Ellie.

"Sure," Gina responded slowly, sensing the tension in Ellie's voice.

“But, first, the good news,” Ellie said as a grin took hold of her face. She held out her left hand. “We got married!”

Gina dropped her jaw, grabbed Ellie’s hand, and looked at the ring. “I can’t believe it.”

“Well, believe it! Jobe and I are now one.” Gina sat back in her chair and just looked at Ellie, smiling. Ellie pulled her hand back and looked at her ring. “It’s temporary. It was on sale at the Chapel of Love, where we stopped on the way out of Vegas.”

Gina covered her mouth momentarily. “No way! Chapel of Love? Vegas? What happened to the big loop around the country following Steinbeck’s route in *Travels with Charlie*?”

Ellie sighed. “We took a detour.”

Gina crinkled her nose. “To Las Vegas?”

“It was Charlie’s idea.” Ellie began to tear up.

“What’s wrong?” asked Gina, as she leaned closer in her chair toward Ellie.

“Charlie is dead,” Ellie said as tears dripped down her cheeks. She wiped them quickly, trying not to draw attention.

Gina was stunned. “Boy, you weren’t kidding when you said good, bad, and ugly. How’d it happen?”

Ellie got quiet. “Maybe you should come over and talk with Jobe and me about this. This is not the best place.”

“Uh ... Okay,” said Gina, slowly. “Tonight?”

“Yep. Maybe at seven?”

“Sure,” replied Gina, still in shock. “Should you check with Jobe?”

“Should be okay. I’ll call you if it’s not. We’re staying in my apartment, for now.”

“Oh, Ellie, I’m so sorry.” Ellie just smiled the best she could through her tears. Gina got up. “I need to get back to work. But I’ll see you tonight. Okay?”

“Yep.” Ellie watched Gina as she headed back to the counter, where she took an order from a waiting customer.

That evening, Gina arrived right on time. After a gentle knock, Ellie opened her apartment door, and Gina stepped in. Jobe stood not far behind Ellie. After Ellie hugged Gina, Jobe stepped up and also gave her a hug. “Thanks for coming over,” he said.

“Come sit down,” gestured Ellie. “I think we need to tell someone about all that happened to us on the trip. It will help us deal with it.”

“And about the creepy man, too?” asked Gina.

Jobe waited for the girls to choose a place to sit. “I guess Ellie told you. Yeah, that too,” said Jobe as he sat on the couch next to Ellie.

Gina sat upright in a big padded chair across from them with her hands folded on her lap, fidgeting with her fingers.

“Where do I start?” asked Ellie, looking over at Jobe.

“Maybe you should start with the detour,” offered Gina.

“Oh, yeah. Good idea.”

“We spent the previous several days traveling through San Francisco, Monterey, Cannery Row, Fresno ... yuck,” Ellie stuck out her tongue, “and then over the Tehachapi Mountains following Steinbeck’s route. We were on the old Route 66 highway when Charlie suggested we head north and spend a day in Vegas.”

“Didn't you protest?” asked Gina.

“We sure did!” injected Jobe.

“But Charlie was adamant,” added Ellie. She looked over at Jobe. “We were both surprised, and we reminded Charlie of what a worthless place Vegas is. But...” Ellie threw up both her hands, “he said he really wanted to visit Vegas, and it would only be for a day.”

“It was Charlie’s RV,” added Jobe.

“Plus, Charlie argued that even Steinbeck, on his tour of America, took a detour through Yellowstone,” said Ellie. “We told him he only gets one detour per trip.”

Gina sat more relaxed. “So, off to Vegas you went.”

“We sure did,” said Jobe, “and we ended up staying one more day at Charlie’s insistence.”

“Seems out of character for what I know of Charlie,” said Gina, her eyes quite inquisitive.

“Yeah, us too,” replied Ellie. “But it turned out there was another side of Charlie.”

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Gina. Ellie teared up.

“Seems he had a gambling problem,” said Jobe.

“You sure?” asked Gina. “He’s always been your rock and mentor, more than just a foster dad.”

Ellie sighed. “I know. This is what makes it so hard.”

“And then he died, on top of all this?” asked Gina. Ellie was quiet.

“Worse than that,” said Jobe, “He was murdered!” Jobe looked at Gina, expressionless. Silence prevailed.

Gina sank back into her chair, staring over the heads of Jobe and Ellie. “That’s horrible. How could this happen? Why? Where?”

Jobe took a deep breath and looked at Ellie. Ellie remained silent. “Turns out, Charlie had some big gambling debts; Mob boss people spotted him, and so they took him out.”

“Where?” asked Gina.

Ellie finally spoke up. “In Charlie’s Winnebago. We were staying in an RV park near the Strip. Jobe and I were out eating, and just as we re-entered the park, we heard a shot, then a car came racing past us as we approached the RV.”

Ellie looked over at Jobe. He knew he needed to continue recounting the traumatic events of that night. “A few people had already gathered, and more were coming. Ellie and I rushed up the narrow, short steps of the RV and found Charlie on the floor, bleeding. I held his head up as someone else pressed hard on his wound to try to stop the bleeding.”

Ellie, almost in a trance, said, “He kept repeating, ‘I’m so sorry,’ and ‘bottom of the sea.’”

“What did that mean?” asked Gina, now on the edge of her chair.

“We didn’t know, at first,” offered Jobe, “and it took another day to figure it out. Charlie had an old, wooden Seagram’s whisky crate that he kept important things in since he was a young man. He brought it on the trip. We joked about whether he planned to drink a lot. When we asked him what was in the crate as he brought it into the RV, he said, ‘poker chips and other things.’ So we never gave it much thought until Ellie came up with her theory of what ‘bottom of the sea’ might mean.”

Ellie spoke up. “Yeah, I figured that *bottom of the sea* meant bottom of the Seagram’s crate.”

Jobe interrupted. “Seemed like a long shot to me. I warned her not to assume too much or get her hopes too high. But it turned out she was right.”

Ellie continued. “We pulled out the whiskey crate from under the fold-out couch in the RV and started going through it.”

“And?” Gina asked with great anticipation.

“Well, at first it was just a bunch of Charlie’s rambling notebooks. Good stuff, mind you, but not light reading.”

Jobe broke in. “Very philosophical, but I’m learning to appreciate Charlie’s thinking more and more.”

“He’s the one who taught you about *Streams of Terrible Beauty*, right?” asked Gina.

“Yep,” Ellie answered proudly. She looked over at Jobe. “And that’s what first brought Jobe and me together.”

Jobe shook his head in agreement as he said, “Man, oh man, discovering *Streams* was quite a journey; I learned a lot.”

“We both did!” added Ellie.

“Hey. The two of you should write a book. *Streams of Terrible Beauty* is a great title!”

Jobe and Ellie looked at each other and said at nearly the same time, "Maybe we will."

"So, that's all there was in the whisky crate – a bunch of books?" asked Gina. "What was at the bottom – you know, at the *bottom of the sea*?"

"Oh, it gets better," said Jobe. "Charlie had a lot of great books from all major religions. But he had also tucked a ton of money – big bills – in each book."

Gina's eyes enlarged as she peered out of the top of them. "How much money?"

"A lot," said Ellie. "You remember me telling you that Charlie always said he was leaving me a legacy?"

"Sure, but I figured it was what he taught you. He never appeared to be rich."

"That's what I thought, too. But he had apparently saved all of his gambling winnings, in spite of the debt he incurred, and put them in the crate for safe-keeping."

"Ha! Some safe!" added Jobe.

"Would you think to look there?" said Ellie, defending Charlie.

"Probably not."

"Wow. So now you're rich?" asked Gina.

"Not quite," answered Ellie, looking at Jobe. "But we have enough to make a down payment on a home, and that is really big."

"I'm so happy for both of you, especially after all you've been through." Ellie got quiet again. Gina, wanting to break the silence, searched for something to say. "Uh, so what was at the bottom of the Seagram's crate?" she asked, expecting nothing.

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot. Charlie had one more book at the bottom that we almost missed in our exuberance over the money."

Ellie leaned forward, grabbing Gina's attention. "But here is the cool thing. Charlie had a list of optimistic passages about how God will someday make everything right!"

"Wow, that sounds like that *Streams of Terrible Beauty* idea you got from Charlie. You know ... that whole idea that God takes *terrible* things and makes them *beautiful*?"

"Yes," replied Ellie, "that's exactly what it was. This is what I believe Charlie wanted us to find at the bottom of the Seagram's crate. The money was just an additional legacy."

Jobe reared back in his seat on the couch. "And let me tell you, Gina, reading Charlie's list of optimistic passages about God was so helpful to us. It kinda saved us from the horrific experience we went through with Charlie's murder. But it also gave us hope in his *Streams* concept that he taught us."

"All sounds good to me," said Gina. "I gotta see this list sometime. Maybe it will help me."

Ellie looked over at Jobe. "I'm sure it will."

"Looks like you got a double legacy from Charlie: wisdom and money," said Gina. "But what about the creepy man at the coffee shop? How does he fit in?"

Ellie pushed her head against the back of the couch and looked up. She took a deep breath. "I don't know, Gina. But it really bothers me. Maybe the Mob followed us home. What do you think?"

Gina's wheels started turning in her head. "I don't know, Ellie. Wouldn't they just take care of any unfinished business on your way back?"

"That was my take, too," said Jobe, jumping in quickly. "As I told Ellie yesterday, if they were after us, they would have caught us by now."

Gina put her fingers slightly touching her lips. Then she dropped her hand and said, "I think you're right!" She turned to Ellie. "If you had not just gone through such a traumatic experience, and a man came into the coffee shop and noticed you,

beautiful as you are..." Ellie blushed, "... would you think much of it?"

Jobe blurted out, "That's what I asked her!"

"Well?" asked Gina, waiting for an answer.

Finally, Ellie said, "I suppose not."

"Okay," said Gina. "Here's what you gotta do. Go to the coffee shop every day ..."

Ellie interrupted. "I already do."

"Okay, good," said Gina, ready to finish her thoughts. "Go there every day, and I guarantee you that you will not see that man or any other creepy-looking guy."

"You think so?"

"I *know* so!"

"I agree!" Jobe said, again wanting to reassure Ellie and prevent her from adding any new stress in her life.

Ellie felt a calm come over her. "Thank you, both, so much. I've got my new husband and my best friend watching over me and making sure I keep it real. But I'm exhausted. It's been quite a day."

"Oh, I get it, girl. So glad I got to come over and hear all the good news, even though some of it was bad." Gina gave Ellie and Jobe a hug and headed for the front door. She opened it, but then turned and said, "I wanna see you in the coffee shop bright and early tomorrow. Maybe we'll talk more about your trip."

"Oh, we will," said Ellie. "Mostly, we had a fun and positive trip – didn't we, Jobe?"

"We sure did. And, thanks for coming and listening, Gina." Gina slipped out the door, closing it behind her.

"I love you, Jobe, my new husband," said Ellie as she embraced him.

"I love you too, my dear."

They kissed and embraced passionately for several minutes. Ellie felt so safe and secure in Jobe's arms.

Chapter 3

The next day, Ellie decided to share the horrible news about Charlie with some of her out-of-town friends. But there was one additional person she thought she should write to: Jim Phillips, an old army buddy of Charlie's, whom she'd heard a lot about all her life. Difficult as it was, she went over to Charlie's house and rummaged through his desk drawers until she found his address book. Thankfully, Jim's name was in it. She got out a sheet of paper and began to write.

Dear Jim:

It is with a broken heart that I must share some bad news with you. Charlie died last week. I know you have been good friends for a very long time. He always spoke very highly of you. I don't want to go into a lot of detail, but Charlie's death was tragic. We were on a road trip in his RV, but visited Las Vegas at his request. There, he was murdered by one of the gambling mobs to whom he owed a large debt. Apparently, they believed he would never be able to repay it and decided to make an example of him. However, I'm surprised that they would spot him so quickly, on just the second day after we arrived. Seems very strange to me, but that's what happened. So, I've accepted it. Perhaps you can make better sense of it. I just wanted to let you know. However, the good news is that I got married before we left Vegas to a wonderful man who was traveling with us. Unfortunately, Charlie will never know, but I'm sure he would approve. Please feel free to keep in touch with us in the years to come. Thank you for being such a wonderful friend to Charlie.

Affectionately, Ellie Martinez

She folded it, stuffed it into an envelope, sealed it, added a stamp and address, then slipped it into a slot in the apartment building lobby labeled 'Outgoing Mail.' *That's funny*, she chuckled to herself. *I always thought Jobe was the outgoing male!*

During the following months, Ellie made many trips to Carla's Coffee Shop with no sign of any mysterious or creepy men, just as Gina and Jobe had predicted. It was only a month after they got back that Ellie became pregnant, a bit sooner than they planned, but at ages 41 and 37, they didn't mind getting on with starting a family. They went back to their jobs in their sleepy little town, used the money left by Charlie to make a down payment on a house, and allowed all the terrible things they experienced on their trip to slowly slip into a beautiful life of love and affection beyond their wildest dreams.

Only once did they have any big problem in their otherwise ideal relationship. Looking back, neither could remember exactly why they had trouble, but for Ellie, it became a stark reminder of how she once bailed out on Jobe, right after they first met, and how much pain she caused both of them. That bailout was always her big, humbling moment in life, but she felt equally thankful that it made both her and Jobe better persons and may have been the only way they would ever have gotten together as a couple. For Jobe, it was what sealed his fate as a believer in what they both held as their key to life – *Streams of Terrible Beauty* that they learned from Charlie.

By July of the next year, in 1988, their son Jeff was born. Ellie was so happy to finally be married and become a mother. She always wondered if she would take to motherhood with all her quirks. Herself, having been adopted, she often felt inadequate and ill-prepared as a person stumbling along in life. But holding little newborn Jeffrey in her arms for the first time dispelled all doubt. She knew she would be a good and loving mom. As for

Jobe, he was as proud as a dad could be with visions of playing baseball in the backyard, fishing trips, and hopefully teaching young Jeff how to play the guitar. So many good times were ahead.

By the time October rolled around, near the one-year anniversary of their marriage, and one year after their traumatic trip that ended with Charlie's murder in Las Vegas, Ellie had pretty much let the memories fade into the background. However, she missed Charlie every day without exception. Pregnancy, giving birth, and caring for a new baby were more than enough to distract her from dwelling on the past.

On one particular, beautiful Fall morning, while sitting in her favorite spot at the big picture window at Carla's, with baby Jeff sitting in his stroller playing with his toys, she experienced a flashback of the strange man from the past. *Where did this crazy thought come from?* Ellie thought to herself. *And why now?* Then she realized it was October. *Funny how we memorialize things annually, both good things and bad things!* She then forced herself to dwell on her upcoming anniversary with Jobe. *Wow! Married a whole year, and I have a beautiful baby boy. It all happened so fast!*

Still gazing out the big picture window, looking at nothing, her mind far away, a voice startled her. "How ya doing, Ellie? You look gone!"

Ellie flinched in her seat for a moment, then looked up to see Gina standing over her. "Oh, sorry. You startled me."

"Yep, I could tell that you were somewhere else. Musing, were you?" said Gina as she sat down across from Ellie.

"I was pondering the events from a year ago."

"I wondered if this might come up in your mind, but I didn't want to mention it."

"Funny, it just hit me today. I don't know why. I've been coming here for coffee nearly every day this past year, and not a

thought of the past came to mind – except for missing Charlie. I think about him every day.”

Gina placed her hand on top of Ellie's. “There would be something wrong with you if you didn't always remember Charlie!”

“Thanks, Gina. But why do I relive the creepy guy thing today, here and now? You're the one who has spooky spiritual experiences, Gina, what do you think?”

“Well, first of all, any spooky stuff – as you call it – is mine, and I can only speak to that as it relates to me.”

“I don't know. You've always been my guide on the spooky side of life, just like Charlie has always been my guide in the logical and material realm. You must have something for me. Don't you?”

Gina sighed. She was the kind of person who always had some premonitions about people, but over the years, she learned the hard way to be very careful about what she told them, especially about their lives, because she was never entirely sure. After a bit more hesitation, Gina finally said, “Let me put it this way. I think you have nothing to worry about. I believe you will continue your life without any serious outside trouble, just as you have this past year. Weren't Jobe and I right in our prediction a year ago about no more creepy men?” Gina waited for Ellie to speak.

“Yes. I agree. And it was a wonderful year. But are you sure this time? This worry that has come over me is really strong. Much of the fear from a year ago has come back and having a baby to watch out for has made me a bit paranoid. Motherhood has turned me into a worrywart. As soon as I had my baby, I really started worrying.”

“Ellie, I am never sure, either way. Don't count on me getting your future right. It's yours to live. I just think you need to stay positive and focus on Jobe and your new, precious little baby boy!”

“So, you have no sense or premonition, whatsoever, of something bad happening?”

Gina hesitated. “Naw,” she said as reassuringly as she could. “I’m sticking with my idea that you have nothing to worry about.”

But Ellie was not fully assured or convinced. “Okay. Then that’s what I’ll do. But still, I’m gonna feel a lot better when October is over.” Ellie looked around the room, double-checking for any surprises in store for her. She looked back at Gina. “Yep. That’s what I’ll do.”

When Ellie got home, she found a letter from Jim Phillips in the mailbox. She wasn’t surprised that he had written, even though she had invited him to stay in touch. What surprised her was that it took a year. *Why now?* she asked herself. She tore open the envelope and unfolded a single-page note.

Dear Ellie and Jobe:

Sorry it took me so long to get back to you. It’s been on my list of things to do for a long time. When I tell my wife that, she rolls her eyes. Ha! But I wanted to give it some thought, and I did.

Charlie and I worked at the Los Alamos Labs together just after WWII and after the Manhattan Project. It was very intriguing work, something we both enjoyed tremendously. Charlie was about 10 years older than me, but he was also my mentor in all things technical. After the war, Charlie decided to go into civilian work; I continued working in government. It’s been good to me; I’ve had many years of interesting work, earned a good retirement, but I always missed working with Charlie. The few times he wrote to me, he conveyed his success in civilian life doing high-level technology work. I envied him just a little bit. I’m sorry we didn’t stay in touch more often. But one thing we both learned during our hitch in the Army was to always be aware of our surroundings. This was true in a war zone, but just as much so in peacetime. I pass this tidbit of caution on to you and Jobe as you begin your life together. It’s proven true for me, and I know it’s been a valuable principle to live by for Charlie as well. Best of success to you and Jobe as you venture

out in life, discovering the journey that God has uniquely for just the two of you!

Your friend, Jim Phillips

Ellie released the letter from her grip and held it in one hand, dangling along her side. She stared off into space for a moment, pondering Jim's closing words. Then she tossed it on the table and made a mental note to talk with Jobe about it.

When Jobe got home from work, she gave him a big kiss and said, "I've got two things to tell you."

Jobe grabbed Ellie by the hand and led her to the couch, where they sat down together. "Okay, tell me all about it."

Ellie got up, went over to the table, grabbed Jim's letter, and sat back down next to Jobe. "We got a letter from Jim Phillips today."

"Isn't that Charlie's war buddy you wrote to last year?"

"Yep. That's him."

"What took him so long to write?" asked Jobe.

Ellie handed Jobe the letter. "Here, see for yourself. It's not very long."

Jobe read for a minute, then said, "Yep. It's a guy thing. I have a list like that," as he handed the letter back to her.

"I know," said Ellie, rolling her eyes. "But didn't it seem a little strange, the way Jim ended the letter?"

"What do you mean?"

"That tidbit of caution that he gave us. Why did he add that?"

Jobe grabbed the letter back out of Ellie's hands. "Let me see that again." Jobe reread the ending. "Yes, now that you mention it, it does seem a bit odd. But I have no idea why he gave us that caution. Maybe he was just trying to convey something interesting that he and Charlie shared in the past."

“Could be. But I still think it's strange,” added Ellie. “You’d think he would try to encourage us with some positive words of wisdom, rather than to give us what looks almost like a warning.”

“You could write and ask him?” said Jobe.

“Naw, I wouldn't want to bother him with it. It might make me feel silly, so I'll just let it be.”

Ellie hesitated for a moment. “Uh, I have something else to share with you. Don't get mad at me; you may think I'm being silly or overreacting. I was uneasy today, drinking my coffee at Carla's. I think it's because it's October and a year has passed since we experienced the awful trauma of Charlie's death and seeing the creepy man.”

“No, honey, I'm not mad in any way. And I suppose it's normal to have a few jitters on the one-year anniversary. It hasn't been a problem this past year, has it?” asked Jobe.

“No, I've done very well being busy with Jeffrey, my work, and loving you. The only thing that has really bothered me this past year was missing Charlie.”

“Well, when October passes,” Jobe assured her, “you'll be back on track, and all of this creepy stuff will be behind you. However, losing Charlie ... that will take much longer. And that's okay. You would be abnormal if you didn't miss Charlie!”

“That's what Gina told me today at the coffee shop!”

“Obviously good advice from her,” Jobe said with a wink.

Ellie gave Jobe an affectionate smile. “Thanks for the pep talk. I'm going to put all this behind me – including Jim's letter – and look forward to another wonderful year.”

“That's my girl!” Jobe gave her a kiss.

And, just as Jobe and Gina predicted, life settled down, and Ellie had another wonderful year. She got pregnant again, this time with a baby girl, whom they named Janelle, born in July, only a few days after Jeff's birthday. Though Ellie secretly hoped for a

girl, she told herself every day that she would be equally happy with another boy. She wanted to honestly tell him that he was exactly what she hoped for.

Jeff and Janelle grew up together, enjoyed all the wonderful privileges of living in middle-class America, and they got along with each other quite well. The only real difference between them was that Jeff was more artistic and mystical, while Janelle was more logical and practical. This caused them to disagree on many things in life, but they also learned to appreciate each other's view of life.

Chapter 4

The following October, on the 2nd anniversary of Charlie's death and the encounter with the creepy man, Ellie couldn't help but be aware of it. However, this time she kept her thoughts to herself and smoothly transitioned through the month of October with very little fear or anxiety. She was relieved, and she knew now with little doubt that all such nonsense was a thing of the past.

Life for the Martinez family became relatively normal over the following ten years, marked by soccer games, ballet classes, and numerous other enjoyable adventures. Jobe and Ellie were determined to expose their kids to as many different kinds of experiences as possible in the hope that they would each find in life what they were destined to do and be.

In October 1997, Ellie and Jobe celebrated their 10th wedding anniversary. Except for still missing Charlie every day, the problems from Ellie's distant past were gone and hardly ever entered her mind. Life was good; it was very good!

On one beautiful Saturday morning, Ellie headed to Carla's to grab one of their signature lattes, made from fresh coffee beans roasted daily in the store. Carla's was the only shop in town that did this. They sold and shipped roasted coffee beans, not only throughout the county but all around the Western United States. They had become well-known after thirty years in business, having been one of the first establishments on the West Coast to roast their own coffee beans.

I'm so glad Gina was able to get a loan and buy this place after Carla's death ten years ago, she thought as she parallel parked the car in front of Carla's. I'm so proud of her. She got out, pulled open the door (still hanging backward), and walked in. She walked past her favorite seat by the big picture window and headed to the counter.

“Good morning, Gina. Everything going okay for you?”

“Yep, business is good as ever. We keep adding new customers to our coffee shipping list. It's hard to keep up while also running the business, but I'm getting it done.”

“Hey, that's a good kind of problem, right?” asked Ellie.

“It sure is. Beats struggling to sell enough lattes to pay the bills. We're not Starbucks, ya know.”

Ellie pulled an ATM card from her wallet and handed it to Gina. “Hey, I'll take this casual, small-town, slow-paced setting over the big city any day. Give me my usual.”

“Coming right up, my friend. You doing okay?” asked Gina.

Ellie punched in her pin number. “Yeah, Jobe and I are doing well. Life goes on!”

“Yes, and on and on...” They laughed together.

Ellie casually looked around as she waited for her drink, enjoying the calm of this local business in her sleepy town of Oak Pines. In the corner were two men she did not see when she walked in. Ellie felt a sudden Deja vu – a feeling she had not felt for ten years! Both wore suits and ties with fancy shoes, looking out of place in Oak Pines. Even the two lawyers at the law firm where she worked dressed far more casually, except on trial days, which were rare.

“Here's your drink. Ellie,” said Gina, calling her attention back toward the counter. “You look worried. What's wrong?”

“I don't want to turn around, but those two men at the corner table, by the door ... I just noticed them. Ever see them before?”

“Can’t say I have,” replied Gina. “But I gotta say they’re overdressed for this small town. You’re not slipping back into worrying about strange men in coffee shops, are you?”

“I guess not. I don’t want to.”

“That was a long time ago, Ellie,” Gina scolded her. “Don’t go there.”

Ellie turned her head to get another look at the two men. One of the men noticed her looking at them. Fear shot through her body. She pondered for a moment, then realized it was October 1997, exactly ten years since she first saw that strange man in this same coffee shop. Amazingly, the two men were seated in just about the same place. *Oh my gosh*, she thought. Her hands began to tremble slightly.

The other man turned around in his chair and looked at her. “Here’s your latte, Ellie.” Ellie turned around. “Oh, thanks.” Her voice had a distant ring.

“You okay, girl?”

Ellie looked up. “Oh, yeah. Fine. Thanks for the latte,” she said with almost no expression.

“You sure you’re okay?” asked Gina.

“Yeah!” Ellie forced out a smile. She turned around from the counter, away from the direction of the two men. She began walking toward the front door, afraid to look at them. As she exited, she glanced over. They were both watching her leave. Ellie panicked, quickly went around to the driver’s side of her car, and got in. She started her car, pulled out into the lane, and sped away. She had not yet taken a sip of her latte.

When she got home, she noticed Jobe’s car in the driveway. “Oh, good! He’s here,” she said out loud, reassuring herself. She rushed in; Jobe lay half asleep, slouching on the couch. The screen door slammed behind her as she entered.

Jobe lifted his head, focused, and saw the terrorized look on her face. He quickly sat up. “What’s wrong, Ellie?”

“I saw a man again today at Carla's, except this time there were two of them.”

Jobe got up, walked toward her, and embraced her warmly. He wanted to say, *Please don't start that again. We put that behind us a long time ago*, but he didn't. After a decade of marriage, Jobe had learned many important things. One was to let Ellie be herself. He knew he had a gem of a girl, but he also knew she was quite human. For this, he was thankful. Well aware of his own flaws and shortcomings, he knew he couldn't handle being married to someone who was perfect. They were always a near-perfect balance, where one was strong when the other was weak, and vice versa.

Instead, he calmly said, “Sit down. Tell me about it,” though inside he became quite concerned. His face looked strained. His eyebrows pushed down over his eyes.

“Jobe, it's October. It's been ten years to the month since I saw that man at Carla's!”

“Was either of them the same man as before?” he asked.

“I don't think so; it's been a long time.”

“It sure has,” Jobe butted in. “Keep that in mind.”

“But they were both well-dressed, like that first man was – dark suits and ties with fancy shoes. It was creepy, Jobe. I wasn't anticipating this at all. It didn't even register with me that it was October or that it had been ten years.” She looked up at him, fear in her eyes, lips slightly trembling. “Why is this happening? Am I crazy, or is someone playing a trick on me? What?”

“Okay, try to be calm,” he said as he held her close to him. “Let's think this through without panicking. Were they looking at you?”

“One was, then both were.”

Jobe pulled away slightly so he could look Ellie in the eyes. “You're still a very beautiful woman at forty-seven,” he said, reassuring her.

She smiled slightly. “You're a sweetheart.”

"I'd look at you that way, too ... I mean, if you were my wife, that is."

She slapped his hands. "Oh, you're still checking out the other women."

"Guilty as charged, but only to make sure I got the best one!"

"Good answer, mister. You got out of that one, this time. But I'm a little scared, Jobe. I can't help it. Maybe I just have to live scared the rest of my life."

"Okay, listen. Here is my honest take on this. They didn't talk to you, right?"

"No, they didn't."

"They didn't follow you out, did they?"

"I don't know," said Ellie, "I left too fast."

"You would have known if they did!" he reassured her. "They couldn't have known you were coming, could they? They couldn't possibly have been there waiting for you, right?"

"True, but I do go there almost every day at about the same time." Jobe sighed inside, realizing he had no answer for that one.

Ellie thought for a moment. Then she began to calm down. "I guess not. How could they? I doubt they were just hanging out there waiting for me to come by. It seems they would have better things to do, or they would come after me in a more efficient way after ten years."

"Now you're thinking straight. It is easy for any of us to go *on tilt* in life. We all have insecurities, doubts, and suppressed experiences just waiting to surface at unexpected times. Two well-dressed men, checking out a beautiful middle-aged lady; it happens every day. But for you, it triggered a traumatic event that you will never be able to fully forget."

"Oh, great. I'm doomed!"

"No, you're not; only if you let yourself be defeated. Everyone has something in life that plagues them."

"You think so?"

“I know so! Ask around, and you'll find this to be true, that is, if anyone will be fully honest with you.”

“Okay, I'll start with you,” said Ellie. “What plagues you?”

Jobe thought for a moment. “Well, I can think of two things. One is the trauma I experienced when my three best friends decided to intervene in my life and correct what they perceived as my wayward ways. That's how we first met. Remember? You kinda rescued me from them right there at Carla's.”

“Oh, I remember it well. I couldn't help but overhear them rebuking you and how badly you needed to be rescued in some way. You kept looking at me while you were talking, and I moved to a closer table so I could hear what you were all saying.”

“There ya go. If I can notice you while distracted by my so-called friends, these two guys can notice you while undistracted. Hey, how old were these guys?”

“Early fifties.”

“Ah-ha! Just like me. I'd be looking, too!”

“So, what's the other thing from your past that plagues you?”

Jobe got quiet. He didn't really want to bring this up. “Well, it's how you so suddenly bailed out on me when things were going so well, just a month or so after we met.” Ellie looked down, remembering how much she had hurt Jobe, even though it had not been about him but her own fear of their new, developing relationship, based on past experiences that had gone badly with other guys. “Sometimes when we have trouble, I get scared that you might bail out on me again. I know it's silly and we are solid in our marriage with two wonderful kids, but my insecurities and fears sometimes get the best of me.”

“Like me and my creepy-man syndrome?”

“Yes, exactly!”

“Okay, you win again. Every time we have this conversation, you seem to make more sense to me than I do to myself. Good thing I married you.”

“Good thing I married you, too, or I'd be like these two lonely, well-dressed men, checking out all the pretty, middle-aged women out there. As I have always promised you, this will not keep happening, not tomorrow, the next day, or any day thereafter.”

“But it did happen again, ten years later!” Ellie was emphatic.

“True,” said Jobe, “but my answer is still the same. It might happen again in another ten years, and my answer will still be the same then! Ya just gotta think and see past it, or it will own you the rest of your life. I wish I could decide for you, but I can't; no one can. It will always be your choice; however, I will always be here to encourage you no matter what.” Ellie hugged Jobe long and hard. She needed to say nothing.

Jobe slowly broke their embrace. “Look, if someone wanted to come after us, they would have done it by now. They would not just continue to survey us. Right?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” replied Ellie.

“Then it's just another coincidence.”

“Sure, but it's a spooky one!”

“It is indeed,” said Jobe. “But that's life. We all experience an occasional *Deja vu*, right?”

“I guess so,” said Ellie with a hint of hesitation. “I love you,” she said, looking into his eyes. Jobe kissed her. They hugged again, and she felt safe. “It was just a couple of businessmen noticing a pretty girl. I think you're right.”

Just as she had done ten years prior, Ellie made herself go to Carla's the next day, again with apprehension, and as before, no strange men were seen. At the end of the day, when Jobe came home, she shared her success with him. “See,” he said, in a calm and joyful voice. “Just another crazy coincidence.” He made her look into his eyes. “Right?” he asked. His eyes were full of reassurance.

Ellie kept going back to Carla's, day after day, until her apprehension once again disappeared. But over the next ten years, she could not help but anticipate the inevitable 20th anniversary of their marriage and the *strange-man* ordeal that seemed to never quite leave her alone. There were two other points in her memory that bothered her, never quite finding an escape. One was the strange warning from Jim Phillips in his return letter. The other was her good friend Gina's reluctance, some twenty years ago, to say she had no negative premonitions whatsoever about what the future held for her and Jobe.

Chapter 5

Jeff's graduation from High School in June 2006 rolled around much sooner than Jobe and Ellie expected. The past nine years seemed to transpire slowly, with all the teenage ups and downs for both kids. However, looking back, it seemed to have passed by quickly. Jeff was thrilled to be accepted at UC Davis, which was only a two-hour drive down into the California agricultural flatlands, 2500 feet below their foothill town of Oak Pines. His major was Political Science.

Jeff was a bright kid with a fair amount of wisdom and common sense for a young man of his age. He stayed out of trouble in his teens but often complained about local police who harassed him and his friends for minor infractions that sometimes pushed the tolerable limits of law enforcement officers just trying to do their job. What Jeff did not know is that all these cops were, not so long ago, exactly where he was and understood him more than he did them. Then again, maybe he did somewhat understand these older guys by how they gave him and his friends many warnings, and never threw the book at them in some unnecessarily dramatic fashion. Perhaps this is part of his reason for aspiring to someday be part of the same law enforcement he so despised as a kid. Jobe and Ellie were puzzled when Jeff chose Political Science as his major, but were even more surprised when they discovered his ultimate goal.

Janelle was only a year behind Jeff in school, but this always made them close siblings, able to share many common experiences, watch out for each other, and not compete as much

as they would have had they been the same gender. Jobe and Ellie had friends with either two boys or two girls, and the natural competition between them was often fierce. They often looked at each other and commented on how glad they were to have two kids of the opposite sex. Another reason was that they also saw too many couples with all boys or all girls, who kept trying to get one of the opposite.

Janelle, strongly drawn to the sciences, was very logical in her thinking and a math wiz. Her plan, upon graduating in a year, was to pursue a degree in physics. She could hardly wait to dive deeper into the study of such things, having become a bit bored with the lower-level high school curriculum.

Although Janelle and Jeff always got along well, they sharply differed in their views of life, both spiritually and philosophically. Jeff became more fascinated by the mystical side of life, whereas Janelle was all about reason and rationality. For her, if something could not be scientifically proven, it was not worth believing. For Jeff, there had to be much more to reality than just what we see. The two of them were a perfect representation of the classical difference between Plato and Aristotle. Plato always looked beyond what we can see, believing there were absolute *forms* in the spiritual realm from which objects in this world are a mere, imperfect copy. Aristotle, Plato's top student, naturally took the opposite approach to life, believing that what we see with our five senses is what counts, and that we are wise to focus on that.

Janelle endured her long, last year of High School without Jeff, whom she missed so much, and chose UC Berkeley to pursue her exciting career in the world of science and physics. With her high grades and high recommendations, she had no problem getting in.

In the summer of 2007, Jeff came home for summer break while Janelle prepared to start her undergraduate studies. Ellie and Jobe decided to have one of their family talks. This was

something they did with their kids many times over the years whenever something important emerged.

“Now that you're both over eighteen,” Jobe began the discussion, “not that it matters all that much, we have something to tell you that we have put off all these years until the right time. Perhaps there is never a *right time* for such things, but this is as good a time as any.”

“Let me guess,” Jeff blurted out, “we were adopted?”

“Very funny,” said Jobe, “but no, this is something rather sad and hard to deal with.” Both kids become sober and silent.

“What is it?” asked Janelle.

Jobe looked over at Ellie, who took it from there. “Well, you already know how we met and our life story about *Streams of Terrible Beauty* that we learned from Grampa Charlie, which became our common faith.”

“Yeah, we've heard this story a hundred times,” said Jeff.

Jobe responded with, “Hey, I'm glad you didn't say a *thousand* times!” Everyone chuckled, relieving the tension somewhat.

“It's about Grampa Charlie,” said Ellie, the smile from laughter left her face.

“Yeah, I wish we could have known him,” said Janelle.

“I wish you could, too,” replied Ellie. “He was a wonderful foster dad for me, but even more so, he was a great mentor. I believe someday you will meet him!” Janelle and Jeff remained quiet. “But like everyone, he was human. He apparently had a thing about gambling, and he got himself in quite some debt.”

“No big deal, Mom, everyone struggles with something,” said Jeff. “Right?”

“Yes, indeed, but it gets a little worse.” Ellie tensed up. Her eyes became distant. Jobe braced himself for what he knew she was about to say. “We never told you *how* Grampa Charlie died and *why*.”

“I always thought it was old age, on that trip you took with him right before you got married in Vegas,” said Janelle.

Jobe spoke up. “That is probably what we told you without giving any details. But now it is time for you to know everything since you are more than old enough to understand it, process it, and maybe make sense of it in some way.”

“We’re still working through it,” said Ellie, “though, thankfully, it’s all behind us, and we have made a good life for ourselves and the two of you these past twenty years.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve always taught us, to forget the past and move on toward that upward calling in Jesus?” said Jeff. “I think that’s a verse somewhere in the bible that you both like.”

“It is,” said Ellie, “and it’s how we have tried to live. But I have not always been able to do this perfectly.” Ellie paused and took a deep breath. “Grampa Charley was murdered in Las Vegas, and it happened in his Winnebago in which we were traveling.”

Both kids looked at each other in alarm. “Oh no,” said Janelle with tears in her eyes. “That’s horrible! How could that happen?” Jeff remained silent, staring down at the floor.

Seeing Ellie tear up, Jobe took over. “As far as we can tell, after talking with the local police the day after it happened, someone spotted Charlie in a casino, which got reported to some Mob boss who had a bounty on Charlie’s head. So, they took him out as a warning to others who might ever dare cross them and not pay their debts.”

Jeff looked up. “You weren’t there when it happened?”

“No, thank God,” answered Jobe, “otherwise we would have been killed, too, and neither of you would be here today!”

Ellie leaned forward to explain. “Your father and I had no idea that Grampa had a past gambling problem. We didn’t learn about it until the next day when we talked to the Police.”

“Wow. That’s a mind-blower,” said Janelle. “Where were you?”

“We were out for dinner and just returning to the RV park when we heard a shot. We thought it was a backfire of the car racing away past us as we approached the Winnebago. People were gathering around, the RV door was open, and I ran up the stairs and found Charlie dying. I held him in my arms as he bled and uttered his final words.”

“What were they?” Janelle and Jeff said almost in unison.

Ellie spoke up. “I’ll never forget them. He kept saying, ‘I’m so sorry,’ with his eyes closed and his teeth clenched. Then he said something very strange. It was, ‘bottom of the sea.’”

Jobe interrupted. “I was holding him, and I felt his body go limp right after the word *sea*, as if he had not quite finished his sentence.”

“What did it mean?” asked Janelle. “Did you ever find out?”

Ellie, now somewhat composed, said, “Yes, but it took a couple of days. Long story short, I was looking down from across the RV living room and saw the old wooden whisky crate, in which Charlie always kept important things. I remember this crate growing up, and for some reason, Charlie brought it on our trip with him. As I looked at it, I read ‘Seagram’s V.O. Canadian Whisky.’”

“Yeah, so what?” asked Jeff.

“That’s what your Dad said when I showed it to him.” Jobe shrugged his shoulders. “But it hit me like a ton of bricks that ‘*bottom of the sea*’ meant the bottom of the Seagram’s crate! Grampa Charlie just didn’t have time to get it out before he died!”

“Mom, that’s a stretch,” said Janelle, her head cocked to the side, mouth slightly open, eyebrows raised.

“Your Dad said that, too.” Jobe shrugged again. “He warned me not to get my hopes up about such a long-shot idea. But I was pretty confident, so we pulled the crate out and started to go through it.”

Jobe jumped into the conversation. “Yeah, at first it was just a bunch of Charlie’s notebooks. But then in some other books he

had stuffed a lot of money – lots of it, big bills.” Jobe paused, reliving it all. “A bill every few pages in each of the books.”

The two siblings exchanged astonished looks. “That’s a lot of money,” exclaimed Jeff.

“Yeah, even if they were all just tens and twenties,” said Janelle,

“Hey, listen,” said Jobe, “they were five-hundred and thousand dollar bills. Real eye-poppers.” Janelle and Jeff gasped, both dropping their jaws. “We counted over a hundred thousand dollars, total!”

“It was bittersweet for me,” said Ellie. “Charlie always told me he was leaving me a legacy, but I always thought it was everything he taught me about *Streams of Terrible Beauty*.”

“And it was!” Jobe added, having become a changed man after learning this concept from Ellie and going through all the troubles they encountered before they got married.

Ellie turned toward Jobe, “Yes, it was, but the money was a big surprise. I had no idea.”

Jobe broke in. “But after we found out from the Police that the Mob took Charlie out for not paying his debt, we got pretty scared seeing all that money. However, after we thought it through, based on the reassurance by the police that we probably were not in danger or we would already be dead, we finally relaxed and were able to ponder the meaning of what Charlie had done for us.”

“I felt guilty and sad about all that money,” said Ellie. “I didn’t want that money; I wanted Charlie. He and Martha were the most important people in my life, having never known my real mother. To me, they were my *real* parents.” Ellie looked over at Jobe. “But it was our new reality, and we eventually fully appreciated the money, put a big down payment on our house, brought the two of you into our lives, and the rest is now our history that you know and have lived.”

Jeff sat back from his perch on the edge of the couch. He sighed and said, “Wow, I'm not sure what to do with all of that information.”

“I don't know either,” added Janelle.

“I think it might have been easier had you told us that we were adopted!”

“Yeah, this is a heavier burden,” added Janelle.

“So sorry, kids, but we had to tell you sometime, and telling you any earlier in life seemed cruel and unnecessary,” Ellie stated, as a matter of fact.

Janelle sat shaking her head from side to side. “I'm not sure I understand any of it now.”

“Me neither,” blurted out Jeff. “It sounds like a movie or someone else's life, not yours.”

Jobe let out a sigh of relief as if a big, long-time burden had been lifted off his shoulders. “You are both on your way to making a great life for yourselves. We are so proud of you, and we look forward to watching you become all you can be, and all God wants you to be.”

They all got up, almost at the same time, not knowing who initiated it. Everyone instinctively hugged each other. Wiping tears away, they stepped back and looked at each other, feeling greater love than any of them could ever remember.

“Sit down for a moment, kids,” said Ellie. “There is one more thing I need to tell you.”

“Oh, like that's not enough,” Janelle said, sarcastically. Jeff sat back down, still reeling from the shocking revelation.

“The day we got back from Las Vegas, newly married,” Ellie looked over at Jobe and paused, still so thankful for the man she secured, “I saw a strange man looking at me in Carla's.”

“So, what's the big deal, Mom? You still look beautiful after two decades!” Jeff said, wanting to diminish whatever new surprise was about to come.

“That’s what everyone tells me, but this kind of look was different. It wasn’t like the way I met your Dad in Carla’s, just a few months earlier.”

“In what way was it different?” asked Janelle.

“It was creepy, and it was intentional. I’m sure of that.”

“Oh, I know the feeling,” said Janelle. “It hasn’t happened too often, but when it does, it is indeed creepy. It’s hard to know if it is inappropriate flirting, some kind of mental case, or something worse. I can understand your uneasiness.”

“Thanks, Janelle. And so, to make yet another long story short, I came home and told Jobe. He told me not to worry and to go back there the next day to prove it. I did, and he was right.”

Jeff asked, “Did you think it was the Mob that followed you home?”

“I did, because he was way over-dressed for Oak Pines, and he left in a big, black, limousine-style car.”

Jeff paused for a moment. “Hmmm ... That is suspicious.”

“But we ruled it out based on what the Vegas police told us and on common sense,” said Jobe in an attempt to offset the tension that was building in his kids. “Seemed to us that they would have done something in Vegas or on our way home. Why wait another day and then not do anything? It didn’t make any sense. So we decided to just move on with our lives.”

“I agree, Dad,” said Janelle. “Plus, you guys are still here, aren’t you?”

“True,” said Ellie. “But there's more.”

“Oh, great. Here it comes,” Jeff said, preparing himself for another shocker.

“No, it's not like that. It’s okay now, but I wanted you to know what I have experienced over the past 20 years.” Jeff relaxed. “I could not help but be apprehensive the following October, but I got through the month without any incidents. Each day until the end of the month was an unfolding drama that ended on November 1st.”

“It’s funny how we live in annual and monthly cycles,” said Janelle. “It seems silly, but I think we all fall prey to it. Why would something like this happen once a year? That’s for birthdays and anniversaries that we choose to celebrate.”

“You’re right, honey. And looking back, it all seems so silly, but it was very real at the time.”

“We all experience some Deja vu in life,” concluded Jeff. “We just have to shake it off and move on.”

“And that’s what I did ... until the ten-year anniversary rolled around.”

Jeff threw his head back and said, “Oh no. Don’t tell me...”

Ellie interrupted. “I know, it all seems silly now, but I couldn’t shake my apprehension. I guess that original occurrence was more traumatic than I realized.”

“So, what happened?” asked Janelle.

“Well, this is why I felt I needed to tell you all of this. After ten years, I had finally forgotten the original event, believing it was all some kind of silly paranoia and my mind playing tricks on me. But ...” Jeff and Janelle both tensed up. “... I saw a man, again, at Carla’s, except there were two of them this time. Both were overdressed in coats and ties and shiny shoes.”

“Hey, Mom, maybe they were in town for someone’s funeral,” offered Janelle.

“Wait a minute, Mom.” Jeff protested. “The Mob is not going to track you down after ten years over a gambling debt by someone who is dead and gone!”

“That’s what your Dad told me. But still, it was one big coincidence that freaked me out. And, over the past decade, I have lived with this ten-year thing in the back of my mind. I couldn’t help it. It hasn’t been easy.”

“I understand, Mom,” said Janelle, wanting her to know how much she understood. “Let yourself be human. I think most people would struggle with this, at least to some degree.”

Jeff added, “Hey, you guys are both still here, so no big deal now, right?”

“I think you are right, said Ellie. But this twenty-year anniversary is coming in October. However, I am ready for it, and I believe it will pass without incident. However, I’ll be relieved when it’s over! This is worse than worrying about going to the dentist!” Everyone laughed, and both kids were relieved.

Chapter 6

Janelle and Jeff parked at the Cliff House in San Francisco, got out of the car, and started down the Pacific Coast Trail to Land's End, just like their parents did some twenty years earlier. After walking about ten minutes, they came to a sign pointing toward the ocean that read, "Land's End." Janelle grabbed Jeff and said, "Come on, let's go see it." They began descending down the long trail of stairs that seemed to stretch endlessly under the low-hanging branches. "Shall we count them?" she asked.

"No thanks. Too many. We'd probably argue about how many, just like Mom and Dad did."

"You're probably right," said Janelle. "Wow, do these stairs ever end?"

"I'm sure they do. But what's worse is that we gotta climb all the way back up!"

When they finally reached the bottom, they followed the trail, where a sign read, *Land's End Ahead*. "Hey sis, I want to wish you a happy birthday a week ahead because I might be out of town next weekend. Wow, 18! But you'll never catch up with me, I'm always a year ahead."

"True, but 1989 was a better year to be born," she replied.

They came upon a small hill, climbed up together, and peeked over the top. "There it is, Jeff!"

"I can't believe it," he answered. "The labyrinth actually exists."

"I told you that I saw a photo of it on the internet!"

“I believe you now. Let's go down and try it out.” They climbed down the hill toward the peninsula like a couple of ants with their backs downward, arms and legs moving.

“Let's see who can get to the middle first,” said Janelle.

“It's pretty big,” answered Jeff. “Might take a while.”

“Not if you avoid wrong turns.” At the first choice in the rock-laid labyrinth, Janelle went left, and Jeff went right.

“How did you know to go left?” asked Jeff.

“I didn't. How did you know to go right?”

“Uh, I just didn't want to follow you, little sister! Ha!”

“You've been like that your whole life, just because you're older – *big brother*,” she said, sarcastically. She then yelled across the rock formation. “Sometimes I've been right, ya know. And, following me would have been wise.”

“I know,” said Jeff. “Don't remind me. You're a good sister.”

“How are you doing over there?” asked Janelle.

“Well, I made it through five of the seven rock rings, but then I hit a dead end and had to go back. How about you?”

“Looks like I'm coming your way,” said Janelle. “Wow, we're almost on the same path. Whoops. Just one stubborn rock lies between us.”

“Yep. But your path goes outward, mine goes inward. I think I'm gonna win,” said Jeff.

“Don't count on it. Labyrinths are designed to fool you.”

After a few minutes of looking down and trying different paths, “Ta-da!” said Janelle, celebrating.

“What? How'd you get to the center so fast?”

“I guess *left* turned out to be the right choice.”

“But it seems like a right turn should lead the *right* way,” said Jeff, “and a *left* should leave you left behind.”

“Very funny. But not this time.” They both laughed.

Jeff got serious. “It all seems kinda prophetic, don't you think? Mom placing stones in a circle here, twenty years ago?”

“Yes, and she imagined someone building a rock labyrinth, like this one, someday in this very spot!”

“Yeah, it's a little spooky!” said Jeff.

“You always see life from a mystical point of view. Why? I just take life as it comes, avoid speculation, and stick with the facts – things I can see and measure. I focus on that because it's what I can count on, rather than just a bunch of mystical could-be stuff.”

“Yes, the mystical is indeed my focus, but I do so because it is the very essence of life, things far beyond anything we can ever comprehend and far more important.”

“But why focus on things you can comprehend or understand when you can focus on things completely understandable, right in front of you, in plain sight?”

“Oh, I don't ignore such things,” replied Jeff. “I just don't limit myself to them, which keeps me from missing out on some greater spiritual experience. The big problem is that your *fact-based, measurements-only* view of life can never explain everything.”

“That's okay,” answered Janelle, “I don't need to. What I can see and observe is all I need, and I'll never exhaust its depths no matter how much I try.”

“Well, someday you may find yourself in a situation where the mystical side of life will become essential.”

“Could be. If that ever happens when you are present, please let me know so I can get on board,” she said sarcastically.

“Oh, trust me, I will. And, somehow, I believe that day is coming. I don't know where or when, but it's coming.”

Janelle said no more as she began to feel creepy about dealing with things she could not see. Though she couldn't prove him wrong, she was sure Jeff was overindulging in things unreal and impractical, yet she wondered if that day, when the mystical side of life would indeed become essential, would indeed come.

Jeff broke the silence. "Let's go look at the Golden Gate Bridge. There's a better view over there at the ocean's edge. Do you think this might be where they sat?"

"Could be. They had to be facing this way, looking across the bay," said Janelle.

"Look! There's that ugly little arch bridge on the right side. That's what Mom used to first introduce Dad to the idea of *Streams of Terrible Beauty* that she learned from Grampa."

"Yes," added Janelle, "and the point was that the terrible-looking small bridge was essential to allowing the big, beautiful Golden Gate Bridge to function."

"That's right. It illustrates how God, in life, takes *terrible* things and uses them to make *beautiful* things happen."

That's a wonderful idea, but do you really think it's true? I like the idea, but it's sometimes hard for me to accept. Perhaps it is just too mystical for me."

"It is, indeed, a mystical idea, but it is also practical."

"What do you mean?" asked Janelle.

"Much in life must be taken by faith, even in your world of fact, figures, and measurements."

"Yeah, I see that," confessed Janelle.

"We all need hope and some kind of explanation for all the craziness in this world."

"Yep, I'll grant you that, too."

"*Streams of Terrible Beauty* is just one way of expressing how life ultimately works, and it has been at the center of Mom and Dad's lives for decades."

"I think you are right. It has gotten them through some pretty tough times," added Janelle.

"There ya go. That's exactly what I meant by practicality," concluded Jeff. "But, man oh man, how many times have we heard that story of how Mom and Dad met, and *Streams of Terrible Beauty*?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe a million times?"

“Hey,” scolded Jeff. “They've told you a million times not to exaggerate! But it's a great story, and they love to tell it. Gotta admit it's pretty amazing.”

“It is indeed,” said Janelle. “You think it all happened the way they said?”

“Something sure as heck happened. We were born, right?”

“Yep. Good point,” said Janelle, “But some of it just seems too good to be true.”

“Oh, I don't know. A lot of it wasn't good at all. And, if they were going to make something up, you'd think they'd leave out all the bad stuff.”

“Another good point. Like Mom dumping Dad and not knowing why?”

“Right. And, just when everything was going so well for them,” added Jeff. “How about Dad's scuffle with Grama's church – The Assembly? That was brutal.”

“Sure was,” said Janelle, “and that was on top of getting dumped by Mom!”

“But Dad learned a lot,” added Jeff, “and so did Mom.”

“I'm glad they got all that out of the way before we came along.”

“Well, we taught them a thing or two.”

“We sure did,” said Janelle. “But you know ... they were good parents!”

“Yep, still are, and I love them so much,” added Jeff.

“I do too – now that I survived my teen years!”

“Ha! Me too! You know, I was thinking,” said Jeff, “we know the story so well – fact or fiction...”

“Or both,” Janelle interrupted.

“Yes ... or both. But we know the story so well that we could probably write a book about it.”

“Think so?” asked Janelle.

“I sure do.”

“Seems like a lot of work. But somehow, I think they’d help us. They’ll sure never do it alone!”

“True,” Jeff agreed. “Seems to me like the book would naturally fall into three parts.”

“I see that,” said Janelle. “Part one would have Mom and Dad meeting, plus that famous trip to the Bay Area and here to Land’s End.”

“And,” added Jeff, “don’t forget the cabin thing where Mom told everyone, including Dad, about her *Streams of Terrible Beauty* idea that she got from Grampa Charlie.”

“Yes, that too. I sure wish we could have known Grampa.”

“Me too,” said Jeff. “I suspect we will, someday.”

“Hope so. Okay. What should we call part one?”

“Unexpected Journey?” offered Jeff.

“I like that. It was, indeed, an unexpected journey for both of them,” said Janelle. “What about part two?”

“No-brainer,” said Jeff. “The Bail-Out.”

“Oh, Mom’s gonna love that!” Janelle said sarcastically. “But that’s what happened. However, she owned it. She laughs about it now.”

“Hey, plus it got her liking Dad more than he liked her,” said Jeff.

“And, what a big reversal from part one, where Dad liked her more than she liked him,” added Janelle. “Wait a minute. Part two is really more about what Dad learned, not what Mom caused.”

“Hmmm. I think you’re right. He called it his *Delightful Devastation*.”

“That’s it, then,” concluded Janelle. “Part two will be called Delightful Devastation. Two down, one to go. What should we call part three?”

“That’s a tough one,” confessed Jeff. They both sat on the log, staring at the Golden Gate. “I don’t know. Nothing’s coming to mind.” Jeff got up and walked around. “I think better when I walk.”

“I think better when I sit,” said Janelle.

Jeff paced, then he went over to the labyrinth and cheated his way to the center. “I’ve got it!” He yelled out.

“What?” said Janelle, turning around on the log.

“All Things Reconciled,” said Jeff.

“Why?”

“Because on that Steinbeck trip, they reconciled their understanding of *Streams of Terrible Beauty*, despite Grampa’s terrible murder. And Mom got reconciled to Dad, in spite of dumping him.”

“That’s perfect!” said Janelle. “But now, what should we name the book?”

Jeff looked at Janelle. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I think so.”

“Then, *Streams of Terrible Beauty*, will be the title!”

“Gimme a hug, big brother.”

October rolled around, and Ellie began planning a big 20th anniversary celebration for her and Jobe. She created a list of people to invite, bought an assortment of banners and streamers to hang, and ordered Jobe a 1/24th-scale model car of his ‘66 Sunbeam Tiger. She was delighted to find one online in blue, the same color as his car.

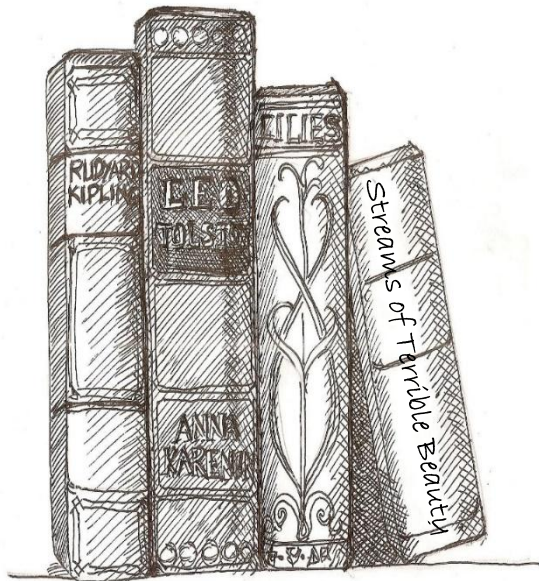
Then she had a terrifying thought. *Oh, no, do I really need to experience this strange-man fear again? I can't believe I am this paranoid twenty years later. But I can't help it. Get through this month with no strange men in the coffee shop, and I'm home free. But what if it happens again? I think I'll go nuts.*

Ellie spent the month again in apprehension. She kept telling herself how silly it all was. *No bad guys are going to wait twenty years to do something bad to us*, she reassured herself. Still, her heart remained troubled. After all this time, she began to think that she was just paranoid, stemming from the violent way she lost Charlie.

The October 12th anniversary celebration went off without a hitch, and Jobe loved his new model car, which found a prominent place in his home office.

But the month was not over. On October 31st, Ellie made herself go for coffee at Carla's. As she walked toward the building, she thought, *This is ridiculous. It's pure superstition that some imaginary bad guy might come on the last day of the month rather than the first day of the next. What's the matter with me?* She entered the coffee shop cautiously and looked around. *See – no bad guys!* She felt silly but also relieved. She stayed an hour longer than usual just to make sure, and then left. When she got home, she sheepishly told Jobe what she had gone through all month. They both had a good laugh and knew that all such paranoia and superstition about bad guys had departed for good.

The Book



June 2010

Chapter 7

Jeff graduated from UC Davis right on schedule in June of 2010. Janelle, being a math wiz, graduated a year early from Berkeley, catching up with Jeff. She accomplished this by taking up to 24 units per semester and extra classes during the summer sessions.

Both were home for the summer, and they decided to publish the book they had worked on over the past four years, titled *Streams of Terrible Beauty*, chronicling their parents' wild and crazy adventure in Vegas. all they learned about life, and how God takes *terrible* things and makes them into something *beautiful*.

“Welcome home, big brother, and congrats on your graduation.”

“Hey, you’re the one who deserves congrats, catching up with me in just three years! I don’t know how you did it.”

“I pretty much gave up any kind of personal life and took classes year-round.”

“I believe it. I’ve hardly seen you in the past three years, except for holidays. Was it worth it?”

“Oh yeah. I can never get too much math, science, and physics. So interesting.”

“Well, I got enough of such *required* stuff to last me a lifetime.”

“How about you? Political Science is a broad field. You sure you want to go into some kind of law enforcement? Doesn’t seem to be your kind of thing to do with all its regimentation.”

“That’s, for sure, not my favorite part of it, but I think I’ll be able to work up into some kind of administrative job in a

reasonable amount of time. In all types of work, we have to pay some kind of dues. I just want to serve humanity in some meaningful way.”

“That’s a noble goal; I’m not sure what mine is yet.”

By August, they were close to finishing the book. “Hey, I think we’re almost ready to publish,” said Jeff, prompting Janelle into discussion. “If I’m not mistaken, all we need to do is combine the chapters we each worked on and go through the final draft to make sure it’s clean.”

“Yep. That shouldn’t take more than a few days. You still have that publisher lined up and ready to go?” asked Janelle.

“I do indeed,” said Jeff proudly. “He told me to get the final draft to him, and he’ll have his editor do a final check, then we’ll get about 300 copies sent to us in a few days after that.”

“You sure we need that many copies?” asked Janelle.

“In this small town, with half of it knowing Mom and Dad and their tragic experience over twenty years ago? It’ll sell out, and we will have to order more.”

“I hope you are right. Otherwise, Mom and Dad will be stuck with a bunch of kindling for next winter’s fires.”

“It was good of them to finance this little project, even though they were reluctant about publishing. But I think they want to get their story out there for others to hear, and they’re glad we are doing it instead of them.”

“I think you’re right. Let’s get started tomorrow and crank this thing out. It will be a big four-year relief.”

“Yes, but also a great sense of accomplishment!”

“For sure.”

In just two weeks, they finished the book, got it published, and received the 300 copies in record time. They lined up a book signing event at the local bookstore, with fingers crossed, hoping not to embarrass themselves by no one showing up. Not only

were they not embarrassed, but they were also overwhelmed by a line that ran out the door and down the street past Carla's Coffee shop. They sold over 250 books that day

Near the end of the day, when things quieted down, they gave most of the remaining books to the store owner, who placed them on display at the front counter with a big sign that said, "Local Authors - On Sale - This Week Only." They packed up the card table and folding chairs they brought, and left as happy as they could be. Almost immediately after they left, a well-dressed man wearing a suit and tie with shiny shoes walked up to the counter and purchased a copy of their book. He paid cash, received his change, and placed it in his pocket while staring at the cover for a moment. He then exited the store.

"Mom, Dad," Jeff called out as he entered the house. "We sold 250 books!" Janelle followed Jeff around the house looking for their parents.

Jobe and Ellie emerged from the back part of the house. "Wow, that's fantastic," replied Jobe.

"Indeed," said Ellie, "but I'm still nervous about having a record out there of all that happened to us and Charlie in Vegas."

Jobe turned to Ellie, "Oh, honey, remember," he said as he placed his hands around her shoulders, "there's nothing to worry about. It's been over 20 years now. Let's just enjoy and celebrate the kids' publication of our story. I think many people will gain from it, especially those who go way back with us here in Oak Pines."

Ellie was not all that much convinced, but she just let it be. "I'm sure you're right. Good job, kids," she said, giving them a big approving smile.

“Hey, kids, sit down, I’ve got something to tell you,” Jobe said with a little more serious tone in his voice.

“Oh man,” complained Jeff, “I can’t handle any more bad news.”

“Neither can I,” added Janelle.

“No, it’s not all that bad,” said Jobe, “it’s about our friend Zach; you remember him, don’t you? There’s some good news in this that you’ll like.”

“Okay, lay it on me,” said Jeff as he plopped himself down on the couch. Janelle sat down next to him.

“Unfortunately, Zach is getting a divorce.”

“No big deal, Dad,” said Janelle, “happens all the time, and sometimes to the best people.”

“Yep, I know, but Zach was a close friend of the family, and he became a better friend after we got through those terrible times many years ago, when he and my other friends pulled an *intervention* on me. He was a young guy then, but he’s learned a lot over the years and became one of my best friends.”

“And so?” asked Janelle.

“Well, here’s the good news, and I think you’ll like it. You’ve been to Zach’s cabin a few times, haven’t you?”

“Sure,” said Jeff. “It’s a beauty, and I’ve spent many hours exploring those State Park Land trails behind his house that seemed to go on forever. Many good memories.”

“Yeah, great place,” added Janelle, “many great memories there.”

Jobe smiled for a moment. “Well, here’s the good news. Zach is moving out of town and doesn’t want the cabin to sit empty all the time. So he’s encouraged us to go up there whenever we want, hang out, enjoy the beauty, and keep an eye on things occasionally. He specifically said to extend this invitation to both of you.”

“Wow, that’s really cool,” said Janelle.

“That's fantastic,” added Jeff, “We'll definitely take advantage of it. How do we get in?”

Jobe chuckled. “Believe it or not, Zach has a hidden key under the third flower pot on the right side of the porch.”

“Some hiding place,” said Janelle.

“That's what I told him,” said Jobe, “but he said he's never had any trouble up there since the cabin is pretty well hidden.”

“Okay,” said Jeff, looking over at Janelle with a grin, “we'll check it out sometime.”

Janelle raised her eyebrows. “We sure will!”

“You know, that's where your Mom laid out in vivid detail the reality of *Streams of Terrible Beauty* that has become so helpful to me over the years.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, we've heard that story a million times,” said Jeff.

“It's in the book, remember?” added Janelle.

“Oh yeah,” replied Jobe, “I almost forgot.”

“Well, here's a copy,” said Janelle, sarcastically, handing her Dad a copy of their book from a box she brought back from the bookstore.

“Thanks,” Jobe said, slightly embarrassed. “Anyway, make sure you take advantage of Zack's offer; he wants people coming and going from the cabin to help keep it safe.”

Janelle added, “If he really wants it safe, he needs a better place to hide the key! If we go up there, I think I'll find a new location.”

“Good idea,” said Jobe, “And if you do, let us know, and I'll inform Zack.”

After listening silently to all the discussion about the cabin, Ellie spoke up. “This came in the mail for you, Jeff,” as she handed him a folded flyer.

Jeff broke the seal and unfolded it. “Hey, there's a Job Fair at Cal Expo down in Sacramento next week. Looks like a lot of

high-tech companies will be there,” he said as he browsed through the flyer. “Who would send me such a thing, living up here in Oak Pines, an hour away in the foothills?”

He handed the flyer to Janelle. Looking it over, she said, “It looks like the Sacramento County Sheriff’s will have a booth there. You should go check it out, since you’re a law enforcement wanna-be.”

“Yeah, I’m still considering it,” said Jeff as he grabbed the flyer back out of Janelle’s hands. He looked at it again. “Hey, the CIA will have a booth there. Doesn’t that seem a bit strange?”

“It does, indeed,” said Jobe as Janelle and Ellie nodded.

“Seems worth going down there just for that. Ya never know, maybe I’ll become a CIA agent.”

“Oh, sure. That’ll be the day,” said Janelle. “I think you’d better stick with the County Sheriff’s opportunities.”

“You’re probably right. But I gotta go by and see what this CIA thing is all about.”

Bright and early Monday morning, Jeff got up and took off for Sacramento with a few printed resumes in a large envelope. He stopped at Carla’s and grabbed a latte, having learned this habit from his parents. He headed out of town and down the hill in his Austin Healey 3000 Mark III. Since his Dad was the proud owner of a ’66 Sunbeam Tiger, Jeff naturally became a classic car enthusiast. When he was 18, the two of them shopped around and bought a 1966 Healey, the same year as his Dad’s Tiger. Jeff learned to love the thrill of acceleration he felt from his 6-cylinder, 150-horsepower engine. He once challenged his Dad to a drag race to see which car was faster. Jobe took him out to an old, deserted air strip in Colfax, a nearby foothill town, where they could race safely. However, his Dad warned him that the Healey was no match for the Tiger, with its overwhelming V-8, in such a small two-seater. They raced, and the Tiger won as expected. Jeff complained because he thought it was due to his Dad being a

better driver. So, they swapped cars. The result was the same; the Tiger was just faster.

When they stopped for a burger on the way back home, Jeff told his Dad about a friend who dropped a V-8 into his Austin Healey 3000. Jobe told him he had heard of this, but also that they were torquing off axles due to the excessive horsepower. He also told him that the Tiger had been equipped with Ford running gear all the way through – engine, transmission, and rear axle – and that’s why it could handle the stress. Jeff enjoyed learning all the amazing details that Jobe knew about cars. It always inspired him to learn more about everything in life.

When Jeff pulled into the Cal Expo parking lot, cars were jammed into every spot. He drove up and down the aisles until he found a spot quite some distance from the convention hall. He began the long walk to the building and walked in. The sound of a thousand voices rang in his ears. It was not excessively loud, but it completely shut out the silence he had just left in the parking lot. The noise gave the impression that many important things must be happening all at once. He turned right and began walking around the big loop of strategically placed booths. As expected, there was plenty of high-tech present: Intel, Hewlett-Packard, Sony, and even a video equipment manufacturer, Grass Valley Group, located in an adjacent foothill town. He knew about it, but the first time he heard of it, he wondered if it was some kind of country-western band. The next bunch of booths was all medical: Kaiser, Sutter Health, and UC Davis Medical Center. He hoped he would never work for any of them or ever be under their care. Yet, he was glad they existed.

Straight ahead, in a corner booth at the end of the walkway, he could see an overhead sign that read, *Sacramento County Sheriff's Dept.* As he approached, he noticed how regimented everything looked with their uniforms and all the garb and gadgets hanging on their belts. *I guess that's supposed to attract some people,* he thought

to himself. *It makes me want to run away. I wonder if they have any interesting desk jobs.* Off to the left, he noticed another, smaller booth. All it said across the front of the table was *CIA. Now, this I gotta see!* Fully distracted from the Sheriff's booth, he approached the table, and a young man, only a little older than himself, greeted him and asked, "Ever consider working for the CIA?"

"Not really," answered Jeff, taken aback by the question.

Just then, a beautiful Asian-American girl with long black hair stepped up next to the young man and said, "I'll take care of this guy, Jerry. Go ahead and take your break early." Jeff was double-taken aback by this move. He didn't know whether to feel lucky or hit upon. "Well," she said, looking at Jeff. His heart skipped a beat. "Have you ever considered working at the CIA?"

Jeff paused, getting his thoughts and tongue together. "No, not really."

"I'm Sara, Sara Bodley," she said, extending her hand.

Jeff reached out and gently held her hand while she shook his in a businesslike manner. "I'm Jeff Martinez."

"Glad to meet you, Jeff," she said, releasing his hand. "What are your career goals? Do you have a resume?"

Jeff paused again, enamored of the striking beauty of the girl standing before him, who was just about his age. "Uh, well, I have a political Science degree from UC Davis, and I've always wanted to get into some kind of law enforcement, even though I hate regimentation, uniforms, and being told what to do all the time. And..." The girl interrupted with a grin on her face. Jeff realized he was giving way too much information, way too soon.

"Do you have a resume?" she asked.

Jeff realized he had left his envelope on the seat of his car. He felt so embarrassed, especially in front of such a beautiful girl. "Yes, I do," he answered, realizing he forgot to bring them in. "I'll have to go out to my car and get them. It's parked way out on the edge of the lot," he said nervously. "Will you be here when I get back?" Jeff immediately realized what a stupid thing he

asked. *I probably just blew it on getting hired*, he thought. *But maybe I can ask her out despite my bumbling around.*

“I’m not going anywhere,” she answered, amused by his obvious nervousness.

“Okay, great. Don’t move; I’ll be right back.” After about ten minutes, Jeff walked again up to the table where the beautiful girl was waiting. She watched him approach with a coy smile on her face. He couldn’t help but notice her warm smile and concluded that he had not totally blown it ... not yet. He opened the envelope, pulled out a two-page, stapled resume, and handed it to her. The manner in which she took it from him was so gentle and feminine. His head was spinning, and his respiration was slightly fast. He watched her eyes as they gazed down over his resume. They were eyes a guy could get lost in, and he did while watching her focus on the resume pages. Her head moved back and forth slightly as she took it all in.

When she reached the bottom of the first page, she flipped it over to reveal the second page. As she did, she looked up at Jeff and said, “This looks pretty good; in fact, it’s really good.” She looked down to begin reading the second page. Jeff just kept looking her over. He could hardly believe his eyes. He was hoping she was a slow reader.

But soon she finished the second page, looked up, and said, “I cannot guarantee anything, but you might just fill an entry position we have open in Langley.”

“Langley, like in Washington D.C.?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yep, that’s the only one we’ve got,” she said with a smile, still amused by his nervousness.

“Yeah, of course. But don’t you have field offices, too?”

“We do, but this opening is at Langley. You interested?”

Jeff was not sure what to say. The last thing he expected was a potential offer to work for the CIA, plus this beautiful girl was totally distracting him from any kind of sane thinking. “I guess

I'd have to think about it. And, I'd have to know more about the job."

"Of course," she said in the sweetest, most understanding voice he'd ever heard. "If you can spare a few more minutes, maybe we can discuss some details in the back part of the booth. We have a couple of comfortable chairs set up for just this kind of discussion."

"Sure," replied Jeff.

"Okay, come around the table and follow me." Jeff walked around the table, and as he followed her, he could not help but notice her awesome figure and how classy she was dressed. *This has got to be a dream*, he thought as he followed along. *I never expected any of this!*

"Have a seat, Jeff," she said as she pointed to one of two high-back luxury chairs. "Can I get you anything? Water? Coffee?"

"A little water would be great."

The girl disappeared, then came back with two bottles of water and gave one to Jeff before sitting down across from him. "First of all," she started out, "you would have to be interviewed by a number of higher-up people. And, we would have to do a background check to get you whatever security clearance you would need. This can take a few weeks."

"That's okay with me."

"Good. It is always a tough bar to clear getting into the CIA, so don't get your hopes up too high."

"Okay, I won't."

"Great. This is a very entry-level job. You would be at the bottom end of the totem pole, but it would get your foot in the door, and that's about the biggest hurdle. Where you go from there would be up to you. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it does."

“I really can't tell you much more, and no one else can until we do your background check. After that, the job will be fully disclosed to you, and you will still be free to accept or reject it.”

“That makes sense.”

“Okay, I just need you to fill in your contact information and sign this form authorizing us to do a thorough background check, and then I will send you on your way.”

“That's it?”

“Yep. That's all we can do today to just get the ball rolling.” She stood up and extended her hand to Jeff. He gently shook it and enjoyed the brief moment of contact. He wasn't sure if the job possibility or the girl was more intriguing to him, but it didn't matter; both dazzled him.

“Thanks so much for talking with me,” said Jeff. “I can hardly believe this amazing opportunity. It's the last thing I expected by coming here today.”

“Well, I'm glad you're considering the job. Well get back to you. If you check out okay, then we'll take the next steps.”

“Will I see you again?” Jeff asked before he really thought about it. He cringed.

“Oh, sure. I'll be involved somewhat until you get hired, if that happens.”

“Oh, good.” Jeff cringed again, but he could tell that the girl was flattered, so he relaxed.

“I'll walk you out to the front table.” When they got there, she thanked him for his time and said, “Don't forget to stop back in at the Sheriff's booth where you were standing when you noticed our table. Perhaps they will provide you with another option. Take care.” She turned and walked back into the booth. Jeff could not help but watch her for a few precious moments.

He walked past the Sheriff's booth, pondering how she could have known he was eyeing the CIA booth. He shrugged it off and headed for his car. His thrill about the job possibility and the girl

were almost too much for him to handle. But he endured joyously, all the way back home.

Chapter 8

When Jeff got home later that day, Janelle, Ellie, and Jobe were conveniently gathered in the living room. As he walked in, Janelle asked, “Well? How’d it go?”

“Unbelievable!” said Jeff, his eyes alive and his body almost dancing.

Everyone sat up straight as Ellie said, “Tell us what happened.”

Jeff tossed his envelope of resumes on the coffee table and sat down on the couch. “I bet you visited a bunch of booths,” guessed Janelle.

“Nope, just one.”

“Let me guess ... Sheriff’s booth.”

“I started to, then I got distracted by the CIA booth next to it. I never had a chance to talk to anyone at the Sheriff’s Department.”

“But you eventually talked to them, right?” asked Janelle.

“Nope. Never did; never needed to.”

“The CIA booth was that interesting?”

“Well, it became more interesting quickly. As soon as I walked over there, a guy about my age greeted me from behind the front table. But before I could even respond to his question, a beautiful Asian-American girl with long black hair came over and said, ‘Take a break, Jerry, I’ll take care of this guy.’”

“Whoa,” exclaimed Ellie. “Someone is sure after you.”

“It was a bit confusing at the time, and I didn’t know if she was hitting on me or just a lucky coincidence. Either way, I was elated.”

Janelle sat back in her chair and chuckled, “Yeah, I guess so.” Jobe just smiled and quietly listened.

Jeff cleared his throat. “Long story short, she took my resume, which I had to go out to get from the car – how embarrassing – but she seemed pleasantly amused.”

“You’re a funny and charming guy, sometimes, Jeff,” said Janelle.

“I did not feel like one at the time. She read my resume and then told me they might have an entry-level position open in Langley.”

Jobe finally spoke up. “What? You’re kidding.”

“No, it’s true, and to my great surprise. But I foolishly asked her, ‘Langley, like in Washington DC?’ to which she replied, ‘Yes, that’s the only one we have.’ I was embarrassed again, but I also detected more amusement on her part.”

“You were on a roll without knowing it,” said Janelle. “I’ve seen you do this before, and somehow it’s always endearing.”

“I hope so; I really liked her.”

“So, what happened next?” asked Ellie.

“She took me to an interview area in the back of the booth, told me not to get my hopes up, and said they would have to run a background check before they could proceed. But it looks like I have a shot at it.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. Bet you never saw that coming,” said Janelle.

“I didn’t, not the job or the girl.” Everyone laughed. “But there were two strange things that happened.” Everyone became quiet. “First, as I told you, she butted in on the first guy and took over dealing with me.”

“Oh come on,” said Janelle, “You’re a good-looking guy, and she was bored.”

“Could be, but then when I was leaving, she said she knew I was considering coming over to the CIA booth while I was standing in front of the Sheriff’s booth. How could she know that?”

Janelle tilted her head a bit and smiled. “She saw you standing there and watched you come over to their booth.”

“Seems like she’d have to be looking for me. It was pretty busy and crowded in there.”

“You’re not short, Jeff,” explained Janelle, “and a good-looking guy like you will come up on any girl’s radar even in a crowd. Trust me. Just take her actions as a compliment.”

“Okay, I will. But it still seems strange to me.”

“Your mystical side is coming out. Just take it for what it is: a chance encounter and a good one.”

Ellie piped in. “Yeah, don’t start reading into things as I have done these past twenty years. Trust me, it’s no fun.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll just let it all be the good fortune it is.”

“When will you hear back?” asked Jobe.

“She said, ‘in a few weeks,’ and that she will be directly involved throughout the whole process.”

“I’ll bet you loved hearing that,” said Janelle.

“I sure did,” said Jeff with a twinkle of hope in his eyes.

Several weeks passed with no word from the CIA. Labor Day weekend came and went; Jeff began to assume the job, and the girl was a no-go. *Wouldn’t they, at least, let me know either way?* He moved on in his mind, letting go of the now-fading images of the beautiful girl and an awesome job opportunity. *Maybe I should apply at the Sacramento County Sheriff’s Department as I originally planned to do. I still want to get into some kind of law enforcement work, but behind the scenes in some way, not just another cop.* Jeff checked with the County Sheriff, and there were no entry-level openings that matched his resume. They suggested that he look into police academies and other such training.

A few days later, Janelle's voice rang out in the house, "Hey Jeff, are you here? Phone call for you."

"On the land line?" he inquired as he caught up with Janelle, who was holding the phone with the cord stretched across the room. "Who would call me here?" He grabbed the phone from Janelle and said, "Hello?" He sat down on the couch as he listened.

"This is Sara at the CIA. Do you remember me?"

"I sure do; how could I forget?"

"Oh, good. Hey, I've got some good news for you."

"Yes?"

"You came up clean on your background check, and they are ready to interview you here at Langley if you are still interested and want to continue pursuing a position with us."

"I sure do!" Jeff's voice was filled with excitement that overshadowed even his infatuation with Sara.

"Okay, great. They want to see you next Thursday and Friday, the 16th and 17th of September. The interviews will take two very full days. You can travel on Wednesday and return home on Saturday. Will that work for you?"

"Yes, indeed." Jeff could hardly contain his glee.

"I'll send you an email with your flight times, car rental info, and hotel reservation, all expenses paid by us. Wear business attire; A tie is a good idea. Any questions?"

"None."

"Okay, then. I will see you at 8 AM, Thursday morning, in the lobby of the main entrance here at Langley. I will include directions in the email I am sending you. I suggest you travel your route the night before so that you will know exactly how to get here. They hate it when people are late and waste their time. That alone could kill your chances of getting a job. Any other questions?"

“Not that I can think of. Oh, wait. Why did you call me on this number?”

“There was no response on your cell phone, and you gave this number as a backup on the form you filled out when we met at the Job Fair.”

“Oh, darn. Sometimes I turn off my phone at night to avoid spam calls. Sorry.”

“No problem, that’s why we ask for a backup number. Well, you can call me anytime if you have any questions. My contact info will be in the email.”

“Thank you so much!”

“You’re very welcome, and I hope all will go well for you when you come. Bye, Jeff. Take care.”

“Bye.”

Jeff hung up the phone and just sat there. He wasn’t sure if hearing Sara’s voice or the good news she brought was more invigorating to him. *I guess both*, he thought to himself.

“Hey Janelle!” he called out.

“Yes?” she said as she stuck her head around the kitchen door.

“I have a two-day job interview at Langley!”

“What?” said Janelle, rushing out of the kitchen. “When?”

“This Thursday and Friday.”

“I assume all expenses paid.”

“Yep.”

“And the girl? Any chance of seeing her again?”

“That was her on the phone. I’ll see her first thing Thursday morning.”

“Wow. You have double-scored.”

“Yep.”

“Go tell Mom and Dad; they will be thrilled.”

Jeff went for his two days of interviews, and they went so well that they offered him an entry-level position on the spot and

told him all moving expenses would be reimbursed. This was a dream job for Jeff, far beyond anything he ever imagined. On Thursday evening, after the first day of interviews, he took Sara out to a really nice restaurant and had a great time getting to know her better. Two weeks later, on Monday, October 4th, Jeff started his new job at the CIA, working as a Junior Researcher. He was paid quite well for an entry-level position and loved his work.

Janelle got a job far beneath her education and skill level, selling advertising slots at the local newspaper in Oak Pines. Despite her brilliance, she was hesitant to go out into the big, scary world and pursue a job in the aggressive manner that Jeff did. She always felt safe and in control in the university setting. There was no lack of smarts in her, only a lack of courage, something *smarts* cannot always overcome.

October rolled around again, but because no creepy men were encountered over the past fourteen years, Ellie gave almost no thought about all the scary experiences of the past, real or imagined. However, halfway through October, it occurred to her what month it was, yet she experienced incredible peace, the kind she had sought for over twenty years. She was so thankful for all she had endured, her husband Jobe, and her two wonderful kids, who both exceeded her expectations in life.

Her cell phone rang. She answered it and said, “Oh, Gina, I'm so glad you called. Lunch in the Park? Sure, it's a beautiful day. Jeff? Yeah, he's doing great in his new job. I'll tell you all about it at lunch. See you in the park in about thirty minutes. I'll bring a couple of burgers and drinks. Thanks for the invite. It will be good to get caught up with you now that I am mostly an empty-nester, sixty-one-year-old lady.”

Ellie and Gina sat down on a picnic table in Memorial Park across the street from Carla's Coffee Shop. The old WWII cannon seemed to be forever present since no one could ever

recall when it was placed there. It loomed large not far from where they sat. Ellie opened the Burger King bag and brought out two Whoppers, a large tray of fries for them to split, and two medium-sized Cokes. "Dig in!"

"Thanks for bringing the food, Ellie," said Gina. "It's been so long since we've talked. Fill me in on what's going on, especially about Jeff."

"He landed a job at the CIA."

"Are you kidding? How did he get that? I've heard they're really hard to get, especially without experience."

"He got an entry-level job of some kind, but says he loves it and is learning a lot of interesting things."

"Like what?"

"Well, of course, he tells me he can't tell me very much."

Gina interrupted, "That sounds impressive."

"It is," replied Ellie, "but he says he's doing a lot of research for special projects."

"And Janelle?"

"She's living at home after graduating a year early from Berkeley, but she's working for The Union newspaper."

"That kid is a brain. Why did she choose that?"

"I think school is so easy for her that the big, cold world out there seems overwhelming in comparison. We don't mind. She'll figure it out in due time. This is just a ... job ... to ... get ... her ... by ..."

"What's wrong, Ellie. You look worried."

Ellie teared up and felt terrified. Over the shoulder of Gina, she saw a man, dressed in a suit and tie, sitting on top of a picnic bench with his feet on the seat. "Don't look now," she whispered, "but there's a man about fifty feet away staring at us. He is well-dressed, like all the other creepy men I've seen in the past. I can't believe this is happening again!"

Gina started to get up. "I'm gonna go give him a piece of my mind for scaring a couple of old women like us."

“No! Sit back down. Jobe told me to call him if this ever came up again.” Trying not to look at the man, Ellie got out her phone and speed-dialed Jobe.

“Hello,” the voice said.

“Jobe, get over here to the park. You told me to tell you if I ever saw another well-dressed creepy man staring at me.”

“I’m leaving right now. Stay calm.”

“He’s on his way.”

“Good,” replied Gina. “Better that a man confront him than an old gal like me.”

Ellie said nothing. She just kept looking at the man who kept staring at her, seemingly wanting her to see him just as the original creepy man did 24 years ago in the coffee shop. It seemed so long ago, but now it all seemed to come back, as if it were yesterday.

“Is he still looking?” asked Gina.

“Yes. But let's remain calm. Jobe will be here in a minute.”

In a few minutes, a car pulled up in front of the park. Jobe got out and headed toward the table where Ellie and Gina were seated.

“He’s over there,” said Ellie.

“Yeah, I see him. Looks like he is leaving,” Jobe said as the well-dressed man walked quickly toward a big, black, shiny, limo-looking vehicle and got in. The car pulled away and sped off down Main Street, headed out of town.

“I’m gonna follow that guy and see where he goes.”

“Be careful, Jobe. Don’t confront him,” said Ellie as Jobe headed for his car.

He called back to her, “Don’t worry, I just want to find out what rock he crawled out from.” Jobe got in, started the car, pulled out, and sped away behind the big black car that was quickly disappearing.

“Oh, Ellie. I’m so sorry,” said Gina. “I hope Jobe gets to the bottom of this and soon.”

Ellie was trembling. "I hope so, too. I can't keep living like this. It just seems to be too much, too often, to be a bunch of coincidences or some kind of unwarranted paranoia on my part. This is real, Gina, and I'm glad you were here to see it with me."

"I sure did," she said, placing her hand on Ellie's to reassure her. "But why would the Mob, or whoever it is, keep doing this after over twenty-four years? It makes no sense. Those mob bosses are either dead or retired by now."

"I know, but I also know I'm not crazy and this can no longer be a coincidence."

"You're right. Do ya think we should stay here or go back to your house?"

"Let's go," said Ellie, starting to get up from the table. She nervously gathered all the lunch food, bags, and drinks, placing them in the trash basket as she headed for her car.

As Gina headed for her car, she called out, "I'll see you at the house in a few minutes."

"Thanks." Ellie's voice was expressionless as she fought through her mental fog on the way to her car.

When she got to the house, Gina was waiting. Ellie unlocked the front door, and they both entered. She dropped the full weight of her body onto the couch. Slouching with her head on the back of the couch and looking up, she said, "Why is this happening? It's like a bad dream that won't go away." Gina didn't know what to say, so she remained silent.

The day passed into evening. Janelle was now present in the room, having been filled in by Gina and somewhat by Ellie, who appeared to be in shock.

"Where is Jobe?" asked Ellie. "Something is wrong. He would have called by now. There is no way he would leave us in the dark intentionally." Janelle stayed quiet, halfway in shock herself. She knew very well all the stories about the creepy men

over the years. The descriptions of Vegas in the book that she and Jeff had written rang out in her head. It all became very real.

Gina broke the silence. "I think we need to call the police and not just keep waiting."

"Yes, I think you are right," said Ellie, half out of it, her speech slow and without expression.

Gina pulled out her phone, opened the Maps app, and entered "Oak Pines Police" into the search box. After a minute of waiting, a voice said, "Oak Pines Police."

"Yes," she replied. "This is Gina Lambert. I am here with my friend Ellie Martinez. Her husband, Jobe, went after a man who was harassing us at the park, but he has not come back."

"How long ago did this happen?" said the voice of the dispatcher on the phone.

"It was early this afternoon."

"So about six hours ago?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Let me talk to Mrs. Martinez."

"They want to speak to you," said Gina as she handed the phone to Ellie.

"Hello," said Ellie in a weak and shaky voice.

"Mrs. Martinez, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so, but I am really worried about my husband, Jobe. He went to follow a man who was staring at us in the park, and he hasn't come back or called. I know he would at least call if he could. Something is wrong."

"Okay, we'll send an officer out to talk with you and see what we can do."

"He was headed out of town on Main Street, following a big, black, shiny car. Can't you go see what might have happened?"

"Unfortunately, we need to speak with you first and get all the details. Otherwise, we have very little to go on. Someone will be out there within the hour."

“Okay. Thanks for your help. Good-bye.” Ellie hung up and handed the cell phone back to Gina. “I wish Jeff were here. He would go looking for Jobe.”

“All we can do is sit tight and wait for the police to come, and then see what options we have.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Ellie, staring off into space.

“You okay, Mom?” asked Janelle.

“Yeah, I think so. This is just so unreal; it seems like a dream.”

Chapter 9

After waiting about 45 minutes, the doorbell rang.

“You want me to get it, Mom?”

“Yes, please. I hope it’s the police.”

Janelle got up, walked to the door, and opened it. There stood a middle-aged woman, decked out in a grey police uniform, with a gun on one hip and a police radio on the other.

“Mrs. Martinez?”

“No, that would be my Mom.” Janelle pulled the door fully open and gestured into the living room as the policewoman stepped in.

Ellie stood up and said, “I’m Ellie Martinez. Thanks for coming.”

The woman approached Ellie, extending her hand, saying, “Hi. I’m Officer Elane Tribble. Okay if I ask a few questions?”

“Sure, please have a seat. I hope you can help us.”

“Well, we’re going to try our best. That’s what we’re here for.” She sat down. Leaning forward toward Ellie, she got out a notepad and a pen. Gina and Janelle sat quietly, taking it all in. Engaging Ellie directly, she asked, “Your husband, Jobe, has disappeared? Is that right?”

“Yes,” answered Ellie. “We were ... uh, Gina and I were ...” Ellie nodded toward Gina.

“You are Gina?” asked the officer.

“Yes.”

“And your last name?”

“Lambert.”

Officer Tribble began writing on her notepad, then turned her attention to Janelle. “And you are?” she asked.

“I’m Janelle. I’m her daughter.”

“Martinez?”

“Yes, mam.”

“Please continue, Mrs. Martinez.”

“Gina and I were at the park having lunch when I noticed a man about 50 feet behind Gina staring at us.”

“Did you know this man?”

“No.”

“Ever seen him before?”

“No.”

“Can you describe him?”

“Sure. He stood out distinctly in the park. He had a dark suit, a white shirt, and wore a tie with some kind of pattern.”

“Anything else?”

“He had a crew cut and shiny, black shoes. I saw them because he sat on top of a picnic table with his feet on the seat, almost trying to be noticed.”

“Color hair?” asked Officer Tribble while scribbling on her notepad.

“Brown”

“Height and weight?”

“Couldn’t tell until he walked away after Jobe showed up. Pretty tall. I’d say about six feet. Husky build ... wouldn’t you say, Gina?”

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

Ellie added, “I wouldn’t want to mess with him. I warned Jobe, as he was leaving to follow the man, not to confront him.”

“The man left in a car? Can you describe it?” the police woman kept her eye on her notepad, writing everything down.

“It was a big, black car – almost limousine-looking. He got into the back seat, so there must have been at least two of them.”

“Did you get a license number?”

“No, sorry. It all happened too fast.”

“How about you, Ms. Lambert?” she said, looking at Gina. “Any recollection of the plates?”

“Not normal plates. Maybe from out of state. Too far to read, but it might have started with a G or C.”

“The car left and went in what direction?”

“West on Main Street, headed out of town,” replied Ellie.

“And your husband followed them?”

“Yes.”

“Year, make, model, and color of his car?”

“A 2005 white Toyota Corolla.”

“His license plates?”

“I don’t know that, but I can look it up.”

“I’ll wait,” she said, finally looking up from her notes. Ellie left the room.

She turned to Janelle. “And you, young lady, were you at the park, too?”

No, I was here at home.”

Ellie walked in, looking at a paper in her hand. “Okay, it’s NLP 488.”

“Got it. Thank you. One last thing I need to ask you. Do you have any idea who these men might be and why they might want to harass you or, possibly, harm your husband in any way?”

Ellie looked at Gina, then at Janelle, hesitant to bring up the past but knowing she must. “Well, about 24 years ago, Jobe and I returned from a trip that ended up in Las Vegas, where my foster dad, who was traveling with us, was tragically murdered.”

“That’s horrible!” exclaimed Officer Tribble. “What happened, and what does that have to do with today’s events?”

“Perhaps nothing, but let me briefly tell you our whole story over the past two decades. Charlie, my foster dad, was murdered by the Mob after spotting him walking through a casino.”

“Why on earth would they do that?”

“According to the Vegas police, he had incurred quite a gambling debt and could not pay it back, so they decided to make an example of him.”

“Did the police think you might be in danger in any way?”

“No, they believed that only Charlie was their target and that we had nothing to worry about. We endured another day in Vegas and made it back home safely, so we assumed they were right.”

“Then why would you conclude that they could possibly have anything at all to do with what happened today?” Tribble asked.

Ellie looked at Gina and Janelle again. “Well, I'm not sure it ended in Vegas. The day after we came home, I saw a man in Carla's coffee shop looking at me as if he wanted me to see him staring. It was creepy.”

Tribble slowly shook her head side to side as compassion and confusion ruled her face. “Yeah, I guess so. But that was so long ago. These two events can't be connected, can they?”

“Well, there's more.” The officer braced herself. Gina and Ellie cringed, not wanting to relive any of this. “I felt afraid and worried every October thereafter that the creepy man might return. But Jobe and Gina assured me that I was just reading into a weird, one-time encounter and that I needed to let it be. So, as the years rolled by, I relaxed somewhat.”

“But?” Tribble asked, anticipating that there was more.

“But on the ten-year anniversary, my fears were validated when, this time, I encountered *two* well-dressed men in the same coffee shop, at Carla's.”

“Oh my. This must have really freaked you out. Were you able to dismiss it as an incredibly cruel coincidence?”

“I wanted to, and I tried too, but it seemed just too much to be a coincidence. However, both Jobe and Gina helped me to see it that way, arguing that the Mob would not wait ten years and then come harass me without taking some kind of action.”

“Yes, that makes sense to me, too.”

“So I tried to move on, but my apprehension never totally left me.”

“What happened then?” Tribble asked, amazed by the story she was hearing.

“Well, the twenty-year anniversary rolled around, and I couldn't help but be nervous since something happened at the ten-year mark. Seems silly now, how we tend to memorialize events, good and bad, thinking they somehow have an annual nature about them.”

“And?”

“And nothing happened. So I figured I was home free and never gave it any more thought after that.”

“I'll bet you were relieved.”

“I was, and I was convinced that it was all finally over, whether real or just coincidental ... until today.”

“With all that history, I can see why you would be devastated by this event in the park. But to think that the Mob in Vegas would come after you in some way after all these years also seems very hard to believe. There must be some other explanation.”

“I know, but what?” asked Ellie, her face reflecting her fear and shock inside.

“Unfortunately, the disappearance of people happens somewhere every day. Let me ask you this: if you had not had all these past, weird experiences with creepy men – and according to your own story, it was only twice in 24 years – would you view a creepy man at the park and Jobe's disappearance as anything other than a missing person situation, difficult as it is?”

“That's a very good question, and no, I would only see it as you have suggested.” Ellie looked at Tribble, expressing her frustration. “But I did have those two encounters, and I have no other possible explanation.”

“I hear ya, but most likely this is a very unusual coincidence, and there is probably a better explanation than a 24-year-old mob grudge. Let's just hope this turns out to be nothing, and for some

reason, Jobe is unable to contact you. I can encourage you that most missing persons end up not missing.”

“Okay,” said Ellie reluctantly. “Thanks so much for your level-headed perspective.”

“You are very welcome. It is so easy to jump to conclusions when enduring such extremely negative events. I see it all the time. You need to stay calm, keep your hope alive, and let us look into all of this, which we will do immediately.”

The officer finished writing, closed her notebook, and stood up. “That’s all we need for now. I will file a missing person’s report this afternoon, and we’ll send someone out immediately to investigate. We usually wait twenty-four hours before taking action, but under these unusual circumstances, it makes sense not to wait.” As she began to walk toward the door, she turned and added, “Unfortunately, this is not much to go on, but I’ll personally let you know as soon as we find out anything.”

Ellie walked to the door with her. At the door, she stopped and said, “Thanks so much for coming. It means so much to me.”

“It was not just my duty, but my pleasure. I just hope we can find some good news for you, soon.”

As Tribble left the house, Ellie closed the door behind her and turned to Gina and Janelle, who were standing in the living room, both silent and a bit in shock. As Ellie walked toward them, they both hugged her.

“I’m so sorry, Mom,” Janelle said, breaking her embrace. “I don’t know how this could happen, and I hope Dad is okay.”

“Me, too, honey.”

“Me three,” said Gina, doing her best to support Ellie, her face full of grief and frustration.

The three of them all sat down in the living room. “You okay, Mom?” Janelle asked, breaking the silence.

“Yes, I think so,” Ellie looked at Janelle with loving eyes, so thankful for her and Jeff and the life she had been so graciously

granted by God. “I feel a little better and more hopeful after talking with Officer Tribble. She is right: it is easy to jump to negative conclusions when we are in stressful situations. *Streams of Terrible Beauty* has been such a wonderful, encouraging view of life for so many years now. It has gotten us through a number of challenges over the years, and without it, I would be a wreck.”

“Yes, Mom. You and Dad have taught us well, and more importantly, both of you have lived it and modeled it for us. It was never a bunch of empty claims. I still hope our book will be something many people will read and gain a lot of insights about life.”

“Me, too, honey.”

Gina, compelled to say something, added, “Wherever Jobe is and whatever he is going through, I’m quite sure he has not abandoned the *Streams* idea. He has always been such a strong evangelist for it.”

“I agree, Gina,” said Ellie, “It was Jobe, after all, who had gone through great difficulty in our early days together, including his devastation from my bailing out on him based on my own insecurities. He was the one who latched on to *Streams* far beyond me, living it daily, making him a great man, a great father, and a great husband. I so hope he’s okay.” Ellie looked at Gina and Janelle with tears in her eyes. “Dang, it is really hard, not knowing.”

“Keep the faith, Mom,” said Janelle, trying to encourage her, though in her own heart she was struggling more than she wanted to admit. “Dad is no wuss, and being an Army Vet, he can take care of himself. He’s a survivor.”

“You’re right. All we can do now is pray and wait. Thanks so much, both of you, for being here with me and helping me through it.”

“We both love you, Mom. Never forget that.”

“We do, indeed,” added Gina. “Count on it.”

Meanwhile, the Oak Pine Police began their missing persons investigation. They drove out of town in the direction that the black car and Jobe were seen headed, but nothing was found: no Jobe, no cars, no trace or clues of any kind. They also began asking around town about anything anyone might have seen in the past few days. The owner of Gold Country Bed and Breakfast reported that a man matching the description given by Ellie and Gina had stayed there the night before. They asked if they could see the room, but it had already been cleaned. They also asked if he had left anything behind in the room. The owner inquired of the cleaning lady, who came back with a book. As she handed it to the police detective, she said, "This was all we found." The detective thumbed through the book, noticing dog-eared pages and many passages underlined and marked up. He looked at the cover, which read, *Streams of Terrible Beauty by Janelle and Jeff Martinez*.

Chapter 10

The next day, Ellie called Jeff early in the morning since it was three hours later in D.C. She let him know what had happened with his Dad. He could only talk briefly, but insisted on coming home. However, Ellie told him to wait and see what happens, not to jeopardize his new job, and hope it would turn out to be nothing. Jeff agreed and told her he had not worked long enough to build up any vacation time. They exchanged their deep love for each other, which is always amplified in difficult times, and Jeff told Ellie to tell Janelle how much he loved her, too. After Jeff hung up, his heart sank. He was worried about his Dad. He knew he needed to just pray, wait, and go get his job done, knowing that's what his Dad would want.

Later that morning, the doorbell rang. It was Officer Tribble. Ellie invited her in. Hearing the voices, Janelle came and entered the living room. "We have some news for you, but it is not about your husband. However, it relates to this case." Janelle and Ellie looked at each other, sharing their curiosity. "May I sit down?"

"Yes, please do," said Ellie.

Janelle saw the book in Officer Tribble's hand and said, "That's our book!"

"Yes, I know. It was left yesterday at the Gold Country Bed and Breakfast by a man who fit the description given to us by your Mom and Ms. Lambert." She handed the book to Janelle.

"It's all marked up," she said, looking at Tribble. "Why?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. Any clue?"

“No. This is crazy. Why would he read our book and then go harass Mom at the park? This makes no sense.”

“We were hoping you might know something.”

“No idea,” she said, handing the book back to Tribble.

The officer did not take the book. “Please, keep it for a day or so and see if there are any clues based on his markings.”

Janelle pulled the book back toward her, with mixed emotions, not really wanting to be in its presence, or worse, read it. “Oh, okay. I'll take a look, but it will be creepy.”

“I'm sure it will, but we need to look into everything and try to find out what happened.”

“I'll take a look at it, too,” added Ellie.

“Thanks. That's a good idea,” replied Tribble. “Also, you need to know that we drove out of town to look for any evidence of either car. We found none. This book is the only lead we have, but we are interviewing various people around town. This is how we came upon the book. Let's hope for more evidence.”

Office Tribble left, leaving Ellie and Janelle to ponder the meaning of the marked-up book.

“What do you think this means, Mom?”

“I have no idea. This is all so confusing. Why would the Vegas Mob be interested in your book? Makes no sense. What do you think, honey?”

“Like you, I have no clue. But I will read through all these markings and see if anything makes sense.”

“Good idea. Give me the book when you are done.”

“I will!”

A few days passed, and no new evidence or conclusions came from the police. Additionally, the markings in the book yielded nothing in the minds of Ellie and Janelle. Ellie was devastated and began losing hope that she would ever see Jobe again, alive. *This is really changing my whole worldview, including Streams of Terrible Beauty*, she thought to herself while sitting on her half-made bed. *There*

are supposed to be some kind of beautiful things that come out of terrible things, right? Isn't this how God works? “Where is the beauty, God?” she said out loud. “I’m not seeing any!”

Then she realized something she knew all too well that she didn’t want to think about. Charlie always told her the beauty will always, eventually come, but that it can take a long time, even a lifetime, and perhaps not until eternity. She knew this was true, and she knew that eventually everything would be made right by God. But that was of little comfort to her in her agonizing struggle that may very well turn out to be a disaster that totally changes her life. She didn’t want her life to change, even if something better would eventually come. She wanted her life back with Jobe, whom she so loved! He was her rock and her one true love in life.

Janelle had gone shopping in Sacramento for some badly needed, new winter clothes. She told Ellie that she would be back by 3 P.M. When Janelle got home, she called out for her Mom, wanting to show her the cute winter clothes she found on sale at Nordstrom’s. She always liked shopping there each year during the big fall sale, loving the fact that the salespeople would bring endless possibilities to the dressing room for her to try on. It made her feel like a queen, plus the sale prices were the best all year.

“Mom, hello? You gotta see these new clothes I got on sale. It’s about the best bunch I’ve ever bought. Mom? Where are you?” She searched the house and the back patio. She checked the garage: “Hmmm, car is still here,” she mumbled under her breath. “Maybe she walked up to Carla’s for an afternoon latte. I’ll show her everything when she gets back.”

Near dusk, Janelle peeked out the window, her anxiety growing. She walked around town, checking all the possible places where Ellie might go, starting at Carla’s. After no success, she rushed home to see if her Mom was there, but she wasn’t. Janelle called Gina.

“Hello?”

“Gina, this is Janelle. Have you seen my Mom?”

“No, I’ve been off work all day and just stayed home. You tried the coffee shop?”

“I did, and a lot of other places.”

“Hmmm... Want me to come over?”

“Yes, please.”

“On my way.”

After ten minutes, Gina came through the front door. “Hope you don’t mind me busting in.”

“No, not at all. Thanks for coming.”

“Now don’t jump to any conclusions, though I can’t blame you if you do. Stay calm, and let’s think this through.”

“Should we call the police?” asked Janelle.

“We can if you want.”

“Yeah, I want to.”

Gina pulled out her phone and quickly dialed the police since the number was still in her phone. She handed the phone to Janelle. “Maybe ask for Officer Tribble?” she whispered.

“Yeah, good idea.” Janelle’s hands were trembling, and she was breathing faster.

“Try to stay calm,” warned Gina.

“I’m trying.” She paused and stared at the floor. “Hello? Police department? Can I talk to Elane Tribble?”

“Hold on, I think she’s still here.”

“Hello, this is Officer Tribble. How can I help you?”

“Oh good, so glad to talk to you.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Janelle Martinez. Do you remember me?”

“Of course I do. What’s up?”

“My Mom is missing!”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Yes. Gina is here, and we've looked and called everywhere. She would call me if she could. She knew I was coming home from shopping in Sacramento this afternoon, but she wasn't here when I returned.”

“Oh boy. This isn't good. Sounds too much like your Dad's situation. Listen, stay calm. I'll come over right away.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Janelle and Gina talked with Officer Tribble and went through about the same line of questioning that they did during Jobe's disappearance. Tribble was very patient and compassionate, but she also confessed to them that this could be more than a coincidence, having occurred so close to the event with Jobe. However, she wanted them to both stay calm and not assume anything until she looked further into it. As she told them when Jobe disappeared, most missing person cases are false alarms with reasonable and good explanations.

After the officer left, Janelle and Gina pretty much had the same conversation, with about the same conclusions that they just had with Ellie a few days before: *Streams of Terrible Beauty* is easier said than done, but it is still the best spiritual conclusion a person can draw in life and live in accordance with!

Another day passed, and unfortunately, the result of Ellie's disappearance was about the same as Jobe's. They both seemed to disappear into thin air, without much evidence except for the marked-up book, which was more mysterious than helpful. Janelle called Jeff on the first night of Ellie's disappearance; he was in disbelief and wanted to be there with Janelle. This time, he was determined to go home. It was just all too much for anyone to handle, and he was sure Janelle needed him there more than ever. So he requested emergency family leave, which was granted for one week, with an option to extend if proven to be needed. He had just been assigned an overseas trip to Hong Kong

scheduled for the next week. He hoped his Mom and Dad would be found so he could get back on time, but he also knew family must come first.

Jeff booked the first flight he could get and was due to land in the Sacramento Metropolitan Airport at 9 P.M. Janelle was waiting in the passenger pickup area when he emerged, towing his carry-on-sized travel bag behind him. She got out of the car and greeted him with a big sisterly hug. "I'm so glad you came. I don't think I can get through this without you."

Stepping back, with calm and love in his eyes, he said, "Of course. How could I not come? You'd come for me no matter what."

"You're right, I would. Hungry?"

"Starving."

"Well, then pick your choice of fast-food poison, and we'll stop there."

Jeff threw his bag into the back seat and got in, while Janelle got back behind the wheel just as a security guard approached to tell her to move her car. "Just leaving," she said as she waved and pulled away from the curb.

They got in late that night, and each one of them went right to bed. The next morning, when Janelle got up, Jeff had already been up for a while. "Good morning, sleepy head," he said as she drifted out into the living room.

"You're up early," said Janelle.

"Not really; I'm jet-lagging by three hours."

"Oh yeah, that's right."

"I think we should do everything we can to find Mom and Dad, if we can."

"I totally agree. Let's sit down, make a list of things to do, and get started today. We can't afford to waste any time."

"Okay, let's do it!"

After compiling a long list, they immediately got to work doing everything within their power over the next three weeks to find their parents. Janelle told her story to the top reporter at the newspaper where she worked, and they ran the story on the front page, getting the word out to everyone in the small, tight-knit community. The plea went out that if anyone had any information about the disappearances of Jobe and Ellie Martinez, they should call the local police and speak with Elane Tribble, who was heading up the case.

They also had missing-person flyers posted all over the county and raised over \$10,000 as a reward for any information leading to the parents' whereabouts. They talked to everyone they could, seeking any scrap of information that might help the investigation. Jeff even drove all the known routes his Dad took over the years, on his Sunday drives to get out of town and ponder life. Jeff stopped at roadside businesses, taking flyers with him to post, yet nothing fruitful came of it.

After three weeks doing almost nothing but searching for their parents, they never gave up hope, knowing that their parents would do the same for them.

“Good morning,” said Janelle.

“Not all that good. I didn't sleep that well.”

“I didn't either. It's Friday, and after three weeks of effort, we've exhausted ourselves by being as proactive as humanly possible, chasing down every possible lead, and yet we have nothing to show for it.”

“Yes, but we had to try. Mom and Dad would never give up on us!”

“I know, and that's what makes failing so painful. Hey, you've been off from work for a long time now. Think you'll get in trouble?” asked Janelle.

“Well, to quote Rett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*, ‘Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.’ Finding Mom and Dad is more important than any job.”

“True. But shouldn’t you call in?”

“I already did that, last week.”

“And?”

“My boss told me to take whatever time I needed and that the agency did not want a distracted worker.”

“Wow, that’s really nice of them. I guess they really value you.”

“I think they do. I’ve solved a number of significant research snags for them in my short time there. So I think I’m okay. But still, I am surprised that they are this flexible.”

“Take the good news and thank God for it.”

“Yep, but I’d rather have some good news about Mom and Dad.”

“Me, too. So let’s brainstorm today and see if there’s anything else we can do.”

“Good idea. You want to go get some coffee?”

“Yes, but I haven’t even had breakfast yet.”

“That’s okay, we’ll grab a bagel at Carla’s. Come on, get your coat, let’s go.”

Janelle went to the hall closet and pulled out a cute, short jacket she bought on sale last week on her annual fall shopping trip to Nordstrom’s. She stared at it.

“Put it on, let’s go,” said Jeff, but she held it and stared another long moment. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Janelle turned around and started putting on the coat. “Mom never got a chance to see what I bought this year. I know she was looking forward to it. For so many years, we made the trip down to Nordstrom’s together. It was always a special mom-daughter event.” She just stood there with her coat on, almost in tears.

Jeff approached her and gave her a hug, then he gently said, “Come on. Let’s go get some coffee and talk it through.”

Janelle let out a big sigh. “Okay.”
“You up to walking? It’s a little chilly out.”
“Yeah, sure, let’s walk.”

Janelle remained quiet all the way to Carla’s as she observed the storefronts on Main Street, remembering Saturday mornings when she and Jeff would go out with Dad to the hardware store, donut shop, and other places that are now wonderful memories. She looked across the street and saw the mostly empty park, where a few kids were climbing on the monkey bars and spinning on a flat, circular merry-go-round. One small child flew off the big disk into the surrounding sand. He giggled, stood up, and climbed back on as soon as he could. Memories of Mom and Dad at the park filled her head. *Where are they now*, she wondered. *I hope somehow they are okay*. Jeff respected her obvious need for silent musing as they walked.

When they reached Carla’s, Jeff opened the backward-hanging door and let Janelle enter first. As she did, she glanced back at Jeff and said, “This place almost seems creepy to me now.”

“Don’t let it be. Ya gotta fight feelings like that, or this whole horrible ordeal will rob us of everything good.” They sat down at Ellie’s favorite seat next to the big picture window that spied on their sleepy little town. “Let’s always make this place special. It was Mom and Dad’s favorite watering hole.”

Janelle smiled and chuckled slightly. “Good idea. You always make me laugh.”

“Better than crying, right?”

“Yes, but a good cry is sometimes needed in life.”

“I hear ya,” responded Jeff. “I’ll go order our drinks. Same usual thing for you?”

“Yes, and don’t forget my bagel, toasted with cream cheese.”

“Okay, got it,” said Jeff, as he headed up to the counter.

“Oh, Jeff, you're in town,” said Gina as she greeted him. “Glad you came. Janelle really needs you now,” she said in a quiet voice.

“I know. Coming was a no-brainer. We're gonna sip some coffee and try to get our heads around all this craziness.”

“I'll leave you two to conduct your business, but let me know if I can help in any way.”

“Oh, I'm sure you will at some point in the future.”

“Well, I'm always here for you. What drinks can I get you?”

Jeff ordered two lattes and two toasted multi-grain bagels with cream cheese. He waited for the order, then took it back to the table where Janelle sat staring out the big picture window, watching the parents with their kids passing by on a crisp Saturday morning. “Here's your latte and bagel,” said Jeff as he sat down. “So, whose gonna go first in trying to make sense of our now crazy lives?”

“You go first. I'm hungry,” she said, taking a bite of her bagel. “I'm still processing all of this in my mind.”

“Well, I am too, but here's what I think. We can't change reality, even though we both would if we could. It is what it is, yet we need to be patient with ourselves, knowing this is about the hardest thing anyone could endure, losing both parents.”

“Hey, don't give up hope just yet. Something good might still happen.”

Jeff took a quick sip of his latte. “Yes, I agree, and we should never lose hope. But realistically, the more time that passes, the thinner the odds of things ending up okay.”

“I know you're right,” said Janelle. “It's just hard to face.”

“Look at it this way: the sooner we can get past the shock of all this, without hurrying through it at some unhealthy pace, the better our chances to find answers.” Jeff leaned back in his chair. “Plus, I need to be back at work in a week, so I do not want to delay.” He then looked at Janelle, compassion spread all over his face, “However, let's go no faster than you are able.”

“That all makes sense, and this will help me move on and find some answers. Just give me one more day.”

“Granted.” Jeff leaned forward and bit into his bagel.

“What do you have in mind?” asked Janelle, unable to add anything to what Jeff had stated.

Jeff leaned back again in his chair, put his hands behind his head, and looked upward. He thought for a moment. Janelle sipped on her latte. He let out a big sigh that extended his cheeks slightly. Leaning forward, he said, “Well, first I want to look at that marked-up book the police recovered.”

“You’ll have to get it from them; they took it back as part of their investigation evidence. But I’m sure they’ll let you read it. Gina and I couldn’t find any clues in it. Perhaps you will.”

“I hope so. Worth a try. I’ll read it while you recoup one more day.”

“Perfect. What else is on your list?”

“We should go talk to that lady Police Officer who helped you, what’s her name?”

“Elane Tribble.”

“Yes. This will get me caught up from their perspective.”

“Makes sense. What else?” asked Janelle.

“Uh, if you are up to it, I’d like to drive to Las Vegas and talk to that detective who helped Mom and Dad.”

“Yeah, I was thinking that too. We can get there in one day if we take turns driving.”

“Okay, let’s do it. How about if we leave the day after tomorrow?” suggested Jeff.

“That would be Monday.”

“Yep.”

“Better get that book today so you can read it tomorrow,” suggested Janelle.

“Good idea. You got anything on *your* list that we should do?” asked Jeff.

“No, I can't think of anything.”

“Well, that’s enough for now. We’ll make up the rest as we go.”

“Okay then, we have a plan!” exclaimed Janelle.

“We sure do. Mom and Dad would be proud of us.”

“They would, indeed.”

They finished their drinks and bagels, then walked back to the house with a renewed resolve to find out what had happened to their parents.

The Quest



August 2011

Chapter 11

That afternoon, Jeff called the Police station and arranged to get the marked-up book. Fortunately, Officer Tribble was on one of her occasional weekend duty shifts, allowing Jeff to talk with her and catch up on everything that had happened in his absence. He headed home, book in hand, and spent the rest of the day and most of Sunday carefully examining all the underlining, exclamation points, question marks, and comments in the margins. It was clear that someone had spent a lot of time going through their book carefully. He could only absorb so much analysis at a time, so he spent a lot of time in between his spurts of reading, wandering around town, and pondering how it all might make sense. Meanwhile, Janelle did very little, recharging her biological batteries and preparing for their trip to Vegas the next day.

Still jet lagging, Jeff woke up bright and early Monday morning. He was eager to get on the road to Vegas, but he knew he needed to let Janelle sleep in and be fully rested, as much as she could under the circumstances. So, he walked up to Carla's, which opened daily at 6 A.M. for all the early birds in town. Walking past all the shops, he could not help but reminisce about his childhood, growing up in Oak Pines, a small town least likely to have a double disappearance of two prominent and well-liked people as Jobe and Ellie.

He reached Carla's in just a few minutes and entered through the backward-hanging door. He hated to admit it, but it felt a little creepy going in, just as it had felt for Janelle and a couple of days earlier. But he took his own advice and resisted the temptation to turn good memories into bad ones because of a few recent events, horrible as they were. *I can't let my whole life be defined by this crazy stuff that has happened*, he thought as he headed for the counter to order his latte. *But then, again, I cannot ignore it either. Janelle and I just need to plow through this the best we can and find answers so we are not plagued by this forever!*

Gina greeted him as he approached the counter, breaking him out of his deep thoughts. "Good morning, Jeff. You're up early."

"I'm still jet lagging."

"Oh, that's right. You're on East Coast time. What can I get ya?"

"Make it a hot, soy, mocha today."

"Coming right up," said Gina as she headed over to the espresso machine. She filled the chrome handle with coffee grounds, packed it down, placed the handle under the spout, and locked it into place. As the concentrated coffee flowed into a small cup, she asked Jeff, "So what have you and Janelle decided to do? Did you sort anything out on Saturday when you were here?" Gina placed a cup of soy milk under the steamer spicket and pressed a button. She looked at Jeff while he waited for the loud steaming noise to finish.

"Well, I decided to look over that marked-up book..."

"Yeah, that's a crazy thing," she interrupted. "Maybe this guy is some kind of nut case." She poured the espresso into a paper cup, followed by the steamed soy milk. Somehow she formed a heart shape at the top of his latte by tilting the cup slightly and regulating the flow of the milk. "Here ya go", she said, sliding the latte over to Jeff across the counter. "So, what else are you doing?"

Jeff continued. "I read through the markings in the book and could not make much sense of them."

"That's what Janelle and I discovered, too."

"Also, we decided to visit Vegas, try to see the detective who handled Charlie's murder case, and maybe visit the RV park where they all stayed."

Gina straightened up. "Hey, that's a great idea, but I don't know how much you'll gain from the RV park visit. Don't you think you should stay close to home in case of any news? Besides, don't they always say, most crimes happen close to home?"

"I know," said Jeff after taking a sip, "but we gotta try something. And besides, the police can call us if there are any developments. This way, we're covering both possibilities."

"That's true. I hope it turns out profitable for you guys. Let me know what happens. And, be careful getting there, getting back, and while you're there."

"Do you sense something?" Jeff asked, suspicious of Gina's warning, knowing she was a *premonition* kind of person who had influenced him a lot over the years as a young man. She was partially responsible for his mystical orientation, which so differed from Janelle's reasonable, rational view of life.

"No, not really," she responded. "But be extra careful just the same."

Jeff was unsure how to interpret this, but it was typical of Gina, and he learned that she was often right more than wrong. Ellie confirmed this in Jeff's thinking many times over the years. "Okay, we'll keep our eyes open. It's already a little spooky going to Vegas since it's where Grampa was murdered over two decades ago. So our antennas are up."

"Good. Have a safe trip," said Gina as Jeff headed for the door. "And call me if you need any help from me."

When he got back to the house, Janelle was up. "You didn't bring me a latte?"

Jeff cringed. “No. I didn’t know when you would be getting up and didn’t want it to get cold.”

“That’s what microwave ovens are for, dummy,” she joked.

“Tell ya what. We’ll stop and get you one on the way, then down the road, we’ll stop at McDonald’s for breakfast.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll go get my suitcase.”

They stopped to get Janelle a latte at Carla’s. Jeff waited in the car, thinking it would be quick. After a while, Janelle came out and got in the car. “What took you so long?” asked Jeff.

“Gina,” was all she said.

“Ah, say no more. Did you have a nice talk?”

“We did. She mentioned that you told her we are headed for Vegas.”

“Uh, did she give you any kind of warning?”

“Yes, and it was a bit strange, but considering the source, perhaps not.”

“Let me guess. Be extra careful?”

“Yep. You got it, too?”

“I did.”

“So what do you think it means?” asked Janelle.

“Ha! It means we need to be extra careful. Maybe keep our eyes open, too. Maybe even watch for some special event or opportunity.”

“Yeah, maybe so,” Janelle said with a hint of skepticism. She sipped her latte. “Well, let’s get going!”

Jeff released the hand brake, pulled out from the curb, and headed down Main Street and out of town.

The drive was long, and they didn’t talk much. Both of them were deep in thought, contemplating all that had recently transpired, anticipating what might be waiting for them in Vegas. Each of them hoped they would find answers, and Jeff additionally hoped that Gina’s premonition had no validity. They

got into Vegas late that day, checked into a motel, and went right to bed, both of them weary after a long drive on top of all the stress they were under.

The next day, still full of anxiety, they got up and took in a “continental breakfast” at the Holiday Inn, which consisted of a sweet roll, coffee, and a banana.

“Don’t look now, but there are a couple of fancy-dressed guys over there that keep glancing at us,” said Janelle

“I’m not ready to joke about this stuff; it’s just all too recent and painful.”

“I’m not joking.” Jeff started to turn around. “Don’t look. Why don’t you go get a refill of coffee? They are a few tables behind you.”

Jeff got up and casually looked around the room, spotting the two men. He refilled his coffee cup and returned to his table. “See what I mean?”

“Uh, I don’t know. There are a ton of businessmen amongst all these gambling tourists, doing business today in Las Vegas.”

“I know, but they keep glancing at us in a way that seems like they’re trying to sneak a peek.”

“Well, of course they are. They’re peeking at you.”

“I know what kind of look that is. I get them all the time. This is different, I can sense it.”

Jeff let out a sigh as he wiped his face with a napkin. “And you say I’m the mystical one. You done? Ready to go?”

“Yes, but what about those men?”

“Tell ya what. Let’s go now, and I’ll bet they don’t follow us out.”

“You’re on. I’ll bet they do because they have to.”

Sliding their chairs back, they both got up and then headed for the door. Jeff opened the door for Janelle in a way that he

could see the two men. As he exited through the door behind Janelle, he said, "So far, so good."

"My turn to drive," said Janelle, holding out her hand as they approached the car. Jeff handed her the keys. They got in, and Janelle started up the car. The motel door was just off to the left.

"Still no sign of them," said Jeff.

"Yeah, maybe you're right." Janelle backed out of the parking spot and drove past the line of parked cars. But she looked in her rear-view mirror. "You lose, there they go walking to their car."

Jeff looked back, "Looks like you were right. But maybe just a coincidence."

"Maybe and maybe not, and if not, how the heck could they know we are here? I don't get it. Life's not supposed to work like this."

"Well. Maybe it does for us. Step on it and see if you can lose them."

Janelle drove as fast and safely as she could as Jeff gave her directions to the Las Vegas police Department. When they arrived, they were greeted by two long rows of palm trees lining the entry road. Before them, they saw a large, five-story cement building with glass windows extending over the entryway doors, all the way to the roof.

"That's pretty impressive," said Jeff, looking up while parking the car.

"It looks rather intimidating to me," said Janelle.

"I think it's supposed to. I wonder if this was the building Mom and Dad came to twenty-four years ago."

"Could be. Let's go find out, and maybe get some real answers."

They got out of the car and approached the building, both taking in its grandeur.

"Man, they must have a lot of crime here to need such a huge structure," Jeff said, opening the door for Janelle.

She stepped in. “This is Vegas. Sin City ... remember?”

“For sure. Hey, there’s a directory on the wall. Maybe we can find out where we need to go.” Jeff walked over and began reading. “There it is. Homicide, 2nd floor, room 214.”

“Let’s go,” said Janelle.

Getting off the elevator on the 2nd floor, Jeff turned right and headed down the hall. “Hey, how do you know this is the right way to go?”

“It was the right direction for our parents in our book, right?”

“Yes, but we were guessing.”

“That’s okay, I’m guessing now.” They walked for about twenty seconds. “Here it is. I guessed right.”

“Lucky us.”

Jeff opened the door for Janelle. She entered first. The room felt just as sterile, hollow, and practical as the hallway they had just exited. “Can I help you?” asked a uniformed man sitting behind a desk facing them.

Jeff decided to let Janelle handle this one. “I’m Janelle Martinez, and this is my brother Jeff.”

“Yes? What can I do for you?” The man sat back in his chair.

“Well ...” Janelle paused and looked over at Jeff. He looked back at her and motioned with his head for her to continue. The man waited. “Our parents, back in 1987, came here and talked to Detective Dana Armstrong about the murder of our grandfather, Charlie Johnson.”

“Dana is my predecessor. She’s now retired.”

“Is there any way we can talk with her?” asked Jeff.

“I can’t give out her contact information, but I can give her a call and see what she says.” Janelle and Jeff looked at each other, guarding any hopeful expectations. The man dialed the phone. After a few seconds, he said, “Dana? This is Matt Lawson. Listen, I’ve got a couple of young people here, a brother and sister, claiming to be the children of two people you helped out in 1987. Something about the murder of their grandfather? A Charlie

Johnson?” He looked at both of them, still standing before the desk. They nodded in affirmation. He covered the mouthpiece. “She’s thinking,” he whispered. Another moment passed. Janelle and Jeff held their breath, clinging to hope. “She remembers,” he said, smiling. “Is it okay to send these folks over to see you? They have a few questions. Okay, will do. Bye.” As he hung up the phone, he said, “She remembers the case because it was a bit unusual. Had something to do with the Mob.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Janelle said, relieved.

They watched as the man scribbled on a notepad. “Here’s where she lives. I think it’s a condo on the south side of Vegas. Nice area. I included her phone number, too.” He handed them the paper. “Is there anything else I can do for you today?”

Jeff took the paper and said, “No, but you have been very helpful. You’ve given us some desperately needed hope.”

The man wasn’t sure what Jeff meant, so he just said, “Happy to help you out. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“We do, too,” added Janelle. “Thanks so much for your time.”

“Hey... It’s my job!”

They left with the address in hand. When they got to the car, Jeff took the wheel, and Janelle entered the address into Google Maps. “Okay, I have some directions. Uh, turn right after you exit the parking lot, and I’ll guide you from there.”

When they reached the address, it was a long row of nice-looking, well-kept condominiums. “These look nice enough,” commented Janelle.

“Beautiful neighborhood, too,” added Jeff. “Probably no mobsters here.”

“Of course not. They live in big mansions!” They laughed together.

They found the correct condo and knocked on the door. An older lady in her late sixties opened the door. She had gray hair,

stylishly fashioned. With a pleasant smile, she said, "Welcome. Come on in." She was a large woman, but still quite feminine. However, she looked like someone who could handle herself well and someone not to be messed with. "Please sit down."

Jeff and Janelle sat next to each other on a brightly colored couch. Dana Armstrong sat across from them in a big easy chair. "So, you have some questions for me?"

"Yes." They both answered, almost in unison.

"Well, my memory is not what it used to be, but I'll do the best I can."

"That's all we ask," said Janelle, "and thanks so much for seeing us today."

"I remember this case," said Dana. "It was a bit unique."

"In what way?" asked Jeff, his curiosity piqued.

"Well, it wasn't unusual for the Mob to take someone out. We got some of that every week. It was always hard to prove because they had perfected their methods. Frankly, most who fell victim to them had it coming, usually a low-life of some sort. But your grandfather's death seemed so senseless and violent. Plus, using two young thugs who are trying to prove themselves in such a public setting didn't make sense either. This was not usually the mob's style. That's about all I can tell you. Any questions?"

Janelle and Jeff looked at each other. Janelle nodded at Jeff, as if to say, *You tell her about the creepy men*. Jeff understood the nod. "Let me tell you what has happened over the years back in our foothill town of Oak Pines in California.

"Okay," said Dana as she reared back in her easy chair, ready to listen.

"After you talked to our parents, they left Vegas a few days later and got married on the way out of town."

"Looks like it worked out okay, since you are both here today," she joked. "Are they still married?"

"Yes, but let me tell you the whole story. There's a big wrinkle in it that we are hoping you can help us with." Jeff had Dana's

full attention. “The day after they got back, my Mom saw a creepy, well-dressed man staring at her in the local coffee shop, and he drove off in a big limousine-style car. It freaked her out, thinking the Mob may have followed them home.”

“Yeah, I guess so. But as I told your parents back then, I didn’t think they were in any danger from the Mob since it looked like their only target was your Grampa, Charlie. I would have a hard time believing they would follow them all the way home and then not do anything about it.”

“That’s what my Dad assumed, too,” said Jeff, “and convinced my Mom not to worry and to assume it was just her post-traumatic jitters.”

“I think that was a good assumption.”

“Oh, but that was not the end of it,” Janelle said, taking over. “To make a long story short, Mom worried about seeing another man again sometime, but she never did, until ten years later, in the same month. She encountered two men, well-dressed, in the same coffee shop.”

“I’ll bet that freaked her out,” said Dana.

“It did,” answered Janelle. “But Dad settled her down, again, and she did her best to assume it was just a very cruel coincidence.”

“Some coincidence. And yes, cruel,” concluded Dana.

“She lived in apprehension after that, but nothing else happened.”

“Great. So what is the problem?”

Jeff took over the story. “Well, Mom worried about seeing another man over the next ten years, but no man was ever seen. On that twenty year anniversary, she was relieved and believed it was all, finally, behind her.”

“I still don’t see a problem.”

Jeff looked at Janelle, then back at Dana. He cleared his throat. “Last week, my Mom was with a friend at the park eating lunch together, and she noticed a well-dressed man staring at

them. This, of course, worried her because she believed all such nonsense had passed. She called my Dad, who immediately came over to the park. But when he got there, the man left in a big, shiny, Lemmo-style car. My Dad went to follow him, wanting to find out what's going on and to put an end to the craziness."

"Yes, and then what happened?"

"He never came back," said Janelle, unable to keep herself from butting in.

Dana sat up straight in her chair. "Did you go to the police?"

"We sure did," answered Janelle, reliving the stress from that day.

"And...?"

"They investigated," added Jeff, "but didn't find out anything." It's like he vanished into thin air."

"Wow, that is strange. I gotta tell you. It may look like mob guys, but it doesn't make sense. They don't harass people for the fun of it. They take care of business, their way, and not twenty or so years later. Perhaps it is some mentally ill person, and the other two encounters were, well, unfortunate coincidences."

"We were willing to accept that, but then a couple of days later, our Mom also disappeared."

"Oh no. That's crazy. What the heck is going on?" Dana looked puzzled. "The police were of no help in this case either?"

"They did their best," said Janelle. "We were hoping you could help us in some way."

"Even as a retired cop, I have no clue. But let me underscore that it just doesn't seem like it could be the Mob after all these years. However, I can't say it's not, either. Maybe someone had a huge, lingering vendetta against Charlie and took it out on his family right up to this day. Still, I think it is unlikely. I suggest some mentally ill person is responsible. Did your parents have any enemies?"

"None that we know of," answered Jeff. "They lived a pretty simple life in a small, sleepy town."

“I’m sorry I can’t help you more. Hey, one thing, though. Those two young thugs hired to kill Charlie were caught and about to be indicted when they were suddenly transferred to another location. I never found out what happened to them.”

“Isn’t that a bit suspicious?” asked Jeff.

“Yes, and that’s probably why I remembered this case. However, transfers are not unheard of. Cases sometimes get shuffled around to different venues, usually to ensure a greater chance of getting a fair trial and therefore a conviction. Maybe some judge ruled that they could not get a fair trial here in Vegas.”

“Is there any way we can find out?”

“Yes, but it is not easy. Those kinds of records get sealed, and it would take a court order along with a good reason to release any information. Plus, it would take a long time, perhaps years.”

“That sounds like a dead end,” offered Janelle. “What would it prove, anyway?”

“Probably nothing,” said Dana, with a tone of certainty in her voice. “Anything else I can help you with?”

Jeff looked at Janelle. She shrugged her shoulders. “Just one more thing. Do you remember the name of the mob boss suspected of killing our grandfather?” Janelle looked at Jeff with great surprise.

“Oh, yeah. That’s an easy one: Geno Romano. He was about as big as they got here in Vegas back in the eighties. He was also a carryover from the days when all the casinos were run by the Mob. He’s got to be well into his eighties now, if he is still alive. Why do you ask?”

“Well, we’re getting a little desperate for answers, and I thought he might be able to help us in some way.” Janelle’s jaw dropped, and she shook her head slightly side to side.

“Oh, wow. I would caution you not to turn over any old stones like that. All those old mob bosses want to retire into comfortable obscurity. Don’t poke such a beast if it’s sleeping. Could be dangerous.”

“Well, it was just a thought. We came to get answers if we can. This whole double disappearance thing has left us devastated, and we really need answers as soon as possible, at almost any cost.”

“I can understand your dilemma. If you really want to pursue this, I can make some calls and see if Geno is still alive and how you might be able to contact him. However, if there is any way you can leave this alone and move on in life, I must suggest that you do that.”

“We’ll think about it. Right, Janelle?” She didn’t know what to say, having always deferred to her older brother all her life.

“I guess so, whatever you think, Jeff.”

“Okay. Please make the calls and let us know what you find out. We are staying at the Holiday Inn on the south end of the Strip, room 308.”

“Yes, I know where it is. I’ll do some calling and let you know either way this afternoon.” Dana stood up. Janelle and Jeff followed suit.

“Thanks so much for your time, Dana,” said Janelle. “It was so good to talk with you.”

“I’m just sorry I couldn’t be of more help. Think it through, very carefully, before entering the lion’s den. These kinds of people are very unpredictable and are capable of anything.”

“Thanks for the warning, we will think it through,” said Jeff, as he and Janelle walked out the door.

“Take care, you two,” Dana said as they departed.

“Are you crazy?” said Janelle as they walked toward the car.

“Maybe,” answered Jeff. He stopped and turned to her. “This is really the only means we have to find out something!”

Janelle thought for a moment, as all the events over the past week flew through her head. Finally, she calmly said, “I think you are right. Let’s take that chance if Dana comes up with anything.” They both got in the car and headed back to the motel.

“Hey, this might be a good time to go check out the RV park,” suggested Jeff.

“You go ahead. I think I need to go rest. This is all very overwhelming. Plus, I doubt there is anything helpful to be discovered there.”

“You're probably right, but I want to go check it out and get it off my mind.”

Chapter 12

Jeff dropped Janelle off at the motel, and then found the RV Park where Charlie was murdered. He felt uneasy there but knew he needed to come. After driving the big loop around the park a couple of times, he found space number 43, where Charlie's Winnebago RV had been parked on that fateful night in 1987. Jeff stared at the spot, realizing there was no longer any evidence that something tragic had happened here. Another RV of some sort was occupying the space now, with people inside, totally unaware of the history. He quickly concluded there was nothing else to see and that talking to anyone would be a waste of his time and theirs. So, Jeff followed around the one-way loop and exited the Park. Though nothing came of it, he was glad he came and witnessed the sacred spot for himself. Somehow, the account of Charlie's death in the book that he and Janelle wrote became all the more real to him.

When Jeff got back to the motel room, Janelle greeted him with the news of Dana's call, providing a way for them to contact the now-retired mob boss, Geno Romano. But this news came with a repeated warning from Dana. So, they agreed to sleep on it and decide whether to contact Romano in the morning. Jeff told Janelle his experience in the RV park, and although there were no solutions found there, he felt it to be a sacred place and that they should go by there together next time they went out.

Morning rolled around, and both Janelle and Jeff felt they had slept well, in spite of all the past stress and their pending decision

about meeting with a mob boss. They discussed it over breakfast and decided they could live with whatever happens more than they could by doing nothing and admitting defeat.

“Who should make the call?” asked Janelle, “Seems like you should and make it *man to man*.”

“Uh...” Jeff hesitated. “I really want to get a hearing with this guy and see what he knows. I’m willing to call him, but I’ll bet he will respond more favorably to a woman’s voice than a man’s.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. But what should I say?”

“Just be your sweet self, and be honest. Tell him, briefly, the bind we’re in. Maybe he has a softer heart in his old age.”

“Okay. I’ll give it a try.” Janelle picked up her cell phone, which felt much heavier than usual, and began dialing the number that Dana Armstrong had given her the day before. “It’s ringing,” she whispered to Jeff as he watched her. “Go sit on your bed over there and quit watching me. It makes me nervous.”

“Okay, sorry.” Jeff went over and sat down, but his ears were focused on Janelle’s voice. She put it on speaker and held it away from her ear. Jeff could hear the ringing.

“Hello,” said a husky old voice coming out of the speaker.

“Is this Mr. Geno Romano?”

“Speaking. Who the hell is this? If you’re selling something, hang up now and don’t call back.”

“No, Mr. Romano, I’m not selling anything. My name is Janelle Martinez, and I just want some information.”

“What kind? I got out of the information business a long time ago. I don’t care how much money you have to buy whatever you’re trying to find out, I’m not interested.”

“No, Sir, I’m not looking to buy any information. I just want to ask a few questions about something that happened in 1987.”

“What’s this got to do with me? You sound like a pretty young girl; what the hell are you doing calling me?”

“Yes, I am young, and I'm here with my brother visiting from out of state. We're inquiring about our grandfather, who was murdered in 1987.”

“Yeah, so what, what's that got to do with me?”

“Well, Sir, it may be a hit job that you ordered.”

“Is this some kind of joke? If so, you're toying with the wrong old man. I don't put up with shit from anybody. Now hang up and quit bothering me.”

“No, please, Mr. Romano, this is no joke, and the information is something my brother and I need very desperately at this point in our lives. Would you *please* be willing to just sit down and talk with us for a few minutes?”

“Just between you and me, young lady, I've ordered more hit jobs than you can ever imagine. And if I did this one, I wouldn't remember it, and I'll never admit it, even if I did. So you're wasting your time. Goodbye!”

“Wait, please, Mr. Romano, Sir, consider just talking to us briefly, it would mean so much to us.”

“If this is some kind of sting operation by those damn feds, you'll never pull it off, and let me tell ya that someone could get hurt. Who do you think I am, some kind of idiot?”

“No, please, Sir, it's not like that at all. We're in a horrible situation. Both of our parents have mysteriously disappeared, and knowing what happened back in 1987 might help us find them.” The phone became silent for about ten seconds. “Hello? Are you still there?”

“Yes, I'm still here,” said the husky voice, “I'm trying to figure out who and what you are.”

“We're just a couple of young people trying to figure out what happened to our parents and how we can get them back. We were hoping, maybe, you could help us.”

“I don't see how, young lady, but I'm willing to give you a chance. I'm not sure why, but I gotta admit your story intrigues me. Tell you what, come on out to my house tonight about 8:00

PM, and I'll give you a little bit of my time. Hey, by the way, how did you get my number?"

Janelle froze. She had no idea what to say. She looked at Jeff, and he just shrugged. She paused for a moment and remembered Jeff's words for her to be her honest, sweet self. She took a deep breath and said, "Detective Dana Armstrong made some calls for us and found your number."

"Surely you jest."

"No, Sir, that's the truth. And I decided before I called you that I would be completely honest with you, no matter what."

"Why the hell would she give you my number, and what the hell are you doing talking to her in the first place?"

"We went to her first seeking answers to our questions, since she was the officer assigned to the case after it happened. . We also asked her who the mob boss was that supposedly ordered the hit job on our Grampa."

"You're a pretty bold young lady, you know that? But I like your style and your moxie. Reminds me of me when I was young. I remember Armstrong; she was always a fair-minded person. Though we were on opposite ends of the law, she only came after me on legitimate issues. I always appreciated that she was a straight shooter. So, come on over and let's talk. Here's my address. Are you ready?"

Jeff grabbed a pin and a pad of paper off the motel desk table and gave them to Janelle. "Okay, I'm ready."

"My house is on 223 Nader St. I'm sure you can do a Google search to find it. When you get here, the guard at the gate will let you in. Just tell him you're the girl I talked to on the phone this afternoon. I'll let him know so he'll be expecting you. I'll see both of you at 8:00 PM sharp. I don't like to be left waiting, so make sure you're on time."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you so much, Mr. Romano," Janelle said, almost jumping up and down. "You have no idea how much this means to us, no matter what comes out of it."

“Well, I'll do what I can, but I don't think it'll be much. Worth a try, I guess. Don't be late!”

“Oh, we won't. Trust me. Goodbye.”

Jeff let out a big blast of air, feeling like he had held his breath for twenty minutes underwater. “That went amazingly well. I told you that you were the right one to make the call.”

“Yeah, but I almost blew it. I was so nervous. Never talked to a mob boss before!”

“Well, you did great, and I just hope somehow he can help us in some way.”

“Don't get your hopes up. Don't forget who we're dealing with. Do you think we could get ourselves in any kind of trouble?”

“Well,” answered Jeff, “as Dana Armstrong said, these people are capable of anything, and there's always a risk in trusting them. But we're just going to have to take that chance. We really have nothing to lose, and we need to get some answers if we can.”

“Let's go get some dinner and try to relax before we head over there to see what happens.”

“Good idea. It's your turn to pick the restaurant.”

“Hey, let's go see if we can find that buffet that Mom and Dad went to the night Grampa Charlie died.”

“Okay, let's do it. Think it'll still be there?”

They drove down the Vegas Strip looking for any trace of a buffet where they could eat. “There's one,” Janelle said, pointing to a big neon sign reading, *Huge Buffet*.

“Hey, that's exactly what we wrote in our book that Mom and Dad saw when they went out to eat. You think it's the same place?”

Janelle cocked her head and said, “That was another thing we guessed about in our book.”

“But maybe we guessed right,” replied Jeff.

“We'll even if we did, I doubt it would still be here after 24 years.”

“You never know. Let's go inside and see if we can find out.”

They enjoyed a very luscious buffet dinner, reminiscing about the true story in their book that took place here, or somewhere nearby, many years ago. Jeff looked at his cell phone, “Hey, it's a little after 7. We don't want to be late to see this guy. I'd rather get there early and have to sit in the car than be late because of traffic or not being able to find the house.”

“Yep, it's like going to the airport. I always go extra early and take a book to read.”

As expected, and with great relief, they found Geno Romano's mansion ahead of time. It was huge, well-lit, with a gate and a long, curving, uphill driveway. They just sat in the car across the street contemplating this crazy idea until about five minutes before 8 PM. They drove up to the front gate. “Looks bigger than our motel,” said Jeff, looking up through the windshield, his eyes moving left and right.

A man emerged from a small guard shack and asked through Jeff's rolled-down window, “Are you the girl on the phone from this afternoon?”

“Sure am,” Janelle said, speaking past Jeff, who was leaning back in the driver's seat.

“Okay, I'll open the gate. Go up the driveway until you reach the house. Park in the circular driveway near the front door.”

The gate opened, and Jeff drove up the long driveway until it circled in front of the house. He pulled over to the curb and parked. They both got out and walked up to the front door, surrounded by beautiful rockwork. They walked between two spectacular rock pillars that supported the large, magnificent roof over the front door. Janelle rang the doorbell. “Man, this is scary. Think we'll ever leave alive?”

“Very funny,” replied Jeff. “Just relax, stay calm, and continue to be your sweet, honest self. I'll let you do the talking, and I'll only get involved if I'm invited to do so. You're the one who has an established relationship with a mob boss!”

“Yeah, now you're the funny one.”

The door opened, and what appeared to be a butler invited them in. He led them down a long hallway to a small, cozy room with plush chairs and many fine art paintings hanging on the wall. “That's quite a collection,” said Jeff.

“Yeah, I'll say!” added Janelle.

A gruff-looking, heavysset old man got up out of one of the big chairs and walked toward them, extending his hand. “I'm Gino Romano.” He shook Jeff's hand first, welcoming him, and then turned to Janelle, holding her hand gently. “And you must be the young, spunky, gutsy girl I spoke to on the phone.”

“Yes, Sir, I am indeed.”

“Please come in and sit down. I don't get much company anymore. My wife passed away a few years ago, and I just kind of waste away in this big old house. But hey, I made a pretty good life for myself. Having a couple of young people to talk to might just do me some good. You want a drink of any kind? I have a full wet bar over in the corner. Name a drink, and I'll bet I have it.”

“How about a gin and tonic?” said Janelle.

“Ah, coming right up.” He reached over to a side table next to his easy chair and pressed a button.”

A voice seemed to come out of the air. “Yes, Mr. Romano.”

“Peters, can you come and fix my two guests a drink?”

“Indeed, Sir; I'm on my way.”

“You'll like the gin I've got: Nolet's Dry Gin Reserve. It's over four hundred dollars a bottle. Gourmet stuff. And for you, young man. What'll it be? Ask away.”

“Hmmm ... how about a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale?”

“Yep, I got one of those and a cold glass to go with it.”

His butler, Peters, stood by waiting to hear their choices. "I'll go prepare those drinks for you now."

Ask away. I'm happy to tell you anything I know."

Janelle took a deep breath. "As I told you on the phone, our parents are missing, and they disappeared only a few days apart."

"How long ago did this happen?" asked Geno.

"Just last week."

"I hope you don't think I had anything to do with any of that. Hell, I don't even know if I had your grandfather killed back in 1987, but if Dana Armstrong thinks I did, it's probably true."

"Well, that's what we came here to find out." Peters returned with their drinks and handed Jeff his ale in a tall, cold mug. He gave Janelle her Gin and Tonic in a short, stocky glass, ice clinking with a lime wedge mounted on the rim.

"That is pretty bold of you, young lady, coming over to the house of a retired mob boss and accusing him of murder and kidnapping! Don't you know I could snuff you both out right now and no one would ever find you?"

"Is that what happened to my parents?"

"Don't push your luck, lady. I don't like being accused."

"I'm not accusing, just asking." Janelle sensed that he was quite irritated. "I just want to know if you know anything."

"Well, I don't," snapped Geno as he sipped his scotch with a mean defensive look on his face. Even if I did, I probably wouldn't tell you because then I'd have to kill you." Janelle felt the blood drain from her face as he just stared at her. "I may very well have had your Grampa wacked in '87, and if I did, he deserved it in some way. I don't kill people for no reason, and I sure as hell don't make people disappear after twenty years!" He continued to stare at her.

Janelle quickly assessed his words and his demeanor. "I believe you, Mr. Romano."

"You do? Why?"

"Because it makes sense."

“Thank you, young lady. I don’t mind being accused of things I’ve done, but false accusations make me furious.”

“So, if it’s not you, who else could it be?” she asked.

Geno shifted back into his chair and took another sip of scotch. He pondered for a moment. “No respectable mob boss would waste his time with such foolishness. Everything we do is efficient and has a purpose.” He pondered, again, and took another sip. “My guess is that you’ve tangled with some kind of psycho. Associations with some past mob dealings are the most logical answer you could come up with, but I suggest you go down that psychopath because you’re wasting your time on this one.”

Janelle looked at Jeff. “We may not know who it is, but perhaps now we know who it isn’t!”

“I think you are right,” replied Jeff. “It’s been worth the trip just to find this out.”

“So are you kids good to go, now?” Geno asked as he stood up. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Not really,” said Jeff, standing up, ready to leave. “But we know more than we did before. This mob thing needed to be explained. I think we can now look elsewhere, and this is a big step.”

“Looks like I was more helpful than I thought I would be,” said Geno. Janelle stood up, and Geno began guiding them out of the room, down the hallway, and toward the front door. When they got there, Geno stopped and turned to them. “Let me leave you two kids with this. I have two grown kids of my own and several grandkids about your age. I’ve mellowed a little over the years, and I want you to know that I believe your parents would want you to go on and make something of your lives. Don’t do what I did; find something respectable. Let me just leave you with that, because that’s what I would want for my grandkids.”

They both thanked him and shook his cold, expressionless hand, as he ushered them out the door.

“Wow, that was quite enlightening,” said Jeff, as they headed for the car.

“Yeah, and a little scary, too. Ya think he would actually snuff us out if he felt the need to do so? Or was he just playing tough guy to impress us?”

“I don’t know. Could go either way,” said Jeff. “He may be a mellow mobster, but he is still a mobster with a long history of violence.”

“Very true,” said Janelle after they got in the car. “But I think we got what we came for. Perhaps we can pursue other explanations when we get home.”

“Yeah, we’ll do that.” Jeff started the car, drove back down the long driveway, and exited through the automatically opening gate.

The next day, Jeff and Janelle drove back to Oak Pines. They couldn't help having long discussions about all that had transpired with their missing parents, but also how surprised they were that the mob boss turned out to be more helpful than the Vegas Police Department. Once at home, they checked in with Officer Tribble and told her all they had learned on their trip. They were disappointed to learn that no new leads had emerged while they were gone. It was beginning to look like they would just have to accept that their parents would not be coming back, though they maintained what little hope they had, determined to continue the search and not give up. They knew the longer their parents were missing, the slimmer the chance of finding them, at least finding them alive. But it had only been about a month, and they both remained hopeful. They appreciated the advice from the mob boss, Geno Romano, so they decided to also explore other possible explanations, like finding some mentally ill person who was responsible for the disappearance of their parents. Yet, they had no idea where to start.

Jeff stayed in town the rest of the week, promising to return as soon as possible, but he needed to return to his job at the CIA, not wanting to miss out on his first field assignment. He made sure Janelle was settled in what had become a very lonely house. She assured him that she would be okay continuing the search while still working her job at the local newspaper and pondering what kind of work she would pursue that would utilize her newly earned degree in physics.

Gina, being best friends with Jobe and Ellie, took it on herself to watch out for the kids during this terrible ordeal they were enduring. So, she suggested to Janelle that she get a dog since she was now alone in a big, lonely house. “A dog will keep you company and add some security that will put your mind at ease,” she told Janelle. The next day, Janelle went to the animal shelter and found a friendly mid-sized terrier, capable of making a lot of noise when needed. She named him Frisky.

Chapter 13

Jeff caught a flight back to Washington on Sunday. He looked forward to the upcoming field trip to Hong Kong. He drove to Langley early Monday morning, parked his car, and headed for the main entrance, just as he had done on his first day of work nearly six weeks prior. To his surprise, his field trip to Hong Kong had been postponed for a month due to some unexpected project developments. His boss told him to get used to it because change was more of the routine than the exception.

Jeff absorbed himself in his fascinating work, doing research for various CIA projects. He was required to submit a written report, with an oral presentation sometimes required. He was quite good at both, and his superiors at the agency were pleased with his work.

He continued his pursuit of Sara Bodley, totally enamored with her, almost as much as he was of his new job. For a month, they went out a lot and traveled to nearby cities like New York, Philly, and Atlantic City on weekends. Their mutual affection grew, and Jeff wondered how his life could be so good while never able to forget the horrible, unresolved tragedy of his parents' disappearance. He regularly talked with Janelle by phone and encouraged her as she struggled living alone, with just her dog, in a very empty house in Oak Pines.

On Sunday, Jeff's long-awaited field trip to Hong Kong finally happened. Forty-three-year-old Dave Nyman, Deputy Director of the CIA's Analysis Directorate, led this team of four agents (including Jeff) traveling via Cathay Pacific on a 747 to Hong Kong. The other two team members were experienced CIA agents, considerably older than Jeff, but he felt privileged to be part of the team despite his junior status.

Jeff entered the plane first, followed by Dave and then the other two agents. Jeff checked his boarding pass and found his seat. Dave sat next to him with the other two agents seated across the aisle. "Ever been to Hong Kong, Jeff?" asked Dave.

"Heck, I've never been outside the U.S."

"Well then, this should be quite a thrill for you. Hong Kong is an amazing place."

"Uh, is it safe there?" asked Jeff.

Dave leaned toward Jeff. "Safer than D.C., I can guarantee you that. Ever since Britain handed it back to China under the Sino-British Declaration, the Mainland runs a tight ship. They maintain order, and no one is in any danger unless they oppose the Chinese government. You're not going to do that, are you?" Dave asked, pulling away from Jeff.

"I don't plan to, unless that is part of our mission."

"Shhh," Dave gestured with his finger on his lips, "someone might hear you."

"You're joking, right?" Dave smiled. Jeff settled in for the long, 15-hour, overnight flight.

After arriving in Hong Kong, the team cleared customs and took a taxi to the Ritz-Carlton, a high-rise hotel overlooking Hong Kong harbor. After checking in, Dave instructed the team to meet back in the lobby in twenty minutes, and they would all go out to dinner together.

After about 15 minutes, Jeff exited the elevator in the lobby. He was greeted by his other 3 colleagues. "Gentlemen, now that

we're all here," said Dave Nyman, "let's go take in a good meal." Dave led the three men single file to an elevator marked "express" and pressed the up button. "This new Ritz-Carlton hotel just opened last March," he said as he stared at the descending numbers displayed above the elevator doors, "and is now the tallest hotel in the world." He looked over at the three men standing in silence. "I've heard the view in the restaurant at the top is spectacular." The door opened, and the four men entered in their natural, unspoken pecking order, with Jeff entering last. "Here we go," said Dave, pressing button 116 from the large array of options all greater than 100. "We'll eat in the exclusive club member's lounge. It's over 1500 feet high." After about 90 seconds of ascending, the elevator stopped on floor 110 and picked up a formally dressed elderly couple, and then continued until it soon arrived at the lounge. A short tone sounded, and the door opened. All four men waited for the couple to exit first.

Jeff was the last to exit, behind his other three team members. As he did, he was met by an elegant setting of big plush couches and chairs filled with people engaged in discussion. The room was not loud, but a constant mumble filled the air. As Jeff surveyed the room, he saw just about every nationality present, more oriental than anything else. Two men wearing turbans were exchanging foreign words, seemingly faster than either could possibly absorb. As he followed the team, led by a waiter to their awaiting table, a wall of glass from floor to ceiling emerged. As he got closer, the bottom of his view seemed to fall out, and the spectacular Hong Kong harbor with all its lights filled his vision. He just stood there taking in a view that rivaled the Grand Canyon.

"You gonna sit down and join us, Jeff?" asked Dave.

Breaking his momentary spell, He looked over at Dave and the other two men, seated at a large round table. "Oh, yeah, sorry. Hey, you weren't kidding about a spectacular view." As he sat

down, the three men smiled and looked at him like three veteran agents who had seen such views many times before.

One of the men said, "Yep, pretty impressive. I've seen many views before, but none like this one."

Dave poured each man a glass of wine from a bottle that was already waiting for them on the table. "I chose this hotel for this very reason. Nothing too good for the agency, right?" he said as he raised his glass and circled it around the table, toasting each man. Jeff barely got his glass positioned in time.

Sipping his wine and placing his glass on the table, Dave got a little more serious. "I can give you a little bit of information about our mission tonight while we're eating. As you guys know, and Jeff, you'll learn this as you gain more experience, we keep our missions pretty darn secret until we're ready to carry them out."

"Why is that?" asked Jeff.

"Well, the agency is always a little paranoid about sensitive information getting out into the wrong hands. It's not that what we do is cloak and dagger stuff, it's just that they always play it safe."

"Overkill, I would say," said one of the men.

"Yeah, I agree with you," said Dave, "but it keeps us alive, and that's what counts." Dave browsed his menu for a moment as all three men followed suit.

After a few minutes of silent reading, a waiter appeared. "Can I take your order, gentlemen?"

Everyone remained silent until Dave lowered his menu, looked up at the waiter, and said, "I'll have your bacon-wrapped filet mignon with a baked potato. Can I get a dinner salad with thousand island dressing, too?"

"Indeed, you can, Sir." The waiter looked at the other three men and waited for their response.

"I'll have the same," said one man.

"Me too," said the other.

The grilled salmon is what Jeff really wanted to get, but he didn't want to break protocol, not knowing how it all worked. "Yeah, that sounds good to me," he lied, as he closed his menu and placed it on the table. The waiter finished writing down the order, collected the menus, and walked away.

After a tasty dinner and some vague references to the mission at hand by Dave, he turned to Jeff and said, "You really must take in the beauty of Hong Kong at night. I recommend the *Ave of Stars*. It's a walking path along the edge of the harbor with all kinds of shops. Very well-lit and very safe."

"Sure, I'll tag along," said Jeff enthusiastically.

Dave looked at the other two men. "Well, I'm pretty tired and jet-lagging a bit. How 'bout you boys? Take Jeff out and show him the town?" But both guys, in their usual follow-the-leader format, declined, repeating some form of Dave's excuse. "Well, Jeff, looks like it's a solo mission for you if you choose to accept it." Everyone chuckled. "Hey, don't miss this chance if you're up to it. We might be too busy after tonight, depending on how our mission develops."

Jeff wondered why no one wanted to go out. But after witnessing a full day of these other two guys always deferring to Dave, he wasn't all that surprised. "Yeah, I think I'll wander around a while before I turn in. How do I get to this *Ave of Stars* path?"

"Oh, it's quite easy," said Dave. "It's not far away, but I think it's a little too far to walk. So go out the front entrance of the Ritz, and grab one of the cabs. There are always some waiting. Tell the driver you want to be dropped off at the Hong Kong Space Museum, and you want to cut over to the *Ave of Stars*. He'll know exactly what you're doing. This is a popular drop-off point." Dave reached into his pocket and pulled out some paper bills. "Here's some HDK to pay the cabbie and a little extra for a snack of two," he said as he handed the bills to Jeff. Jeff looked at the bills with an expression that begged for an explanation. "Oh, those are

Hong Kong Dollars. We'll go to an exchange office tomorrow and get more." Jeff took the bills and crammed them into his pocket. Dave pushed back his chair and stood up. "Well, gentlemen, I'm ready to call it a day."

"Me, too, boss," the two men said in order, also standing up.

Jeff stood up, too, and said, "I guess I'm off to see the stars."

"Enjoy yourself. Don't stay out too late," warned Dave. "We have a big day tomorrow."

The three men rode the elevator down to their rooms. Jeff took an express elevator down to the first-floor lobby

As Jeff exited the Hotel, he saw the nightlife lights glowing in the distance. He was thrilled to be in Hong Kong and to be part of some mysterious mission that would be revealed in the coming days. He walked over to a long string of waiting cabs and got in the first one. "You speak English?" he asked.

"Yeah, quite well. I was educated in America, at UCLA."

Jeff felt a little foolish. "Take me to the Hong Kong Space Museum."

"Sure. No problem. This time of night, I assume you are headed for the *Ave of Stars*."

"I am, indeed. How far is it?"

"Only a few minutes, but I have a minimal fee," he said, looking back at Jeff.

"No problem. Beats walking. Let's go."

After a few minutes of driving, the cabbie pulled over to the curb. "Here's your drop-off spot. That'll be ten-forty."

Jeff pulled out his newly acquired HKD, randomly picked two bills from the unfamiliar money, and handed them to the driver. "Is this enough?"

"That's way too much." The cabbie handed one of the bills back to Jeff, along with some coins as change for the other bill. "Just head straight through that museum parking lot, and you'll see the entrance you want."

“Thanks,” Jeff said as he got out of the cab. The cab departed, and Jeff headed out across the parking lot. When he got to two buildings where the lot narrowed to an alleyway, he heard what sounded like a woman crying for help. The voice seemed to come from the alley ahead. When he got past the first building and looked around the corner, he saw a lady struggling with a man in a doorway. “Hey, what’s going on there?” he asked as he walked toward them. The lady kept struggling and cried out again for help. Jeff approached cautiously.

Suddenly, a cloth bag was pulled down over his head by someone behind him. He could feel the bag tighten around his neck. As he instinctively reached for the opening of the bag, his arms were restrained, and his hands were tied with what he guessed were zip-ties. As he fell to the ground, unable to catch himself with his hands, he brought his shoulder up close to his head. When he hit the ground, a sharp pain ran down his arm into his clenched fist. He could feel his legs being tied together, then his whole body lifted up horizontally and shoved into a car. He heard two car doors close, followed by sudden acceleration as the car sped away.

“What do you want?” he yelled. His heart raced, wondering if he might soon die. No one answered. He could only hear breathing, some sniffing, and a couple of coughs. “What do you want?” he asked again. “Where are you taking me?” Still, there was no answer. “I’m a CIA agent. Check my ID if you want.” Jeff thought a moment, but all he could think of were scenes he had seen on TV, which at the time seemed so harmless and entertaining. “They’ll come looking for me. You’ll be better off letting me go.” No voices responded. Jeff strained to free himself, but he soon realized it was no use.

After about fifteen minutes of driving, the car pulled onto what felt like a gravel driveway. Soon, the car stopped. Jeff heard the car door open, and he felt someone pulling him out; two people carried him from both ends of his body like a sack of

potatoes. All he could hear was grunts as the two people seemed to open a door and muscle him through it. He heard the door close behind them. In a few moments, he heard another door open, and soon he was placed on the floor. “Don’t move or you die,” said a voice. Jeff lay still as he felt his hands and feet loosen. Part of him wanted to get up and run, but the hood and his fear of what the voice told him restrained his urge. “Stay face down and don’t look up,” said the same voice. Jeff felt the bag over his head loosen, then slipped off his head. The blight of the room made him squint. He then heard the door close and a clunk sound of the lock engaging.

“Okay to look up now?” he asked. There was no answer. So he slowly looked up over his shoulder and then began to get himself up off the floor. No one else was in the room. He was still worried and kind of in shock, but relieved to have his hands and feet free and to view his surroundings.

There was one orange plastic-seated chair in the room, so he carefully sat down in it and assessed his pain. “Nothing broken,” he mumbled to himself. His wrists and ankles were a bit sore, but other than that, he was okay. “What a horrible experience,” he said, wishing someone were there to sympathize. “What the heck do they want? I wonder if they are going to kill me?” He could not help but ask himself if this was related to his team’s mission that he knew so little about.

He scanned the room to evaluate his situation. The brief training he received in his first week at the agency was already at work. He remembered the basic rules he was given if ever captured. He never dreamed it would be this soon in his short career, and he was already second-guessing his decision to take the CIA job. *Too late for that, now*, he thought. Three rules came to mind. The first was to stay calm and not panic. This sounded so easy in his training, but now it had become an essential discipline. He realized the wisdom in it. Second was to take any possible action because opportunities may be limited and short-lived.

Third was to assess all surroundings, looking for any possible way to escape. He remembered the instructor saying that there is usually some way to escape, but that it may not be obvious and that it must be found in time.

As he looked around the room, it seemed to be some kind of storage place. There were a lot of cupboards, no windows, and only one door, which was probably locked from the outside. Jeff got up, tried the door, and then put his ear up to it. Dead silence. He wondered how much time he had, knowing that someone would be back in due time. He went around and tried all the cupboard doors. All were very secure. The ceiling had large tiles. He got up on a counter and pushed upward on a tile. It didn't budge, and they were made of some kind of hard plastic or acrylic. He thought maybe he could bust through, but was sure it would make a big noise. *Rule number four*, he thought to himself, *needs to be: don't make any big noises that will call attention to yourself*. He got off the counter and pulled open the only three drawers in the room. They were next to a large enclosure that went from floor to ceiling with a door in the front. The door was locked, but the drawers appeared unlocked. He tried pulling one drawer all the way out, but something prevented it, so he pushed it back in.

He paced around the small room, thinking through his choices. He could wait until they come and fight like heck, and probably die. He could bang on the ceiling and see if a tile breaks loose. *What else is there*, he thought. He turned around and looked at the drawers again. He remembered watching his Dad remove a kitchen drawer once by lifting the front up when it was fully extended. *Oh, it couldn't be that easy, could it?* He pulled the top drawer out to its full extension, then he lifted up the front. It moved, allowing him to fully remove the drawer. Relief washed over him.

He looked inside the drawer slot and noticed a space extended into the floor-to-ceiling enclosed area. *Well, that's great. There is no way I can squeeze through that drawer opening*. So he reached

in as far as he could until his head butted up against the front of the counter. He felt around and then reached into the enclosed area. He felt all around the door. Nothing. But he noticed that the lock for the enclosure was on the far side of the door. *Hmmm ... I wonder.* So he reached as far as he could until his finger barely touched what might be that lock. *Darn, I can't quite reach it.* He stopped, relaxed his arm, and took a deep breath. He pulled his arm out, took off his outer and under shirts, and reached in with his bare skin pressed against the counter. He could feel more of the lock. *Oh, if I can get just one more inch, maybe I can slip open the lock.*

So he took another breath and let it out, reached almost to the point of dislocating his shoulder, and managed to release the lock. The door opened slightly. He slowly pulled his arm back out of the drawer hole and moved it around in the air to get the blood flowing. He opened the enclosure door and looked up. More ceiling tiles. He quickly removed a few large items from the enclosure and stepped in. Putting his foot on one of the drawer braces, he lifted himself up, reaching the ceiling. The tile moved when he pushed on it. His hope began to surge.

He got out of the enclosure. Realizing that someone could come back at any time, he raced to put his shirts back on, replace the drawer, and shove it back in. He put the few items back into the enclosure, calculating that he could barely squeeze past them if he crawled up to the top and into the ceiling. After he got inside, he shut the door behind him and turned the lock to its original position, securing the door. It was quite dark, and he almost panicked, feeling closed in and contemplating the odds that someone would come back and find him gone. But he focused his mind and used the drawer braces as a ladder to reach the ceiling. Once there, he pushed the tile up and lifted himself into an attic area of the building.

A dim light at the end of the long attic caught his eye, so he crawled toward it. It was an air vent, covered with a heavy mesh screen. Feeling around the edges of the mesh, he discovered a

screw at each corner, and one of them seemed to be loose. He tried his best to turn it with his fingers, but it wouldn't budge. Feeling around on the attic floor, he searched for anything he could use to loosen the screw. Just a few turns were all he needed to finish removing the screw with his fingers, but he found nothing. *I'm so close to freedom, yet so far away*, he thought to himself as he paused to catch his breath. *Anything with a small metal edge is all I need.* He checked his pockets. They had taken his wallet, cell phone, and key ring that had a small pocket knife on it. *Oh, if I only had that.* He chuckled to himself, *MacGyver would have had one!*

He put his hands on his belly and felt the metal snaps on his western-style shirt. His hope soared once again. "I'm gonna get out of here," he mumbled as he tore one of the snaps away from his shirt. The edge of the snap fit perfectly into the slotted head of the screw. He pressed down hard and turned it slowly. *It moved!* He remounted the snap and turned the screw again. The turning got a little easier each time. The screw finally became loose enough to turn it with his fingers. Out it came. Jeff was elated. He folded the heavy mesh screen over, making a double-layered triangle of it. *I think I can fit through that opening.* He bent the middle of the screen upward just enough to give himself some extra room. He stuck his feet through the opening, then his hips. *For the first time in my life, I'm glad I'm not a big buff guy!* His stomach scraped against the rough edge of the opening as he wriggled himself all the way out and down the outside wall, hanging by his hands.

He hung there in the dark and caught his breath, wondering what was below and how far down he would fall. He remembered his Dad showing him how to break his fall by rolling backward when hitting the ground. So, he planned to do that. *I hope I hit ground and not an air conditioning unit or a bunch of pipes. Well, here it goes;* He released his grip and fell only about eight feet since the house was single-story. When his feet hit the ground, he rolled backward and did a somersault, just as his Dad had taught him.

He never knew why he taught him this, but he was sure glad he did. Sprawled out on the lawn that went all the way up to the edge of the house, he felt the dampness of the overnight dew penetrating his shirt. Standing up but crouched, he carefully turned around. In the distance, he could see some lighting, much like what he saw when he exited the Ritz Hotel earlier that evening. He saw no one around, so he headed toward the lights.

Chapter 14

After walking about a half mile, he entered a brightly lit stretch of city streets with shops on both sides. He had heard that selling goes on twenty-four/seven to accommodate all the jet-lagged tourists visiting Hong Kong. With all this activity and lights, it was like the middle of the day, even though it was the middle of the night. Jeff had no idea where he was. He had no money, no I.D., not even his passport, and no cell phone, but fortunately, English is prominent in Hong Kong. *I sure am glad our mission was not in Beirut*, he thought to himself. Tired, jet-lagging, up late from the trauma he just experienced, including a scraped-up belly that was aching, he pondered what he should do. *No phone and no money; can't call anyone or pay for a taxi.* With no ID, he couldn't even prove who he was. *If I could just get to the US Embassy, they could establish my identity and get me back to the hotel.*

He flagged down a taxi that pulled over. He opened the passenger door and said, "I don't have any money, but I need a ride. I can pay you later ..." The taxi pulled away "... when I get where I'm going," Jeff mumbled under his breath. "I'm so exhausted. I just want to sleep." His eyes were bloodshot, his hair disheveled, and his body ached all over. He kept walking but started to stagger slightly. Feeling dazed and confused, his mind was wandering, still coming to grips with the bizarre events of the evening. He kept walking, staring at the ground, not knowing where he was headed.

Suddenly, a voice asked, "Do you need some help?" Jeff stopped and looked up. Before him was a nicely dressed man with what appeared to be a stack of brochures in his hand. Jeff just

stood there dazed. As a woman passed by, the man handed her a tract and said, "Jesus loves you and so do I." The lady took the tract without slowing down or saying a word. Everything was like a dream to Jeff. He was feeling faint, and it showed on his tired face. "Why don't you sit down here on the curb for a minute?" said the man. Jeff sat down. "You don't look too well, my friend." Jeff just looked up, still dazed. "How can I help you?" the man asked.

Jeff paused and gathered his thoughts. "Uh, I was robbed of all my money and identification. If I could just get to the US Embassy, I think I'll be okay."

The man signaled for a cab. When it pulled over, he opened the rear door and motioned for Jeff to get in. "How much to take this man to the US Embassy?" he asked the driver.

"You pay fifty dollar," said the cabbie in broken English. The man gave the driver 50 HKD.

"Thank you so much," said Jeff as he entered the cab. "Why are you doing this for me?"

"Because Jesus loves you, and so do I. I'll be praying for you, my friend." The man closed the taxi door and watched as the driver headed for the Embassy.

The cab pulled up to the curb and let Jeff out. Jeff walked up to a booth just outside a large, fortress-looking door. "Is this the US Embassy?" he asked a fully decorated, uniformed Marine corporal sitting inside the booth. The Marine stood up and said, "Yes, it is. How can I help you?"

Jeff thought he might be dismissed if he told the marine that he worked for the CIA, so he just said, "I am an American, and I was robbed a while ago of all my money, wallet, passport, and cell phone. I need some help."

"Hold on, let me see what we can do." The Marine picked up a phone and, after a few seconds, said, "I've got an American tourist who's been robbed and needs some assistance." After a

short pause, he said, “Okay, I’ll send him in.” He pushed a button, and the door buzzed. “You can go in, but you will pass through a metal detector. Do you have anything metallic on you?”

“No, nothing.”

“Okay, go on through.”

Jeff entered through the big door, where he was greeted by a middle-aged woman also dressed in Marine attire. “I’m Sergeant Myers. And your name is?” she asked, extending her hand.

Jeff stepped forward, clasping her hand. “I’m Jeff Martinez, and thanks for letting me in. I am tired and rather desperate at this point. I hope you can help me get back to my hotel and rejoin those I am traveling with.”

“Follow me to my office, and I’ll see what I can do.”

Jeff finally felt safe telling the Embassy people that he was a CIA agent on assignment with his team here in Hong Kong. They ran a fingerprint check to verify his identity, took a photo, and issued him a new passport. They also gave him a temporary, prepaid phone loaded with two hours of talk time and drove him over to the Ritz-Carlton.

The Embassy driver dropped Jeff off at the main entrance. All he wanted to do was go crash and get some sleep. He checked in at the front desk to ask for a room key, claiming he had lost his. He showed them the temporary ID card the Embassy had printed for him. He grabbed the key card, went up the elevator, and finally staggered into his room, falling on his bed and asleep in minutes.

It was nearly noon when Jeff awoke. He felt better but was pretty groggy, but he was also quite hungry since he hadn't eaten since dinner the night before, except for some snacks the Embassy folks gave him. He wanted to take a shower, but his hunger overruled him. Grabbing his door key and headed down to the restaurant next to the lobby. When he entered, looking for a seat, he saw Dave and the other two agents eating lunch.

Approaching them, Dave looked shocked to see him. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

“You look like hell,” said Dave. “Big night out last night? I warned you about staying out late.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” said Jeff, not wanting to joke around. “I was abducted, right after the cab let me off by the *Ave of Stars* path.”

“What?” exclaimed Dave. The other two agents stopped eating. “Who? Why?”

“I have no idea. Fortunately, I was able to escape and get to the US Embassy, where they issued me a new passport and gave me a prepaid cell phone. I thought you might know whether this is connected to our assignment here in Hong Kong.”

“I can’t think of any connection. Our mission here is pretty benign. There shouldn’t be any kind of danger involved, especially here in Hong Kong.” He looked across the table at the other two agents. “Any ideas, guys?” They both shook their heads and went back to eating. “Wow, this is crazy.”

“Why didn’t you come and get me for lunch?”

“I knocked on your door, but there was no answer. I figured you were out late, but I never dreamed that anything like this could happen.”

“So you don’t think any of us are in danger?”

“Naw. Once in a great while, an American tourist, usually alone as you were, gets abducted with the intention of extorting money from loved ones back home. In your case, once they found out you were CIA, they would have dropped you like a hot potato.”

“Well, that’s good to know. I thought I was a goner.” But Jeff knew his captors probably saw his CIA ID when they took all his belongings, so he didn’t totally believe Dave.

“You’re safe now, Jeff, and that’s what counts. The agency will want a full report when you get back to Langley.”

“I’ve got quite a story to tell them. Hey, I don’t know what you’ve got planned for us today, but do you think I could just recoup and get my brain unscrambled?”

“I would, but that will not be necessary. As I was just telling the guys, our mission has been canceled, and we’ve been instructed to return to Langley immediately.”

“Today?” asked Jeff. “You’ve got a flight booked for us?”

“Yep. We leave about 2 pm, so we all need to go pack up and meet down here in the lobby in about fifteen minutes.”

Jeff was stunned. This trip was making no sense to him at all.

The team caught their flight on time and were back in DC the next day. Jeff returned exhausted, mentally, physically, and emotionally. When he got home, he went to bed early and slept for about 14 hours. When he woke up, it all seemed like a bad dream, but he knew it wasn’t. He looked at the clock, and he had just enough time to shower, grab a piece of toast and coffee, and get to work on time. He hoped he would get some answers today about his abduction and why the mission was canceled.

When he got to Langley, he parked, walked into the building through the main entrance metal detector, and then down a long corridor toward his office. He made a mental note to call Janelle and Sara sometime today. Both calls were important, but for different reasons. Entering his office, he put his briefcase down and placed his coat across the back of his desk chair. He sat down and called Janelle.

“Hello,” the voice answered.

“Janelle, it’s me, Jeff.”

“Oh, so glad you called.”

“Any new developments on your end?” asked Jeff.

“No, nothing. I just miss having you to talk to anytime. I’m still trying to figure this all out. We’re still searching. We need to never give up hope about finding Mom and Dad.”

“Very true, but don’t wear out your brain. Some things in life are not figure-out-able.”

“I know, but I can't help it. I keep thinking something will lead us to some crazy man, or whatever.”

“Yeah, me too,” answered Jeff.

“How about you? Anything new?”

“I went on my field trip, but the mission was aborted two days after we arrived.”

“How come?”

“They don’t always tell us such things. It's always about having a ‘need to know,’ and they don’t seem to think I need to know, so I never know.”

“Very funny.”

“Well, it's mostly true, being as far down the food chain as I am.”

“Nothing exciting happened in Hong Kong?”

“In two days? Naw,” he lied. He did not want to needlessly add to Janelle's worries and burdens. “I'll tell you all about it on my next long weekend visit. Being able to fly free on military planes is golden. I just have to do the standby thing.”

“Okay. Let me know when you can come out.”

“Maybe next weekend, but not sure yet. Take care.”

“Thanks for calling. Bye.”

Okay, one down and one to go. He started to call Sara, but then decided to take the long walk to the other building where she worked. He didn't want to be noticed taking a break so early after arriving, so he slipped out a side door that automatically locked behind him and took an even longer route around both buildings, where few people are seen.

When he got to Sara's office, she saw him, immediately rushed to the door, and gave him a big hug. Her body close to his made him forget for a moment all the trouble he had just been through. *Man, I'm falling in love with this girl,* he thought as she held him tight. *I wonder where it will lead.* Sara released him and pulled

away so she could look in his eyes. "You're back early from your trip, or did you not go?"

"We went, but it got aborted on the second day there."

"That's a bummer."

Jeff looked off in the distance. "I need to tell someone what happened to me there."

Concern filled Sara's face. "Sounds serious."

"It was, and I'm still reeling from it."

"Tell me what it is."

"I can't, it will take too long, and it's too traumatic."

"You're gonna leave me hanging like that?"

"Only until tonight, if we can go out."

"Sure, of course."

"Pick you up at 6 PM?"

"That works."

"I'm okay, now, so don't worry. But I have a lot of unanswered questions. Maybe you can help me think them through."

"Happy to do so," said Sara, still expressing her concern.

"Okay, thanks. I feel better already."

"Glad I could help."

"I think you'll help more tonight. See Ya."

Jeff took off and hurried back to his office, expecting someone or some email to be there, asking him to submit a report on his experience in Hong Kong. But no one and no email came all day.

Jeff and Sara went out to a very nice restaurant. He wanted to never stop impressing her, even if it meant living lean the rest of the time. He told her about his abduction and escape in all its dramatic, gory detail. She was horrified but had no clue what it meant or why the mission was aborted. She only said that unexpected experiences without explanations were not unusual at the CIA and that he had better get used to it.

Chapter 15

The next day, Jeff felt his workload backing up because of the trip to Hong Kong. *I'd think they would take this kind of thing into consideration when making the schedules.* But he understood that some schedules cannot be pushed out, and his research work was a key element in many projects. So he was determined to get caught up as much as possible, even if it meant working late. He checked off Janelle and Sara from his mental to-do list, freeing his mind to focus on the mountain of work before him.

As lunch time rolled around, he decided to save time by eating in the company cafeteria, rather than going out as he usually did. The food wasn't all that good, but it wasn't bad, either. He entered the cafeteria, got in line, then selected a hot turkey sandwich plate with mashed potatoes and gravy. He knew it was hard for anyone to ruin such a tasty meal. Grabbing his tray, he found a vacant spot at one of the long tables. After he sat down, an older man sat down across from him with his own tray of food. He did not say anything and just smiled. Jeff smiled back. "Oh, shoot," he said out loud. "I need some salt and pepper." The old man did not seem to notice that Jeff had spoken. Jeff got up and came back in a minute with salt and pepper in his hand. The man was already gone. Jeff wondered how he could eat so fast, or whether he just decided to sit somewhere else.

As Jeff sat down again, he saw a note slipped under the edge of his tray toward where the man was sitting. He pulled the note out and read it. *Your life is in danger. Meet me at the newsstand just inside the main entrance at Union Station in DC at 3 pm. Find the car magazines*

section. Jeff flipped the note over to see if there was anything else written. The only one who could have left the note was the old man. He sat high in his chair and looked around for him. Had he not just gone through his scary experience in Hong Kong, he would have taken the note as some kind of joke. But under the circumstances, he took the note quite seriously. “Three o'clock in DC?” he mumbled. “That really cuts into my day. So much for getting caught up.” Not only was his curiosity piqued, but Jeff was also understandably disturbed by the note’s warning of danger.

Jeff had trouble concentrating the rest of the afternoon, unable to get the warning from the note out of his head. When 2:30 rolled around, Jeff grabbed his coat and headed out for Union Station in DC. He got there at almost exactly 3 PM. He went through the main entrance and saw the newsstand to the left. It was a large booth that stood out in the middle of the busy, noisy, marble-lined main floor area. Hundreds of train arrival and departure times were displayed on the walls, about halfway down from the high ceilings. A crowd gathered around the large booth with racks of magazines, books, and newspapers. Circling the booth, he weaved in and out of people until he found the car magazines. He looked around, then reached over and pulled out the latest issue of *Classic Cars*. “Good choice,” said an old man standing next to him, keeping his eyes fixed on a copy of *Guns and Ammo*. Jeff looked over and saw the same old man from the cafeteria. “Just keep reading,” he said, without breaking his own gaze away from his pages. Jeff looked back down, pretending to read. “Your Dad would approve of your choice, himself being the owner of a classic car.”

“How do you know this, and who are you?”

“All in good time, my young friend. This is a safer place to talk than the cafeteria, but not for any long-term discussion.” The old man placed the magazine back on the rack and pulled out a

different one. “Did you ever see the movie *All the President's Men*, with Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman?”

“Yes.” Jeff kept his eyes on the magazine and turned to the next page.

“There was a parking garage where Bob Woodward met with Deep Throat. Do you remember that?”

“Yep,” he answered, concluding that the old man was some kind of delusional nut-case.

“Do some research and find out where it is. I’ll meet you there at 10:30 tonight. Take a cab and switch cabs, just like in the movie. Can you do that?”

“Yes, but is this a joke?” Jeff was feeling half confused and half duped.

The man looked over at Jeff for the first time. “I’m afraid this is deadly serious. I know all about your Grampa’s Las Vegas murder in 1987.” He turned his attention back to his magazine. “That should be all you need to know to make me credible. I’ll explain a lot more tonight. Go down to the bottom floor of the garage and find the southeast corner.”

“Okay,” Jeff said hesitantly, “I’ll be there.”

“Good. See you then. Tell no one about any of this.” The man closed the magazine, returned it to the rack, and casually walked away. Jeff caught his movement out of the corner of his eye, but did not turn his head.

Jeff returned to his office and decided to work late as planned and, perhaps, get a little bit caught up. However, he couldn’t focus on anything other than the words of the old man and his recent narrow escape in Hong Kong. However, he researched the location of the parking garage and wrote down the address.

About 9:30, he left work and drove to a supermarket parking lot. He chose it because it was joined to a pharmacy that had a side door he could exit from without being seen. He went in, walked up and down a few aisles, then went into the adjacent

Pharmacy and exited through the side door. One block away was a busy street with lots of cabs. He flagged one over and got in. “Can you take me to...” he paused as he pulled the address from his pocket, and handed the paper to the cabbie, “...this address?”

“Sure thing, mister,” he said, handing the paper back to Jeff. Jeff stuffed it back into his pocket and leaned back into the seat, contemplating what the mysterious old man might have to say when they would meet.

The cabbie dropped Jeff off, and after Jeff paid him, he pulled away from the curb and sped away, leaving Jeff alone in a very dark and lonely part of town. However, it was very quiet, and there was little sense of danger. Jeff checked his phone for the time. He was about ten minutes early. *That's better than being late*, he thought. He went down three flights of concrete stairs until he reached the bottom level of the parking garage built on the side of a hill. It was very dark, and very few cars were parked on the lower level. He had memorized what direction the south-east corner would be, so he headed that way.

When he got to the corner, the old man was already there. “Did you take two cabs?”

“I did better than that. Parked my car and went into a store connected to another store and then exited through a side door.”

“I like that, good thinking.”

“I then walked a block and flagged down a cab.”

“Okay, we should be good.”

“Isn’t this a little silly, copying a scene in a movie?”

“Oh, quite the contrary. I'm copying something from real life that worked. Remember, the movie was about real, historical events. Deep throat picked this parking garage for a reason. It's off the main beat, it's quiet, dark, and not used all that much. So if it's good enough for Deep Throat, it's good enough for me.”

“Ok, makes sense. Well, lay it on me. What is all this stuff about my life being in danger? From whom?”

“Maybe we should sit down. There's a curb going up to the walkway just next to your feet. You see it?”

“Yes.” Jeff sat down, and the old man did too, but with a grunt.

“Your danger comes from the CIA.”

“What?” Jeff said, standing up. They hired me and like my work. That's crazy.”

“It's not as crazy as you think, and you'll see why after I fill you in.” Jeff sat down again. “That mishap in Hong Kong ...” The old man paused to let Jeff ponder.

Jeff stood up again, “No way. We went there on a mission, some kind of assignment.”

“Why do you think it was aborted?”

“I have no idea.”

“Did you ask them?”

“Of course,” said Jeff as he sat down again.

“And...?”

“They said the reason was classified, and we didn't need to know.”

“Oh yeah, that's a common dodge they use a lot. The mission wasn't aborted, it was accomplished ... so they assumed, until you showed up the next day still alive.”

“You mean that *I* was the mission?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“But why, what have I done to make them want to kill me?” Jeff was almost in tears.”

“It's not anything you've done, it's who you are?”

“Who I am? What do you mean?”

“Your parents are Jobe and Ellie Martinez, and your grandfather is Charlie Johnson.” The old man let his words sink in to Jeff's thinking.

Jeff stared at the ground, pondering the old man's words. Then he looked up. “You mean to tell me it was the CIA all along and not the Mob or some crazy man?”

“I’m afraid so.” The old man watched as Jeff leaned back with his hands behind him on the walkway.

Jeff looked over at the old man. “Then that means my Mom was not imagining things all these years.”

“No, she was not.”

“But the Las Vegas police said it was the Mob who took out my Grampa.”

“It was staged to look that way. You must keep in mind that these are very clever and ruthless people.”

“Is all the CIA this corrupt?” asked Jeff.

“Oh, heavens no. Most are very good people and dedicated public servants.”

“How about my girlfriend, Sara?”

“She has no knowledge or part in any of this. The so-called team you were on in Hong Kong is part of an elite, special operations group *within* the CIA. They are almost invisible.”

“Then my recruitment was rigged?”

“Yes.”

“And Sara?” Jeff cringed as he asked.

“She knew it was rigged, but she didn’t know why. You were hired so they could observe you.”

“That’s kind of scary. You mean the Job Fair in Sacramento was a setup?”

“The Job Fair wasn’t, but the booth in the Job Fair was. Didn’t you find it strange to get a flyer addressed to you way up in your foothills town, an hour away from Sacramento?”

“Yeah, actually, I did, come to think of it. But the booth said CIA on it.”

“Yes, and that was all for you to see and be drawn in. Anyone else visiting the booth got a brochure for a company named *Creative Instrumentation of America*, and they would joke with the visitors about the CIA acronym.”

“So that’s why Sara seemed to see me coming and took over when I visited the booth.”

“Yep, it was all there to draw you in. But your relationship with the girl is real. CIA agents are real people who develop real passions. She was just doing her recruiting job as she was asked to. Don’t hold it against her.”

Jeff was relieved. “Wow, that’s good to know. At least something in my world is genuine.” Jeff’s mind suddenly shifted. “Hey, who are you, and how come you know so much?”

“I’m surprised you didn’t ask me this earlier.”

“I wanted to, but I got a little distracted by this big CIA-after-me paradigm shift.”

“Understandable. My name is Jim Phillips,” the old man said, extending his hand.

Jeff shook his hand. “Happy to meet you, Jim. Hey, wait a minute, my Mom mentioned you once. You’re that long-time friend of my Grampa Charlie.”

“That’s right. We go way back. I worked under your grandfather as a technician at Los Alamos Labs near the end of the Second World War. After the war, I went into government work, and your Grampa went into the newly developing civilian technology environment. But we kept in touch.”

“So how do you know so much?”

“Ha! I’m a relic at the CIA. I started at the beginning in 1947. I’m kind of the *resident historian*. Though I retired years ago, they keep me around on a contract basis because I know where all the bodies are buried, so to speak, and have information that isn't in any files. I have a top-secret clearance, and they pretty much let me wander around the agency, keeping up on the latest developments. Occasionally, they call me into a meeting to pick my brain. I’m seen as a harmless, trusted old guy who is now just part of the furnishings.

“But about a week ago, I accidentally came across your file, which is not easy to do since it is part of this clandestine Special Ops group that is supposed not to exist. As I read through your history, I recognized you by the Martinez name, and I

remembered the letter I received from your Mom shortly after your grandfather's death. Reading further, I realized the immediate danger you were in and had to warn you."

"Well, I'm sure glad you did, Jim. What should I do now?"

"That's the tricky part. I think buying time is essential. Your sister is also in danger."

"Why us, and why my parents? Do you know what happened to them?"

"I'll explain all that next time we meet, but for now, we gotta get you out of here. You need to go home this weekend and tell your sister everything I've told you. Tell your boss you need to check on your sister, since he knows about your parents' disappearance; he just doesn't know why. Fly home and then call in on Monday to let them know you need to stay a couple more days. This will buy you and your sister time without raising any suspicion. I will also fly out this weekend on a fake gambling trip to Reno, Nevada, which is driving distance from your hometown. Is there some secret place we can meet so I can fill you both in on everything I know?"

Jeff thought for a moment, then he remembered Zack's cabin. "Yes, we have access to a cabin owned by a family friend. It is vacant, but he wants us to visit occasionally to guard against break-ins."

"Perfect. Write down the street address and draw me a map, then transfer it to me the way I slipped my note to you in the cafeteria tomorrow at coffee break time, around 10 AM. Make sure you get your flight set up for Friday and let your boss know what you are doing."

"Okay, I will. But I have many more questions."

"All in due time. For now, let's just keep you and your sister out of harm's way."

"Okay."

“My car is parked on the top level. I’ll give you a ride to a few blocks away from your apartment. They may be watching you, so we shouldn’t chance being seen together.”

“How on earth are we going to get out of this mess?” asked Jeff.

“I wish I had the answer, but I don’t. For now, let’s stay one step ahead of the problems and see what happens.”

“Okay. I guess that’s all we can do.”

“It is,” said Jim, trying to reassure Jeff. “Let’s go.”

Around midnight, Jim let Jeff off a few blocks away from his apartment. He walked quickly to get there, but was a bit paranoid of every shadow around every corner.

On the next day, Friday, Jeff went to work as usual, though it no longer felt usual. He booked his flight for that afternoon and let his boss know about his plans. He also wrote down the cabin's address on a piece of paper, added a map showing Jim where to turn off at the Five Mile House store, folded it, and, around 10 AM, successfully transferred the paper to Jim via the cafeteria trays.

Friday evening, Jeff arrived at the Sacramento airport. Janelle was waiting for him in her car along the arrivals curb. Jeff strolled out right on time, threw his carry-on suitcase into the back seat, and got in.

“Oh, I am so relieved to see you,” said Janelle. “Thanks for coming.”

“How could I not?”

“When do you have to go back?” she asked as she looked over her shoulder and pulled away from the curb.

“Uh, well,” Jeff hesitated, “I don’t think I’m going back.”

“What? You already quit your job? I thought you loved it. What about Sara?”

“I do love it, and Sara owns my heart.” Janelle looked over at Jeff, showing her confusion. “You’ll understand after I tell you everything that has happened.”

“Did you get fired, or what?”

“Worse than that.” Janelle’s curiosity piqued. Jeff looked out the passenger window. “Oh, man, where do I start?”

“Sounds serious.” Janelle looked over at him, then shifted her focus back on the road as she dove over the top of I-5 and circled around the on-ramp. She waited for him to gather his thoughts.

He looked back over at Janelle. “This was way too serious to discuss on the phone, so I hope you don’t mind that I waited to tell you in person.”

“What, did you kill somebody or something?”

“No, but I almost got killed.”

“You’re scaring me, big brother. This is way too much like the mom-and-dad thing.”

“I’m afraid it is. It is very much tied into Mom and Dad’s disappearance.”

“What? The Mob or some crazy man came after you all the way across the country?” she said, with a snicker in her voice.

“It wasn’t the Mob or a crazy man,” he said, looking over at her, letting his words sink in. “It was the CIA.”

The car swerved in the lane slightly as Janelle reacted to Jeff’s revelation. “I gotta pull over so we can talk about this,” she said as she took the next off-ramp. She turned right twice and pulled into a space in a McDonald’s parking lot. She turned off the engine. “This is crazy. Are you telling me that all Mom’s sightings of creepy men and the disappearance of both our parents is the work of the CIA?”

“Yep, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“And they tried to kill you?”

“Yes, last week in Hong Kong.”

Janelle leaned back in the seat and stared at the sun visor, trying to take it all in. Jeff gave her a moment. He knew this would

have to come out slowly and painfully, just as it had for him when he heard it from Jim. “Why? This is insane and very scary.”

“I don’t know why, yet. Do you remember the name, Jim Phillips?”

“I think so. Wasn’t he an old friend of Grampa’s?”

“That’s the guy. He works at the CIA, but has retired and is now a consultant. He happened to come across a file that chronicled a case concerning Grampa, Mom, Dad, and now us.”

“They killed Grampa back in 1987?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know that either.”

“How are we going to find out? Am I in danger, too?”

“Yes. Sorry.” Janelle was stunned, and doubly so after all she had recently been through. “But the good news is that Jim Phillips is coming here this weekend to fill us in on everything he knows.”

“Does he know what we should do about all of this?”

“He said he was not sure, but for now he just wants to help us stay safe.” Janelle just stared out the windshield. “Should I drive home the rest of the way?” Jeff asked her.

“Yeah, I think so. You’ve had more time to get used to all this insanity.” Janelle got out of the car and came around to the passenger side, while Jeff passed her, headed to the driver’s seat.

Jeff started up the car, looked over at Janelle, and said, “Buckle up. Something tells me we’re in for quite a ride.”

Chapter 16

The next day, on Saturday morning, Jeff got up early, once again jet-lagged. He decided not to visit Carla's, fearing who might be looking for him and Janelle. He made some coffee and fried a couple of eggs with bacon. A couple of hours later, as he sipped his third cup of coffee, Janelle entered the living room, where he was reclining and pondering.

"Morning," she said, still stunned by Jeff's revelations the night before.

"You look tired," said Jeff. "Want some coffee?"

"Sure. But how about going to Carla's?"

"I think we need to lay low until after we talk to Jim."

"Okay. Makes sense."

Jeff disappeared into the kitchen and soon came out with a cup of coffee for Janelle. He handed it to her. She took it without saying a word. "I gave Jim a map before I left DC and added a note to meet us at the cabin Saturday afternoon. So, we should head over there sometime after lunch."

"Okay," she said, followed by a sip of her coffee. "Tastes pretty good. Thanks."

"You okay?" he asked, turning his head slightly to the right.

"I will be." Janelle put her coffee on the side table next to her chair. "I have so many questions. How can all this be happening to us?"

"I do, too. Hopefully, we'll get some answers today."

"We'd better, or I'm gonna go nuts."

“We will. Jim told me he knows a lot more, but it would have to wait until we are in a safe place to talk.”

Janelle nervously picked up her cup and took a sip. “And that safe place would be the cabin?”

“Yep. That’s the plan.”

Noon came and went, so they packed up essential items, grabbed the dog and his food, got in Jeff’s car, and headed for the cabin. “This is all such cloak and dagger stuff,” said Janelle. “I feel like at any moment someone could close in and take us away.”

“I know the feeling. We’ll just have to keep our eyes open and be very cautious,” said Jeff as he looked around while starting the car. “I think I’ll take all the back roads up to the cabin, just to play it safe.”

“Good idea.”

Jeff headed away from town on a side street that led to a winding, uphill back road that disappeared into the pine trees, which so characterized their sleepy little town. It was a longer route, but less traveled and safer than the freeway. The two of them did not talk much, their minds full of questions neither of them could answer. Jeff monotonously glided through the turns, some of them quite sharp, having to downshift then back up in the straightaways. After about fifteen minutes and having climbed another 1100 feet above Oak Pines, they reach a neighboring sleepy town of Pollock Pines, also nestled in the Northern California foothills.

Emerging from the narrow road that had no center line, Jeff turned left onto a two-lane stretch of Highway 50. “Did you know about that slower back way of getting to the cabin?”

“I had no idea,” answered Janelle.

“Dad and I used to go for drives seeking out back roads just to see where they go.”

“Yeah, I remember you guys doing that. But wouldn’t it be easier to just look at a map?”

“What? And spoil our sense of adventure? Besides, that would be cheating. Okay, here’s our turn. This Five-mile House store is our landmark. Do you remember it?”

“Not really,” Janelle just stared out the passenger window, not wanting to talk, as Jeff let a few cars pass before turning left. into the store parking lot, then pulled around behind the store. “What are you doing?”

“We need some groceries. I doubt there are any at the cabin. I’ll be right back.”

Jeff got out of the car, carefully walked around to the front of the small market, and entered. The store carried only a few basic items, but enough for the local away-from-town residents to buy basic items without venturing into town, five miles down the hill. Jeff lifted a basket from the rack near the door and walked up and down all three short aisles, grabbing bread, eggs, milk, butter, some lunch meat, mayonnaise – he knew this was an essential – bacon, and some fruit. He paid the young woman seated behind the cramped counter, using cash as Jim suggested.

Back in the car, Jeff pulled around to the front of the store, turned left onto the highway, then left again down an under-sized two-way road. In less than a quarter mile, Jeff turned left into a long gravel driveway that slowly brought the cabin into view. The cabin had a high, steep roof, sloped to handle large dumps of winter snow. The roof curved outward near the bottom, giving the cabin a charming, Chalet-like appearance. The windows were in a crisscross style. The rockwork of the walls contained a beautiful mix of brown, gray, blue, and green, fashioned skillfully, ranging from small stones to giant boulders.

Jeff parked, and they both got out. “Oh, smell that fresh mountain air,” he said, walking up to the porch, looking under all the flower pots for the hidden key. “Do you remember which pot the hidden key is under?”

“No, sorry, I don’t,” is all Janelle said.

“You okay?”

“I’m just tired and tired of all this insane craziness. I hope Jim has some answers for us.”

“Trust me; he will. Here it is, under the third flower pot on the right. Remember that. Hey, weren’t you gonna hide the key somewhere better?”

“Yeah, maybe I will ... later.”

They went in and made themselves at home just as Zack had suggested when he offered the cabin to their parents.

Meanwhile, Jim Phillips had just landed at the Reno airport on his fake gambling trip as cover for his clandestine visit to meet with Janelle and Jeff at the cabin. He took a taxi to the downtown area that was lined with casinos. He passed under a big arch that said, “The Biggest Little City in the World.” As the Taxi drove down the main drag, Jim watched out the window as he passed the Atlantis Casino Resort, the El Dorado, Circus Circus, the Grand Sierra Resort, and the Club Cal Nevada. “Pull over here,” requested Jim. He paid the cabbie, grabbed his overnight bag, and headed down the sidewalk.

Though it was the middle of the day, bright lights filled his gaze, and the clink-clank of slot machines tickled his ears. Personally, he had no interest whatsoever in gambling, but he remembered how fascinated his old friend, Charlie Johnson, was with every aspect of it. When he reached the Grand Sierra, he entered the front door, navigated his way through the casino on the plush, multi-colored carpet to a counter in the back next to the parking garage. The sign overhead read, *Car Rentals*. “I need a rental car with unlimited mileage for today and tomorrow.”

The man at the counter took all his ID information, had him sign a contract, and then handed him the keys. “Step through that door on the left into the garage, and your car is the second one on the right.” Jim thanked him, exited into the garage, got into his assigned car, and drove out the back exit. He followed some obscure streets that he had pre-selected until he found the on-

ramp for southbound I-580. He traveled until it turned into Highway 50 at the 395 junction, which then took him along the shore of Lake Tahoe. There, he took in spectacular views of the lake he had never seen before. He stayed on 50 traveling over Myers Grade, then down the hill through Twin Bridges, Strawberry, Kyburz, and finally Pollock Pines. He took out the map Jeff had given him and looked for the Five Mile House store, where he turned left, and down the road toward the cabin. He looked at the map again and checked the address he saw on a fence post at the opening of a gravel driveway. He turned in and followed the driveway up to the cabin.

Hearing the tires crunch through the gravel, Jeff emerged through the front door to meet Jim. As Jim got out of the rental car, Jeff asked from the porch, "Did you find the cabin okay?"

"No problem," answered Jim.

"And did your switch cabs?" asked Jeff, sarcastically.

"Better than that. I slipped out the back way at the Grand Sierra in this rental car."

"That should be good enough," said Jeff, mimicking the role Jim played at Deep Throat's parking garage a few nights before. Jeff gestured with his hand, "Come on in."

Jim climbed the few front steps and entered the cabin as Jeff held the door open. He closed it behind Jim and said to Janelle, "Meet Jim Phillips, our new survival guide in life."

Janelle was not in the mood for humor, but she said, "Welcome, Jim. I am really glad you came. I have a thousand questions."

"And I have answers, not all of them, but many that will be of great help to both of you," he said, looking at Janelle and then Jeff in turn.

"Please sit down. Can I get you anything?" asked Jeff.

"Just some water."

"Anything for you, Janelle?"

"Another cup of coffee would be good."

“Good choice, that’s what I’ll have, too.”

Jim spoke up. “Uh, if you’re serving coffee, I’ll change my order.”

“Okay, three coffees coming right up.” Jeff disappeared into the kitchen.

“Wow, this cabin is just as you described it in your book, *Streams of Terrible Beauty*,” commented Jim.

“You read it?” asked Janelle, sitting up a little straighter in her chair.

“Here’s your coffee,” said Jeff, placing three mugs down on the coffee table before them.

“Yes, I did,” answered Jim. “The CIA has a copy, and I’ll tell you more about that in a little bit.”

Janelle looked at Jeff, who was just as surprised as she was.

“Let me start right about where I left off with Jeff the other night. He filled you in, right?” Jim took a sip of coffee while looking at Janelle.

“He did,” she answered, “but I’ve got a ton of questions.”

“All in due time, my dear. Let me tell you both what I know and see how many questions get answered.”

“Okay,” and “sure,” Janelle and Jeff responded sequentially.

Jim stood up, cup in hand, paced a short distance, then turned back toward the two siblings. “Probably your big questions are: why your Grampa was killed, why your parents disappeared, and why the CIA is after you today. Am I right?”

“Yes,” and “for sure,” they answered.

“Let me start with question three first. It should be the most important and urgent question for both of you. To give it as straightforwardly as I can, the book you wrote is why you became a target.”

“What?” protested Jeff. “How could they possibly object to our account of Mom and Dad’s experiences?”

“Well, answering the questions about Charlie and your parents will explain it. Charlie and I worked at Los Alamos Labs

just after WWII, and right after the Manhattan Project that produced the atomic bomb. We were both involved in a project exploring the usefulness of quantum weirdness (that's what we used to call it) for the military. We were both technicians, Charlie at the senior level, and I was about ten years younger at an entry level. One evening, when Charlie was working late, he came across a file folder that was accidentally left out on a table in the lab where we did our work. It was marked Top Secret, and he ignored it for a while, not sure what he should do. But his curiosity got the best of him, and he thumbed through it for quite a while. He was both shocked and intrigued by what he found."

"How do you know all this?" asked Jeff. "Were you there, too?"

"Oh, heavens no, and I'm glad I wasn't. Charlie told me about this incident a couple of years later, after we became trusted friends. I think he needed to tell someone."

"What did he end up doing about it?" asked Janelle.

"He told me that he looked through the file very carefully, trying not to disturb how it was arranged. However, he's sure he left fingerprints, something he didn't consider at the time. He left the folder on the table where it was, finished his work, and left. But he always regretted giving in to his curiosity and worried about it over the years, partly because of what he read, but also because he knew how much the Lab protected all government-oriented secrets."

"Nothing ever came of it until 1987?" asked Jeff.

"Apparently so. I think he became less concerned over the years since no one ever approached him about it."

"That makes sense," said Janelle, "but why would they ever suspect him in the first place?"

"We always had to log in and out of the lab when we were working in it. So when they discovered the unsecured file, it would be easy to look up who was in the lab that evening. Charlie was correct in thinking that he *could* be in trouble."

“But it still makes no sense that they would wait until 1987 to take action,” concluded Jeff. “And why the CIA? How did they get involved? Don’t they deal with foreign threats, leaving national threats to the NSA?”

“Let me address those one at a time. First, there was no NSA until 1952, when it was originally founded. The CIA was formed in 1947. I was part of the original team, and that’s why I’m viewed as a trusted old man who is also a *walking CIA history book*. Once the military discovered the possible breach, they likely turned it over to the CIA to investigate.

“Now, as for your first question of why wait so long, some thirty years? Well, here is what I think. The CIA never acts hastily. They thoroughly investigate matters, then if they decide to act, it is executed decisively and with all needed planning. I can only guess that they were watching Charlie all those years, and that something triggered them to act in 1987, just as your book triggered them to act against your parents and both of you. We’ll never know what triggered their action to kill your grandfather, but rest assured that something did.”

“There is another aspect of this whole thing that probably plays in. The people who killed Charlie also killed your parents,” Janelle and Jeff both flinched, “and are now after you. It is a *Special Ops* group that operates almost invisibly within the Agency. This clandestine nature is what makes them so efficient, but it also makes them dangerous. There is little or no oversight, so once they get a target, they don’t quit until the mission is completed. This is why you are so much in danger and will say that way until...” Jim paused, realizing the truth he must tell them, “... well, until they succeed. They are very efficient, have endless resources available to them, and never fail as far as I can tell.”

“Then we are doomed!” Janelle began to weep, “We’ll end up just like Mom and Dad and Grampa Charlie.”

Jim knew what she was saying was probably true, but he was also determined to give both of them some hope. “Not necessarily,” he quickly replied.

Janelle looked up at Jim. “Then you know how we can escape this mess and get on with our lives?”

“No, I wish I did, but something deep in my soul tells me there is a solution. I just don’t know what it is.”

“So why did the book trigger this *Special Ops* group?” asked Jeff.

“Well, I can only guess, but here’s my theory. They thought they had taken care of any lingering problems when they took out Charlie. However, they wanted to make sure, so they kept an eye on your parents after they returned from Vegas to see if there were any signs of them knowing what Charlie knew.”

“Why did they only spy on Mom and not Dad?” asked Janelle.

“Oh, I’m sure they spied on both of them, but your Dad did not detect it in any way, being a man and not having that sixth sense that women seem to have about people and life.”

“But they seemed to have wanted Mom to notice them,” added Jeff.

Jim threw back his head slightly. “Ahh, yes. I have an educated guess about that, too. The CIA often likes to prod people to see how they react. Sometimes they learn more genuine and accurate information this way than by directly asking or forcing people to talk.”

“I can’t believe the CIA, especially as my employer, is so corrupt.”

“Whoa, wait a minute. Most of the CIA is comprised of good, honorable people who are trusted public servants and want to do a good job. It is just this small, *Special Ops* group that is the problem.”

“Why doesn’t somebody shut them down?”

“Ahh, good question. First, almost no one knows they exist. They hide *within* the Agency under their own cover and with funding they cleverly obtained. Besides, who would shut them down? They’ve been around almost since the beginning. They are very powerful, and the few who know about them also fear them. They are like a runaway train. Unstoppable.”

“I don’t know about Jeff, but I only have one more question.”

“Go for it.”

“I have a degree in physics, and I’ve been studying quantum mechanics, *quantum weirdness* as you call it, and I’m just wondering what Grampa Charlie found out that could get him killed.”

“Well, it could have been something that was Top Secret at the time, but is common knowledge today, which is probably everything we knew at the time.”

“If that’s true, then why would they still come after us so many years later?”

“That’s hard to explain, but let me try. These *Special Ops* people are not normal people. They are not necessarily bad, just fanatic about never questioning their chain of command and always accomplishing a mission, once ordered to do so, no matter what.”

“How can they be good people and go around killing others?”

“I hate to say it, but it’s about blind, unquestioned loyalty. They let someone higher decide who lives or dies, believing their job is to obey orders, alleviating them from responsibility in their own minds. This requires a very special, unusual kind of temperament, but such people are out there, and most end up as assassins, working for the Mob, or in CIA *Special Ops* groups. The sad thing I must tell you is that once they have been given a directive, there’s no stopping them. They act as an isolated field unit that must stay in complete isolation from the Agency until their mission is completed.”

Janelle just looked at Jeff, both contemplating the dire straits they were in. “So, we just have to wait here until they find us and kill us?” she asked.

Jim desperately wanted to give them some hope, but he also wanted to be honest with them. “Do you remember the movie, *Borne Ultimatum*? It came out about four years ago and was the third movie in the *Jason Borne Trilogy*.”

Janelle and Jeff both answered, “Yes.”

“Though Jason Borne was a CIA assassin, he became a target himself by other CIA assassins. At one point near the end of the movie, his assailant had a clear, close-up shot at him, but didn’t take it because Jason, previously in the movie, had a clear shot at him and did not take it. While pointing his gun at Jason, he asked him, ‘Why didn’t you take the shot?’ Jason’s response was, ‘Do you even know *why* you’re supposed to kill me?’ and then he walked away. He asked a key question that perfectly describes these Special Ops folks. They don’t know, and don’t care, why they are killing. They just do it because it’s their job. Let me put it this way. You are in a pickle, for sure, but haven’t you found that life is often unpredictable and almost anything can happen?”

“Yes, but that’s how we got into this unpredictable mess,” said Jeff experiencing a strange mixture of cynicism, frustration, and fear.

Jim knew Jeff was right and had to think fast. “Well, then, why can’t there be an equally unpredictable *solution* on the horizon?” The siblings were both silent, now contemplating this other side of life’s coin. Finally, Jeff said with a glimmer of hope, “Yeah, I guess that’s possible.”

“Then cling to that, never give up hope, and keep your eyes wide open for that unpredictable solution.”

“I thought you were going to say to keep our eyes open for any possible danger,” added Janelle.

“Yes, that too, of course. But it is even more essential to maintain a positive, optimistic mindset, or you might just miss the *solution* when it comes your way, and I believe it will.”

“How do you know, Jim?” asked Jeff.

Jim leaned forward in his chair and clasped his hands together. He looked up at Jeff. “To be honest, I don’t know for sure, but I do *believe* it, and that’s the more important aspect of life. As I mentioned, I read your book because the CIA had a copy of it in a cupboard in their *evidence* room. I learned about Charlie’s *Streams of Terrible Beauty* idea, and it did not surprise me, having known him since his early years as a younger man. He always had this view of life, and he lived it. I was fascinated by your parents’ journey of meeting each other through all their ups and downs, and their fateful vacation that tragically ended in Las Vegas. But since the two of you wrote this book and were raised by your parents, I can’t help but believe that *Streams* is firmly embedded in the core of your being. Am I right?” They both nodded and affirmed what Jim was suggesting. “So, cling to that as a basis for your optimism, knowing that eventually God will make all *terrible* things *beautiful*.”

“Even this terrible situation we are stuck in, today,” asked Jeff, “knowing we will most likely die a sudden, violent death?” Janelle waited for Jim’s response with an expression on her face that said, *good question, Jeff!*

Jim responded, “*Especially* in this situation! The greater the terror, the better the eventual beauty. It is a spiritual law of life.”

“That may be,” said Jeff, “but *eventual* is the key word. We may die before we ever experience any beauty.”

“So?” asked Jim, rather coldly. “Do you think you’re the first person in the long history of this world who checked out of here, never finding a solution to some impossible problem?”

“No, of course not,” Jeff said, looking away from Jim.

“I remember Charlie telling me once that there was a passage in the New Testament that told how Abraham lived his whole life

without ever seeing God's promise of a better earthly land. And so, he instead focused on a much better land, a heavenly one. This is the kind of disposition you must also maintain.

"Do you remember during the 9-11 terrorist attack, that there were a couple of patriots on flight 93, the weaponized plane headed to destroy the Capitol? They simply said, 'let's roll' before they attacked the hijackers and caused the plane to crash in Pennsylvania?"

"Yes, I do," said Jeff, unsure of the significance.

"Unlike the two of you, they knew that they were going to die whether they succeeded or failed. Yet, they boldly went and did what they knew they had to do. You can adopt this same attitude, except that you have a chance of finding a way out. They had no such opportunity. An optimistic mental and spiritual state of being is your key to finding a solution, if there is one."

Janelle and Jeff couldn't help but agree with Jim, though it did not give them any clear or immediate solutions. However, it gave them both hope that was rooted in who they were, based on everything they had learned and experienced in their young lives.

"Any other questions?" asked Jim as he looked back and forth at each of them.

"I'm sure I have more," said Janelle, "but I'm overloaded with info right now, and it will take me some time to process all of it."

"Yep, me too," added Jeff.

Jim stood up. "I wish I could stay, hang out here with both of you. Someday, perhaps we will be able to do that. But I gotta get going. I've got a plane to catch back to DC tomorrow." As he walked toward the door, he added, "Turn your cell phones off and leave them off. It's the CIA's best method of tracking people. Buy a couple of prepaid, untraceable cell phones, and use them only for emergencies. Do not try to contact me in any way. I'll get a hold of you. Also, do not use any credit cards. Use cash only. Expect a postcard sent to this address at least weekly. The message might be a little *encrypted*, so just read between the lines

based on everything you now know.” He turned to face them before he reached the door and told them, “I need not tell you to be very careful. Trust no one, but do not let yourself become so paranoid that your thinking, praying, and exchanging ideas become locked up. That’s a recipe for certain failure. Keep seeking that *solution* that I believe must be out there somewhere.”

“Hey, one last thing, Jim,” said Jeff. “If you come again, there’s a more discreet way of getting here. You might want to use it in the future. The cabin property, in the back, butts up against State Park property. You can park behind the store at the Five Mile House and walk down a hiking trail that starts there. When you see a formation of three different-sized large rocks on the right, that’s where you cut through the forest to the back of the cabin.”

“I’ll come that way next time.”

They both thanked Jim for coming and for risking his own life and well-being for theirs. He wished them well, exited through the front door, and drove away in his rental car as Janelle and Jeff watched through the living room window.

The Chase



November 2011

Chapter 17

Jim drove back to Reno, retracing the route he followed earlier that day to the cabin. He took the same back streets to the grand Sierra parking garage, where he turned in his rental car. He booked a room, had a nice dinner, and spent the night. In the morning, he caught a cab to the airport and waited to board his long flight back to DC.

Monday morning, he went to work about the same time as usual. He sensed no indication that anyone knew where he had spent his weekend, but should it come up, his gambling trip acted as a bulletproof cover for his whereabouts. Jim, well respected at the CIA because of his age and longevity at the Agency, remained fairly invisible. Assumed to be a trusted figure, he was often a useful resource in meetings whenever his expertise was sought. He lived a rather lonely life, with few friends. But he liked it that way, keeping his life simple and fulfilling.

Shortly after grabbing his lunch alone in the company cafeteria, Jim received an email that read: *The Special Ops Group requests your presence in a meeting at 2 p.m. in room 512. Be there!* The “sent from” box in his email had only a long string of cryptic, meaningless characters. Jim was invited to meetings regularly, but this one made him nervous. *Did someone find out about my trip to Oak Pines?* he asked himself. *Perhaps someone is suspicious of my snooping around the agency in areas clearly unrelated to my work.* Jim, with his Top-Secret clearance, was afforded a lot of latitude, never called into

question in his probing activities. *Maybe I've gone too far recently, and someone is suspicious. Or, maybe it's just routine. Guess I'll soon find out.*

At 1:55, Jim headed for room 512. When he walked in, three men and a woman were already seated. He didn't recognize any of them. "Have a seat, Jim," said the woman in a serious tone of voice. Normally, this would not bother Jim since the tone at the CIA was usually formal and very business-like. They all moved through life with a sense of urgency.

Jim shuffled over to one of the vacant chairs, playing up his harmless, old-guy routine that helped him remain semi-invisible among CIA employees who are totally enamored with their own greatness. He pulled a chair out and plopped his weight into it with a muffled groan. A moment of silence passed as all four sets of eyes gazed at him. For Jim, it felt like several long minutes. He thought it odd that no one introduced themselves.

The lady finally broke the silence and said, "We've been working on a long and difficult case. We thought you might be able to shed light on it for us." She waited for his response.

Jim knew all too well how the CIA operates. They never tip their hand and often act ignorant when asking questions, already knowing the answers, just to see how subjects respond. But he also knew that playing dumb while being reasonably transparent was his best defense. "I try to stay well-informed on as many current issues as possible so I can contribute something helpful if ever called upon to do so," he responded, keeping his rhetoric as vague and general as possible.

The man seated to the woman's left spoke up. "We don't expect you to know much about this case since it has been conducted with the highest degree of secrecy over the past several decades."

"Okay, shoot. Happy to help you out anyway I can."

"Good," said the man leaning back in his chair, slightly reducing the tension in the air. "Do you know a man named Charlie Johnson?"

Jim's heart sank, and fear began to spread through his body. *Is this a trap?* he thought. *If I say 'no' and they already know my history with Charlie, I'm toast. But, then again, if they don't know, I hate to admit having any connection to him and the current situation with the Martinez kids.* Jim knew the safe bet was to be honest without offering any additional information. "Yeah," he said very slowly. "I worked with Charlie at the end of WWII."

"Did you maintain a relationship with him over the years?"

Jim had to think fast. "Ya know, after the war, I started work here at the CIA, and as I recall, Charlie was determined to find a career in the emerging technology of that day." Jim figured there was no advantage to admitting any further contact with Charlie because it could tag him with all the current events in this case, and he would be in big trouble. He had not stayed in contact with Charlie over the years, except for a few isolated times, and doubted they would have any record of it.

After pausing a moment, the man looked away from Jim, seeming to lose interest in him, and said, "Well then, I doubt that you can be of much help to us." Jim was so relieved. He tried hard not to let it show, working to maintain the same demeanor he had when he came in. "But, you might be of some help to us as we continue working this case." He turned to the woman on his right and asked, "You want to take it from here?"

"Sure," she said. "We have a book in our possession, written by the grandkids of this guy, Charlie Johnson." The lady held up a copy of *Streams of Terrible Beauty*. "Ever seen it?"

Jim knew he needed to be truthful, never knowing when they might be entrapping them. They often did this right after they made someone feel comfortable, lowering their guard. Jim played the old-guy card once again. He squinted, pulled his glasses out of his shirt pocket, and fumbled a little putting them on. He tilted his head back slightly, then removed his glasses. "I remember seeing that cover somewhere. I think it was in the evidence room cupboard. I saw it when I was looking for something else."

“Did you have a chance to read it?”

Jim answered carefully. He knew his fingerprints had to be on the book. “I thumbed through it because the cover displaying the Golden Gate Bridge caught my eye. But it seemed like some kind of novel, so I pushed it aside and continued my search.”

“What were you looking for?” asked the lady.

“Dan Murray asked me to find any evidence for the *Omniscient Observer* project. He suspected some of it was missing and knew I could easily spot any relevant items because I knew the case quite well.”

“And did you find any?”

“I did not.”

“Murray was disappointed?”

“He was, but it got that loose end tied up for him.”

“Hmmm,” the woman mused. “You’re a good man to have around. I still think you might be able to help us. So let me bring you up to date.” Jim relaxed back in his chair. “The parents of these two young authors lived in the small foothill town of Oak Pines. The kids grew up there, raised by their parents, Jobe and Ellie Martinez. Their connection to Mr. Johnson is that Ellie was his foster daughter, whom he and his wife, Martha, raised from age seven. We ... that is, the Special Ops group prior to us ... monitored Mr. Johnson after the war until 1987 when they decided to take him out.”

Jim sat up in his chair. “Why? He always seemed like a nice guy when I worked with him at Los Alamos Labs.”

“He probably was, but we – well, the members of the team at that time – discovered that he had likely viewed some highly classified documents that were accidentally left out on a table in a lab where he worked. We weren’t certain of how much he knew, so we just kept an eye on him over the years. At some point, we decided he was too big a security risk and arranged to have him killed on a trip he took with the Martinez couple. We observed the three of them taking what seemed to be a detour into Las

Vegas, which gave us the golden opportunity we were waiting for. So we staged a mob hit job in his RV while the couple was out for dinner. From then on, we monitored the couple for about twenty years. They never demonstrated any knowledge of what Charlie knew, so we were about ready to close the case.”

The lady leaned forward. “But then this book came to our attention.” The woman lifted up the book again. “Our operative staying in that small town obtained a copy and evaluated it carefully. He gave us a full report. Unfortunately, he left his marked-up copy in the place where he was staying, and we were unable to retrieve it. But, based on his analysis of the book, it was decided that the parents of these two siblings were also too great a security risk, and they were eliminated.”

Jim took a big gulp inside. This made the fate of Janelle and Jeff’s parents clear and final. He knew he would have to tell them. “So, what about these two kids?”

“Because they wrote the book, they must also be terminated. The team decided that accomplishing this mission would allow us to finally close this prolonged case.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Just keep your eyes and ears open. You have a distinguished reputation for discovering what others miss. I guess that comes with your many years of experience and your long tenure here at the agency.”

“Well, yes, this is my greatest strength. It enables me to bring value to every project I am part of.”

“The son, Jeff, was recruited to work here at the CIA just a few months ago. We did this so we could evaluate him and determine the best time for our strike team to take action. Unfortunately, we acted and failed in Hong Kong. So now we are extra careful in how we proceed. Both siblings are currently in their hometown of Oak Pines, California. Jeff has just taken a leave of absence from work. We think this will work to our advantage, having them together in the same location. We have a

unit working in that town, but we are not sure where they are. However, as soon as they are found in a location that keeps our mission clandestine, the strike force will act. They have been activated on a non-communications basis so that the mission cannot be jeopardized in any way before completion. Do you have any questions for us, Jim?”

Jim was stunned, but careful not to show it. His worst suspicions were all true. He knew he needed to relate all this new information to Janelle and Jeff, while still trying to find a way of escape for them and encouraging them to stay optimistic, keep hope alive, and keep searching for that *solution* that he believed must somehow exist. “No, that pretty much tells me everything I need to know. But it always seems such a shame to take the lives of otherwise innocent people.”

“We agree, it is, and we wouldn’t if we felt there was no ultimate risk. But we don’t know that, and we need to do our job of keeping all of our secrets secure, no matter what it takes to accomplish this.”

The lady, followed by the three men, all stood up. “Thanks for coming,” said the man on the left. “We would really appreciate getting from you any information or ideas you might develop. Please stay in touch with me at the email address on the invitation I sent you earlier today.”

Jim stood up and said, “Okay, I will.” He shook all four hands that were extended toward him and left the room.

With all this new information, Jim decided to send a postcard to Janelle and Jeff. He wouldn’t be able to say much, but he could let them know he had more information to give them next time he sees them. When he got back to his office, he pulled out the left-hand desk drawer and grabbed a postcard from a stack of many. He thought for a moment, remembering that he needed to keep it somewhat cryptic.

Jim addressed the card, using only the address Jeff gave him for the cabin with no return address. After work, he took the time to drive up to Gettysburg, just across the Pennsylvania border. He parked in the Union Hotel parking lot and headed for the *Sign of the Buck* restaurant inside. As he passed through the lobby, he approached an *Outgoing Mail* slot at the end of the check-in counter, where he casually deposited the postcard on his way to the restaurant. After a satisfying meal, Jim drove back to his apartment in the DC suburbs, satisfied with his secret delivery.

The next day, Janelle and Jeff got up and ate breakfast on the back deck at the cabin. The setting was totally secluded, blocking out all the troubles and worries they recently experienced.

“Seems so peaceful out there,” said Jeff as he felt the chilly morning breeze whisk through his hair.

“Yeah, who could ever believe there are people who want us dead?”

“I’m getting a little numb to it. Maybe it’s a human instinct to help us deal with trauma.”

“I think so,” said Janelle, “but don’t let it woo you to sleep or stop you from looking for that *solution* Jim believes is out there.”

“No, I won’t do that, but I can’t help but wonder if he’s just trying to encourage us, giving us hope against hope.”

“Could be,” Janelle responded, “but it is still the best advice we could ever get.” Jeff nodded gently. Janelle sat up in her chair and looked over at Jeff. “Oh wow, I need to go get all my notes and books on quantum weirdness that I left at work. If the CIA goes snooping around there, they might find them and really get pissed off at us.”

“Ha! What are they gonna do, kill us?”

“Good point. But still, I’m right in the middle of understanding this stuff so much better, and I want to keep going on it.”

“Well, it looks like we're stuck here at the cabin for who knows how long, and we both need something to keep us busy. Maybe you can teach me all about it.”

“Sure. And you, being the mystical man that you are, might just find quantum weirdness fascinating.”

Okay, I'm open,” said Jeff, “but why do people call it *weirdness*?”

“Oh, you'll find out. That's probably the most interesting thing about quantum mechanics. It's the bridge between my rationalism and your mysticism.”

“Okay, you got my attention.”

Janelle looked over her shoulder at a big, outdoor clock hanging on the back wall of the cabin. “People are already at work, so I think I'll go now, get my stuff, and get out of there.”

“Be careful,” said Jeff, “It's dangerous out there for both of us!”

“I will,” she said as she lifted herself out of her chair. “I'll be back soon.”

Chapter 18

“Happy Friday, boss.” The man looked up from behind his big executive desk.

“What are you doing here. You're still on vacation until Monday.”

Janelle pulled out one of the two lush, high-back chairs stationed in front of the big desk. “I came to grab some personal things I need with me this weekend.”

“Oh, okay.” Her boss paused. “I still can't believe what happened to your parents. Did the authorities ever figure it out? So bizarre, especially in this small town.”

“No, not really,” said Janelle. Her glee halted, and she just stared over the top of her boss's head out the window at the dead, lifeless leaves on a tree close to the building.

“Oh, how stupid of me. I shouldn't have brought that up. Listen, you take as much time off as you need.” His eyes were full of compassion with a trace of pain. “We're doing okay here at the paper without you, but we always do better when you're here.”

“That's so kind of you. I'm okay now. I need to get back in the work groove. I actually miss my work and all the great people here.”

“If all goes well, you will soon be transitioning from marketing to reporting.”

“Well, then, I'd better get on it. I'll go grab my notes and look them over this weekend so I can hit the ground running on Monday.”

“Okay. Take the shortcut to your office if you want,” he said, pointing to a door adjacent to his desk.

As Janelle disappeared through the door, accidentally leaving it slightly cracked, a voice came over the intercom on the right side of Bradley’s desk. “There are two men here to see you, Mr. Bradley. They say it's important.”

He pressed a button on top of the intercom. “Who are they?” The voice paused.

“They’d rather not say until they talk to you.”

Bradley mused for a moment. Then he pushed the button again and said, “Okay, let them in.”

Janelle, who had not gotten very far down the hallway, heard enough of the conversation to arouse her curiosity. So, she quietly sneaked back near the door that was still slightly open and stood behind it where she could not be seen.

“Come on in, gentlemen,” said Mr. Bradley, walking around from behind his desk to greet them. “Please, sit down.” He pointed to the two lush chairs in front of his desk. He walked back behind his desk, sat down, and said, “What can I do for you today?” Both men were dressed in dark suits with ties, totally out of place for such a small, casual town.

One man pulled out his wallet and flashed his credentials; the other man followed suit. “We're with the CIA,” said one man. Bradley reared back in his chair. Eyes wide open, and speechless. “Don't be alarmed,” said the other man. “This is a routine visit.”

Janelle nearly gasped out loud from behind the door. Bradley leaned forward. “What's routine about a visit from the CIA in a small town like this?” he asked.

“It's all very simple,” the man said, leaning back in his chair, attempting to put Bradley at ease. “We're doing a background check on one of our employees, Jeff Martinez, and our understanding is that his sister, Janelle, works here.”

“That's all? Couldn't you take care of this by phone or email?”

“We like to get the facts and get them straight. We consider any in-person visit to be well worth our time.” They waited for Bradley’s response.

“I knew she had an older brother, but I didn't know what kind of work he was in. Wow, CIA? Pretty impressive.”

The other man leaned forward, put his forearms on his knees, and clasped his hands. “We just have a few questions for Janelle. Is she here?” Janelle's heart sank. Her pulse skyrocketed. She knew that was a lie, and that their motives were much more sinister. *Should I quietly exit through the back door,* she thought? Janelle froze in fear. Her legs would not move.

Bradley thought quickly. He knew he should just give it straight, especially to such important people. But he had an odd feeling that something was not right. “She's on vacation,” he said truthfully. “And she's not due to be back until Monday,” he added, knowing it was not the total truth.

“Well, here's what we want you to do,” said one of the men, sliding a business card across the desk. “Give us a call next time she comes in. We're staying at the Bed and Breakfast here in town. And please, Mr. Bradley, we need your cooperation on this. Don't alarm her by telling her anything about our visit. Just give us a call.” Looking at the other man and grinning, he said, “We have a habit of making people feel nervous, even in routine matters like this.”

“Okay,” said Bradley, picking up the card lying on the desk. His suspicions were fully aroused now. “I'm more than happy to accommodate you, fellas, and I'll give you a call as soon as she comes in on Monday”.

“That's great,” said one man, as they both stood up, prompting Bradley to come out from behind his desk. He shook both of their extended hands and then watched them walk one behind the other, through the door by which they entered. But then one of the men turned back toward Bradley and said, “Not a word of this to anyone, not even your secretary. Maybe just tell

her we are prospective clients.” The man raised his finger, then pointed it at Bradley. “We need to avoid making people nervous, right?”

“Hey, you got it,” Bradley replied. “Anything to help out my government?”

After the men left the room, Bradley walked over to the partly open side door and pushed it open to go through. The door hit Janelle with a thump. He looked around the door and saw her frightened and still. “Whoa, how long have you been there?”

“The whole time. I’m sorry, boss, but I’m also not sorry. I’m scared.”

“Do you know what this is all about?” he asked.

Janelle sighed. “I sure do, and it’s not about a background check for my brother.”

“So he doesn’t work for the CIA?”

“Oh yeah, he does, but he’s here in town on vacation. Can we sit down and talk?”

“Yes, come on back into my office.”

Janelle sat in one of the two lush chairs. Bradley sat down behind his desk. “It has to do with the disappearance of my parents.”

She had Bradley’s full attention. “Go on,” he said.

“I can’t go into detail; you’ll just have to trust me. I gotta get out of here and out of town.”

“Whoa, hold on. Shouldn’t we call the police or something?”

“To complain about the CIA?” she asked him.

“I see your point.”

“Why did you cover up for me, boss? You put yourself in jeopardy.”

“I thought of that,” he replied, “but I just felt like something was not right. I don’t really know why.”

“Well, you’re right. Something is very wrong, and the less you know, the better off you will be.” Janelle’s mind was racing as Bradley just looked at her with great concern.

“You gotta call them soon, boss, and tell them I was here. But give me five minutes to get my notes and leave. Your secretary knows I came in here right before those men did, but she doesn’t know if you were in here when I entered, right?”

“Yes, I follow you.”

“In a few minutes, casually mention to her that you look forward to my coming back from vacation on Monday.”

“Okay.”

“Then she will say that she saw me go into your office before she sent the men in there.”

“Yes, that makes sense.”

“Tell her you did not see me and were in the bathroom or something.”

“Okay, yeah, this might work.”

“And that’s when you came back, heard her call announcing the two visitors.”

“But what do I say happened to you?” asked Bradley

“Tell her you don't know, and that maybe I went out the side door and down the hall to my office.”

“Okay, I get it.”

“In a few minutes, I'll walk by her desk and say, ‘I'll see you on Monday,’ and she will have this in her mind when you talk to her.”

“That's right. This should work.”

“This way, you're covered. You can honestly tell the men when you call them that you didn’t know I was here, and your secretary will back you up.”

“That’s pretty darn genius. It knew you were smart, but I would never think of that so quickly.”

“Well, I’m just glad you were so suspicious and lied to protect me.”

“Wow, this is all rather dramatic, don't you think?”

“Indeed, it is, and I hate it. But Jeff and I are in survival mode until we figure this all out.”

“Where will you go?” asked Bradley.

“Out of town somewhere.”

“Good luck, and let me know if I can help in any way.”

“Can't do that, boss. Gotta be no contact till this gets resolved. You may have just saved my life, and that is enough.” Bradley was dazed, trying to take it all in. “I'll step back out the side door, go to my office, then leave past the secretary and make my comment to her.” Janelle gave him a quick hug and slipped away.

In a few minutes, Janelle walked past the secretary's desk with a folder and some books. “I'll see you Monday morning.” As Janelle left the building, she walked briskly, looked around carefully, trying not to attract attention. She got into her car and tried to calm her trembling hands as she retrieved her cell phone from her purse, but then remembered Jim's warning about cell phones revealing locations. So, she left it turned off.

Bradly waited ten minutes to let Janelle get into her car and drive away before he started executing his part of the plan. After talking with the secretary and pretending to discover from her that Janelle had been there, he called the CIA men. They came over immediately and thoroughly questioned Bradly and his secretary. They bought the story he gave them, assuring them he had no idea where Janelle was headed.

Chapter 19

When Janelle got back to the cabin, Jeff was still on the deck, enjoying the unusually warm weather for that time of the year. As she pulled open the sliding door, Jeff turned around. "How'd it go?" he asked before he could fully see how shaken she was.

He quickly got up out of his chair. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Did they see you? Were you chased?"

"No, but almost. They came looking for me at work while I was there. I was only a few feet away from them, hiding behind a door. I was breathing so hard I was sure they were going to hear me, but they were talking to my boss, and he covered for me." She sat down with Jeff and explained the scheme she had cooked up with her boss to fool the CIA men.

"Oh man. This is getting too dangerous. Let me think." Jeff paused. His breathing was slightly heavy. "We need to do several things. First, we need more groceries. Second, let's buy two prepaid cell phones."

"Good idea," said Janelle.

"But we need to ditch this car and go get Dad's Tiger out of the garage, since they may not know about it. Dad hasn't driven it for several years, and I think it is unregistered."

"We could get pulled over, having no tags."

"True, but we'll have to take that chance. We can take less-traveled streets when we're out."

"Can we do it tomorrow? I'm spent."

"Yeah, no problem," answered Jeff. "Let's just recoup the rest of the day."

"How and when will we get the Tiger out?"

Let's do it in the wee hours of the morning. That's when I used to do my paper route. There's never anyone out at that time, except once when Craig Vanderwagon and I were both fourteen. We snuck Dad's car out to deliver newspapers, and a Deputy Sheriff stopped us, but saw what we were doing and let us go, telling us to be careful. Anyway, we'll go early and sneak Dad's car out again."

"Okay, you're the expert."

"Once we get the car here, we can go out more invisibly."

"Sounds like a good plan."

"Hey, you ready for your first lesson in quantum physics?"

"Sure. It'll keep both our minds off our woes," replied Jeff.

"Let's go back inside," suggested Janelle.

Jeff found a comfortable spot on one of the two connected recliners, which shared a built-in side table. Janelle went to her room and came back with a stack of books and a few spiral notebooks.

"You remind me of how we described Grampa Charlie in our book, with all his books and notes."

As she sat down across from Jeff on the big sofa, Janelle looked at him with a melancholic gaze. "I wish we could have known him."

"We do, to some degree. We described him in detail in our book, based on all Mom and Dad told us."

"That's true. Okay, let me first answer your question from the other day about why people call it quantum *weirdness*."

"This should be good," said Jeff, leaning back with his hands clasped behind his head. "Lay it on me."

"There was a famous science experiment, first conducted in the early 1800s, then more prominently about a hundred years later. It is commonly known as the *Double-Slit Light Experiment*. They shone a light through two close-together vertical slits in a panel, with another panel behind it to display the projected light.

Since light is a wave, when it travels through the two slits, it creates two sources of light that interact. The resulting pattern on the back panel is a bunch of vertical bright bars with darker spaces in between due to the two light sources interfering with each other.”

“That makes sense. But where’s the weirdness?”

“It’s coming; be patient.”

“Okay.” Jeff maintained his relaxed position.

“The original experimenter decided to shoot one particle of light at a time to better understand how light operates. He suspected that light is not only a wave but also a bunch of particles.”

“So?”

“Well, waves and particles are very different from each other, and it is hard to conceive how light can be both at the same time.”

“Different in what way?” Jeff was still, casually enjoying Janelle’s presentation.

“It’s like having a radio and a gun in the same room. The radio fills the room with sound. This represents waves. The gun shoots bullets that land in a particular spot where it is pointed. This represents particles.”

“Did you have to use that illustration, considering our predicament?”

“Good point, but you see the difference, don’t you?”

“Crystal clear.”

“So, it is hard to imagine a gun acting like a radio or a radio acting like a gun, right?”

“How about a shotgun?”

“That’s a little more like a radio, but still a long way from it. Anyway, they shot these light particles through the slits, one at a time, and watched as the same interference pattern slowly displayed on the back panel. This surprised them because the individual particles were acting like a wave. They got curious and wanted to see what was happening when the light traveled

through the two slits. So, they hooked up a detector to monitor and record what happens. This time, when they sent particles of light, they saw two vertical lines of light resulting from the two slits where the particles randomly traveled through. Why would the results be any different? All they did was start looking at what happened. They became observers!

“But when they turned the camera off and ran the experiment again, the interference pattern was back. They scratched their heads trying to figure out how observing something could change its behavior! This was not only weird, but revolutionary.”

Jeff sat up in his chair. “You mean to tell me that by simply observing the experiment, it changed the results?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“So, the light going through the slits knows if it’s being watched?” asked Jeff.

“*Know* is a big word. We can’t really say that light actually *knows* anything, but we can say that it somehow *reacts* to our observing it.”

“That’s spooky.”

“Well, it gets spookier. They tried to trick the light source by leaving the camera powered on with its red power light glowing, but they did not actually record anything, so there was no real observation. They even left the room.”

“Did it work?” asked Jeff, anxious to hear the answer.

“Nope. They couldn’t fool the light source. It knew it wasn’t being watched and went back to displaying just two strips of light on the back panel.”

“I thought you said it can't know.”

“It can't, as far as we know, but it’s hard not to use this word since that’s how it appears.”

“Well, it’s extra spooky that they couldn’t fool it.” Jeff thought for a moment. “Is there more?”

“Oh yeah. Buckle your seat belt.”

“Oh, no. Now what?” asked Jeff.

“They tried one more trick. This will blow your mind.” Janelle’s eyes got bigger. “They moved the location of the camera so it would record *after* the light went through the slits. The idea was to force the light to decide what to do *before* it was observed.”

“Oh, no. Don’t tell me the light knew ahead of time that it was going to be recorded,” asked Jeff, preparing himself for a shock.

“Yep. Somehow it knew ahead of time and acted accordingly.”

“How could it possibly know? What ... is light clairvoyant? This is crazy.”

“Yes, just about as crazy as the CIA chasing us.”

“I think this is crazier.” Jeff got up out of his chair. “Could they have made a mistake, or maybe it’s some kind of fluke?”

“Not a chance. This experiment has been replicated in laboratories worldwide for the last hundred years, and it always comes out the same.”

Jeff looked directly at Janelle. “Wow. I gotta do some serious thinking about this. However, being the mystical guy that I am, this is not a big problem for me, only a surprise. It all kinda fits with my belief that the universe has some kind of cosmic consciousness. This might just be proof! How on earth do *you* explain this, being the rational, reasonable, scientific person that you are?”

“It’s not that hard. Scientists are used to making discoveries that they don’t understand, only to find out at some later date that there was a rational explanation.”

“Yeah, but this one seems different. It’s going to be hard to ever explain this one away with science. This reeks with some kind of spiritual content.”

“I gotta agree with ya there. This experiment became known as the one *that broke reality*. It shook the scientific world.”

Early the next morning, Jeff went into Janelle's room and woke her up. "It's time to get up, sleepy head. We need to go get the Tiger before it gets light outside."

Janelle turned over in her bed and looked up at Jeff. "Wouldn't you know it. The one time in recent memory, when I finally have a shot at sleeping in, I gotta get up and do something. Oh well, that's life. I'll be up in a few minutes."

Jeff left her room and went downstairs to fix some coffee. About the time the coffee was done dripping through the brown paper filter of the drip coffee maker, Janelle entered the kitchen. "Oh, good. Coffee. That will help." Jeff poured and handed her a full cup. "Well, I've got all I need. Let's go." Jeff grabbed his car keys off the counter, and they exited the cabin, single file, into the cold, dark morning air.

Jeff drove back to Oak Pines using the back roads that he had used getting there a few days before. As he approached the block where the Martinez home was located, the same block on which both kids spent their whole lives, Jeff slowed down, turned off his lights, and pulled over to the curb.

"Why are you stopping here?" asked Janelle. "Our house is around the corner."

"I know, but I'm playing it safe, perhaps unnecessarily, but safe just the same. We're gonna leave the car here and sneak in through the rear of the property."

"How ya gonna do that?" asked Janelle.

"You'll see," he said, getting out of the car and closing his door very carefully. Janelle did the same. The morning was eerily dark and quiet. "There is an old four-foot-wide Telephone Company easement providing access to their poles," Jeff whispered. "The neighborhood guys and I used to hide in here and make pretend forts. It runs behind our house and the neighbor's."

"I never knew about this," said Janelle as she followed Jeff through a narrow gap in the fence.

Jeff turned his head halfway around. "That was the idea. No girls allowed." They made their way down the narrow passage until Jeff suddenly stopped. Janelle almost bumped into him. "This is the fence behind our house. There is no gate, so we have to climb over."

"Oh, great." Janelle wished she had stayed in the car.

"No, it's easy. You just turn your foot sideways between any two of these vertical pickets and then flatten it out. This will let you climb up and over the fence."

"Easy for you to say. You probably did it a thousand times."

"Hey, this is one time I need not scold you for exaggerating."

"Very funny."

"Okay, so try that foot thing and lift yourself up, then put your other foot in my hands. I've got them locked together up here around my chest. Climb over the top and let yourself down. You ready?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Janelle wedged her foot into the fence and pushed herself up. She looked down to see where to put her other foot, but it was dark. She felt Jeff's locked hands support her other foot, pushing it up. Somehow, she went clumsily over the fence and landed on her feet on the other side.

"See how easy that was." Janelle didn't want to start an argument, so she said nothing. In almost an instant, Jeff came flying over the fence, landing next to her. "Well, at least we don't have to go back that way." Jeff looked around. All was quiet in their old backyard. "I hope the back door to the garage is unlocked," he whispered as he approached it, "otherwise, we'll have to break in."

Jeff turned the knob, and the door swung open. "I'm going to open the big door manually, then I'll roll the car down the driveway and into the street. Get in so you'll be ready to go." Janelle got in while Jeff reached up and pulled a hanging rope that disengaged the garage door from the opener track. He very carefully lifted the garage door until it was above his head.

Opening the Tiger door, he got in and moved the stick shift on the floor to neutral. He pushed the car until it started to roll, then quickly jumped in. As soon as the car was fully out of the garage, he pulled on the emergency brake to keep the car from moving. He got out and carefully pulled down the garage door. The few creeks it made caused him to cringe. He looked around, saw but heard nothing, so he got back in the car and released the brake. The car rolled down the driveway and into the street. Jeff turned the steering wheel so the car would be headed downhill. As the car started downhill, Jeff followed the road until he approached a long, flat straightaway. Turning on the ignition, putting the car in 4th gear, and popping the clutch, the engine gently started.

He looked over at Janelle. "So far, so good. You ready to go? Seat belt on?"

"Yep."

He put the car in first gear, turned on the running lights, and gently let out the clutch. As the Tiger began to speed up, he ran it through its four gears, turned the headlights fully on, and took off for the back roads to the cabin from which they came.

"Au-oh," said Jeff, looking in his rearview mirror.

"What's wrong?" asked Janelle.

"Some headlights just emerged quite a ways behind us. I'm taking no chances; I'm getting out of here." Jeff downshifted to third gear and stepped on it, fully engaging the powerful 160-horsepower V-8, pressing Janelle's head against the headrest.

"Wow, I forgot what a pocket-rocket this little car is," said Janelle.

"Yep, one of the fastest cars alive," said Jeff as he put it in 4th gear and punched it, squealing the tires. "Well, as Marty McFly once said, 'Let's see if you bastards can do 90.'" After several minutes of high-speed maneuvering over the twisty roads, Jeff looked over at Janelle and said, "I think we lost them."

"Yeah, I guess so. But we don't even know if they were after us."

“That’s good. In a car like this ya never need to know.”

By the time they got back to the cabin, dawn was just breaking. Jeff turned into the long gravel driveway and approached the cabin. He pulled around to the side where the garage was located, stopped the car, and turned off the engine. “Well, we made it.”

“Yeah, and thanks for the adventure down that dark, narrow path. I feel blessed to have gotten over that fence in one piece.”

“Well, you made it, and now we have a way to drive around town and probably not be seen.”

“I gotta admit, that’s a good thing.”

“Let’s go inside. I’ll come back out through the garage and park the tiger in it.”

After Jeff got the Tiger into the garage and out of sight, he found the remote garage door opener and placed it on the Tiger’s seat. When he entered the house, Janelle asked him when he thought it would be the best time to go into town. “The busier the better,” he replied, “hiding in plain sight.”

“Okay, then I’ll go around noon. I think I’ll wear my hair up, with a scarf and sunglasses.”

“Sounds good to me. Try to avoid seeing anyone we know.”

“I’ll try.”

“The garage door opener is on the passenger seat. Check the gas. Get some if it’s below half?”

“Yep. Good idea.”

Chapter 20

Around 12:30, Janelle headed for town in the Tiger. She took the main roads since the Tiger provided her reasonable cover. She noticed the gas tank was below half, so she stopped in at Seven-Eleven, where her Mom once overheard her Dad talking to the store clerk about how his life had changed. It was this conversation that led Ellie to straighten out her own life. After looking around to make sure she wasn't followed, she lifted the nozzle. As she pumped gas, Janelle pondered all that she and Jeff chronicled about their Mom and Dad's lives in the *Streams* book. The gas pump handle jumped, breaking her pondering spell. She replaced the pump handle, got in, and drove away.

She stopped in at the local, independently owned grocery store, which was the closest thing Oak Pines had to having a real supermarket. She hoped that having her hair up in a scarf and her sunglasses would keep her from being recognized. However, she wondered if the sunglasses worn inside would attract more attention than providing any cover.

"Janelle? Is that you?" a voice said a way off to her left.

Janelle turned and saw Gina standing there, head tilted, staring, mouth slightly open.

Janelle slowly took her sunglasses off. "Yep, it's me."

Gina turned her head slightly the other way and looked out of the corner of her eyes, "You trying to hide?"

"Yeah, sort of. It's been tough going through all we've been through recently. I guess I just want to avoid talking to people."

Gina shook her head up and down and put her hand on Janelle's arm. "I totally understand, and so I won't keep you. But tell me, briefly, how you are doing. I've called a couple of times, but there was no answer."

"I'm avoiding phone calls, too," she lied, not wanting to tell Gina they were hiding out at the cabin. "But had I known it was you, I would have answered. I'm getting by okay. It takes time to think things through." She desperately wanted to tell Gina about all they learned from Jim Phillips, that Jeff was here in town, about her close call at work, and that they were hiding out in Zack's cabin. But she didn't dare. It would, potentially, jeopardize their fragile security and maybe put Gina in danger.

"And Jeff?"

"Oh, he's back at his job and loves it," she lied again. "It's good for us to both stay busy."

"One more thing. How about the dog?"

"Oh, he's a blessing. Such a good understanding friend. Thanks for setting me up with him. It was an excellent idea I would never have thought of."

"So glad it worked out." Janelle paused for a moment. "What is it, Janelle?" asked Gina, sensing in her mystically oriented mind and heart that something was going on.

"Uh, before we went to Vegas seeking answers, you warned us to be careful. Do you remember that?"

"I do, indeed."

"Do you still feel that way today, or has it passed?"

"Funny you should ask. Just this morning, right after I got up, I sensed something wrong concerning you and Jeff. I brushed it off, as I occasionally must, having learned the hard way that my fears, insecurities, and emotions can mingle with my spiritual insights and lead me to draw false conclusions. So, I usually give things a few days to cook and see what develops or disappears. But in this situation of yours, my premonitions are rather strong. Except for the normal grieving and struggling after all you've

been through, you and Jeff are not experiencing something out of the ordinary, are you?"

"Like what?" asked Janelle.

"Like anything beyond slowly recovering from the recent, traumatic events."

"No, nothing like that, just the jitters of having gone through so much."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, even though it makes me think my little discerner is malfunctioning. I just can't help but feel that something is not right."

"Maybe you're foreseeing something in our future."

"Could be, but premonitions about the future feel different. This is not one of those."

Janelle began fishing for more information. "Well, do you sense anything at all about our future, good or bad, and whether things will end well for us?"

Gina thought for a moment. "I do sense something positive attached to this current, negative feeling. It's like there is some kind of *solution* out there, but I don't know what for, when, how, or why. That's about all I can give you. I wish I could be more specific. I'm glad I'm wrong about your present situation. If you say it is good, then that's all I need to know."

Janelle felt a little guilty for lying to Gina, but knew she had to. "Thanks so much, Gina," she said as she gave her a hug. "You were always a good friend to my Mom, and you're a good friend to me now. You've always been more like an aunt to me."

"That's because we're like family. I don't see how I could have been of much help today, but if I encouraged you a little, I am satisfied. Keep me posted and let me know if I can be of any help."

"Oh, I will. Trust me."

Janelle bought some essential groceries, some snacks, and a bag of dog food, along with two prepaid phones with two hours of minutes on each. After she paid, using cash as they had agreed

to do, she took her bag and headed back to the cabin. Except for occasionally checking her rearview mirror for suspicious cars, her mind was focused on Gina's belief that there was some kind of solution out there and on how similar this was to Jim's idea along the same lines. It gave Janelle renewed hope.

The next day, around noon, Frisky started barking near the front door. Janelle and Jeff, both upstairs in their rooms, rushed down the stairs, went to the front window, and looked out. All they could see was a mail truck at the top of the driveway. A hand emerged at the window, pulled open the mailbox door, and placed something inside. Pushing the door shut, it drove off to the next house. Janelle and Jeff looked at each other, thinking the same thing. "Postcard from Jim?" asked Jeff.

"I'll bet it is."

"I'll go get it." Jeff rushed out the door and almost ran up the driveway. He pulled out a card and waved it in the air, knowing Janelle had to be watching him. He came down the hill as fast as he went up and entered the cabin. He was already starting to read it.

Janelle couldn't contain her curiosity. "What does it say?"

Jeff sat down on the couch, and Janelle sat next to him. He read the card out loud as Janelle followed along with her eyes.

Dear friends:

I hope you are enjoying your luxurious vacation. I'm still working away at my job and wish I could be there with you. Perhaps I will be able to break away soon and come see you. Things got extra busy here at work, and I got to be part of a meeting where some plans were made that will probably affect both of you. We had a wonderful discussion about one of your favorite books. I was surprised that this even came up in a company meeting. But they all seemed surprised, too! I think they are still planning to surprise you someday as a result of your choice of books. That's all for now. Hope to see you soon.

Take care, stay optimistic, and never stop looking for that solution in life that has got to be out there somewhere.

Your friend, Big J.

They just looked at each other, “What do you think it means?” asked Janelle.

Jeff sat back on the couch, still holding the postcard. “I’m not sure. But keep in mind, he said it would be encrypted.”

“Okay, let’s try to figure it out. Our *luxurious vacation* is our cabin stay. His desire to *break away soon* might mean he’s planning to visit again.”

“Yep, could be. But what is this *meeting with plans made* all about?” said Jeff.

“Look at the next line. A discussion about *one of our favorite books*? That can only mean there was some kind of CIA meeting where the book we wrote was discussed.”

“That’s a bit scary. If Jim comes, we need to get more details.”

“The next line is scarier,” added Janelle. “They are planning to *surprise us* someday? Wow, that means we are even more of a target.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“What are we going to do, Jeff?” Janelle’s face flooded with a mix of concern and fear.

Jeff put the card down on the sofa and looked at Janelle. “It means we keep doing what we’re doing, and wait to see what happens.”

“That’s about all we can do, but there is one more thing.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” asked Jeff.

“We need to stay hopeful and allow our minds to find that solution that is out there somewhere. Hey, I just remembered. I saw Gina at the store today, and I pressed her for any premonitions she might have.”

“You didn’t tell her our situation, did you?”

“Of course not. In fact, I told her you were back at your job, loving it!”

“I wish I were. Any spooky stuff from Gina?”

“Yep, and this encouraged me. She said almost the same thing Jim told us, that there is a *solution* out there.”

“Hmmm. She has always been right more than wrong. So, I’d say that’s semi-good news.”

“Yep. Let’s get on with finding that solution.”

“Something tells me we’d better find it fast!”

“Hey, how about some more quantum weirdness?” asked Janelle.

“Sure!”

“Another strange aspect of quantum physics is something known as *entanglement*. This happens when two atoms are so connected to each other that what happens to one also happens to the other.”

“No big deal, right?”

“It’s a big deal when they stay in sync with each other while very far apart, perhaps up to distances across the universe.”

“Wow!”

“But even stranger is that they stay in sync instantaneously, no matter how far they are apart. This means that, however they communicate, it happens faster than the speed of light, which is supposed to be the fastest speed that anything can travel.”

“Instantly, with no delay?” asked Jeff.

“That’s right. And this fact drove Einstein nuts. In his mind, this was impossible, breaking all known laws of physics.”

“I’m intrigued. Tell me more,” said Jeff.

“Imagine a set of particles, such as electrons or atoms, that are entangled. The particles are spun in one direction, and their spins are then carefully measured. When one particle’s spin is measured to be “up,” the spin of the other particle *instantly* aligns in the same direction, no matter how far apart they are. This

synchronization violates classical principles of communication because the particles appear to communicate faster than the speed of light. It appears supernatural because it defies natural laws as we understand them. The two particles function identically, as if they are one, even though they are far apart. They are two particles, yet they are unified in a way that they function as one.”

“Holy crow. Add this to the quantum weirdness of the two-slits experiment, and we almost have a totally new view of reality. Maybe things in life are not the way they appear.”

“It's a baffling mystery for scientists.”

“Well, I'm glad I'm not a scientist. I'm good with mysteries, and I'm going to have to ponder all this and see what I can make of it.”

“You want more? I could tell you about superposition, quantum tunneling, and the uncertainty principle, if you want.”

“Oh, please, no. I got enough to chew on. Do you mind if I browse through some of your books?”

Janelle gestured toward her stack of books. “Be my guest.”

Janelle and Jeff lounged around the cabin the rest of the day, staying busy, knowing they were safe by lying low, out of public view. Janelle did more reading in her quantum books, and Jeff took a long walk in the State Park land that butted up against the cabin property, pondering all that Janelle taught him about quantum weirdness and entanglement.

“Janelle, wake up,” said Jeff, standing next to her bed and gently shaking her.

Janelle looked at her alarm clock next to the bed. “It's 4 AM. What are you doing?”

“We gotta talk.”

“Now?” she asked, a bit perturbed.

“Yes. This can't wait. I may have figured out that *solution* Jim and Gina are so sure is out there.”

Janelle was fully awake, now that Jeff had captured her attention. She got up, put on her robe lying at the foot of her bed, and followed Jeff downstairs. “Better put on some coffee.”

“I already have it brewing,” said Jeff as he stepped off the final step onto the living room floor of the cabin. “I’ll go get us some.” Jeff disappeared into the kitchen, then reemerged in a minute with two mugs in his hands. He put them down on the coffee table and sat on the couch.

Janelle was nestled in a big easy chair, legs tucked in to stay warm with her mug in hand. She took a sip. “Okay, what are you thinking?”

“Well, I got thinking about how quantum stuff is how all our troubles began.”

“What do you mean?”

“The CIA, originally, went after Grampa Charlie because he accidentally learned some secrets about the quantum research conducted at the end of WWII. Right?”

“Yes, that’s what started all this trouble.”

“And then Mom and Dad were killed because we wrote that book about their experience of Grampa being killed in Vegas. Right?”

“Yes. Go on.”

“And now they are chasing us because they think we might know something we shouldn’t.”

“But we don’t even know what it is we supposedly know!” Janelle’s frustration about the past month was reemerging. “What’s your point?” she finally took another sip of coffee.

“Well, maybe, just maybe, all this quantum stuff can also get us out of trouble.”

“How? In what way?” she asked.

“I’ve done a lot of thinking about quantum weirdness and entanglement ever since you told me about them. If this stuff is true, it is very powerful.”

Janelle remained quiet, ready to hear more. “Y-e-s?” she said, slowly, anticipating his next idea.

“If observing light sources can change their behavior, and remote objects can somehow influence each other, why can't we change our *terrible* situation into a *beautiful* one?”

Janelle thought for a moment. “I like your idea, but here are the problems. It is doubtful that these quantum actions can work in our realm, far above the tiny regions of the atomic world.”

“But it *is* possible? Right?”

“Yes, I suppose, and there are some today who are suggesting this. But even if it's true, we have no way of observing the CIA in order to change their behavior.”

“I thought of that. But maybe it's more about focusing on something than just seeing it. Maybe this is what prayer, meditation, and positive thinking are all about. Maybe we are all entangled together in some mysterious way, and all we need to do is tap into it.”

“Uh, yeah. I hear ya,” said Janelle with a hint of hesitation in her voice.

Jeff had hoped for a little more enthusiasm from his scientific counterpart sister. “Look,” he said, trying to dispel his discouragement, “we don't have a ton of options, and I lean toward Gina and Jim in their belief that there has got to be a *solution* out there somewhere. This might be it!” Jeff waited for Janelle's response.

“You're right. It's all we've got. Jim told us to stay positive and keep our minds active, looking for a solution. So, let's go for it. What do you think we should do, mystical brother?”

“I think we need to put all our time and energy into praying, thinking, meditating, and focusing on the CIA changing their minds about us. We've really got nothing else to do, so I don't think it can make things any worse.”

“That's the most brilliant thing you've said all morning.”

“No doubt,” admitted Jeff.

“Did you look through some of my quantum books?”

“I browsed through them. Some of the science was over my head. But the spiritual stuff looked interesting.”

“Did you see any of my Steve McFey books?”

“I think so.”

“He is an interesting author. He has a PhD in physics and in theology!”

“Wow, smart guy. Hey, he’s partly you and partly me.”

“Exactly.” Janelle shuffled through her stack of books on the couch. “Here’s one that you might find encouraging.” She held it up for Jeff to see. “It is titled *Quantum Physics and Prayer*. It’s the third in his quantum spirituality trilogy. His first two books, and I have them all,” she held up the other two books, “are titled *Quantum Physics and Life*, and *Quantum Physics and Faith*.”

“Hmmm, I’ll check them out.” Jeff settled back into his chair. “Okay, lay a quote on me.”

Janelle rapidly turned some pages in the quantum prayer book. “He reviews the double-slit experiment I taught you about yesterday and then concludes this: *When the particle isn't watched, it appears to mysteriously go through both slits simultaneously. But when observed, it behaves normally, going through one slit or the other. It's a baffling outcome that violates what we thought we knew about how reality works.*”

“He explains it better than you did.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“You need a PhD!”

“I’ll start working on it if we ever survive this horror show. But here is where it gets interesting and is the part that may help you the most: *It acted as if it knew whether it was being observed or not. How did that happen? How did it know? Could the particle have some sort of consciousness? Was it the simple act of a human watching that made the difference? There are so many unanswered questions. It seems unbelievable.*”

Jeff sat up in his chair. “Yes, he gets it. It is all about cosmic consciousness. Even non-human things, like light, are

interconnected with everything else in the universe. This is the ultimate reality!” Jeff sat back again, as if he had just finished some kind of inspiring sermon.

“Could be,” was all Janelle said, not being fully on board with Jeff, limited in scope by her scientific mind.

“Could be?” asked Jeff. “It’s *got to be* this way. Even your guru guy says so.”

“He’s not my guru, and I don’t agree with him on everything. But I have to concede that this quantum weirdness certainly opens the door of spirituality to us scientific folks. I’m more open now than I have ever been, so let’s get on with our own quantum experiment and see if we can find that elusive solution that Gina and Jim are so sure is out there.”

“This *is* the solution. I’m sure of it,” said Jeff emphatically. “And I believe that very soon we’re going to be free of this heavy burden we are now under.”

“I hope so!”

Chapter 21

Jeff and Janelle were fully engaged in every aspect of their quantum-influencing experiment, doing everything they could think of to ensure its success. They prayed, meditated, contemplated, visualized, focused on, and even chanted out loud thoughts, words, and ideas having to do with the CIA changing their minds. At first, it was thrilling, both believing they were doing something about their frightening predicament. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday went very well. But as the week dragged on, so did their hopes and ambitions.

On Wednesday morning, Jeff got up, fixed himself some bacon, and pushed a frozen waffle down into the toaster. He poured himself a cup of coffee, doused his waffle with maple syrup, and headed into the living room of the cabin, where he could slowly eat his breakfast while taking in the gorgeous view out the back window. He sipped his coffee and took an occasional bite of his waffle that had already grown cold. But it didn't bother him. He was totally focused on trying to pray, meditate, and visualize what he thought would change the behavior at the CIA.

"Hello?" said Janelle, waving her hand in front of Jeff's face, breaking his spell imposed by the tall, majestic pines and cedars in the backyard.

Jeff looked up. "Oh, hi. I was somewhere out there." He nodded toward the big picture window.

"I could tell. Meditating, praying, or just gazing?"

"Mostly gazing. I'm burned out on all our apparently feeble attempts to change reality, long-distance."

Janelle sat down across from him in a big recliner. “How do you know it hasn’t already worked? Giving up so soon?”

“No. Just taking a break. Hey, you’re supposed to be skeptical of mystical things,” said Jeff.

“Don’t forget, this is about science, too.”

“I’ll give it a few more days, then I’m going to look for a new solution.”

“Well, I’m staying the course. I think this experiment of ours has some real potential. Remember, this was your idea.”

“Yeah, don’t remind me.”

“Maybe you’re trying too hard, wearing yourself out,” suggested Janelle.

“Aren’t you going after this with all your mind, soul, heart, and strength?” asked Jeff.

“No, not really. I am fully engaged, but I’m trusting whatever it is out there, quantum, God, or some combination, to do the work. I just see myself as a willing participant.”

“Hmmm. Never thought of it that way,” replied Jeff. “Maybe both of our methods are needed.”

“I like that idea. Together, we’ll cover the whole spectrum of responses. Let’s check in again at the end of the week.”

“Okay,” Jeff said, reluctantly.

As Christmas Eve approached, Jeff spent the rest of the week engaged in his intense, mystical thinking, while Janelle took a calmer, more measured approach. They wandered around the cabin, inside and out, not saying too much, trying to stay focused on their quantum experiment in their own ways.

Christmas Eve came, but it seemed to take a long time.

“Okay, I’ve had it,” blurted out Jeff, awakening Janelle from her semi-slumber in the quietness of the cabin's living room. “I don’t think I can do this anymore. I don’t think it's working.” Janelle waited, knowing he was not done. “We’ve contemplated

the heck out of this quantum experiment of ours. I don't sense any change. Do you?"

"No," replied Janelle, calmly. "But what were you expecting?"

"I don't know. I expected *something* for all my effort. It's been two weeks."

"Were you expecting a call from the CIA, which, for the most part, doesn't even know the Special Ops group exists?"

"Yeah, maybe, hoping for something, anything!" He glared at Janelle, not in anger but in frustration.

"I gotta admit, I'm pretty exhausted, too. I never thought focusing on something intensely could wear me out. This is worse than studying for finals last year at Berkley."

"So, what happened to Jim?" asked Jeff. "We haven't heard from him. You'd think he'd send another postcard." Jeff looked off into space, then he looked over at Janelle. "It's Christmas Eve. I want life to be the way it was. I want to spend Christmas with Mom and Dad, just like we always did in the past."

Janelle let out a big sigh. "Yeah, me too."

"Maybe we did the wrong kind of quantum connection and blew Jim's cover."

"I doubt that."

Jeff looked over at Janelle. Great concern owned his face. "What are we going to do now?"

"We keep on doing what we're doing."

"I don't think so. Shoot, I was really hoping that this quantum thing was the solution we were looking for."

"And if it's not, what now?" asked Janelle.

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"Well, we could go public and let them kill us."

"Yes, or wait here until they find us ... and they will!"

"Seems like a lose-lose situation."

"That's exactly what it is," said Jeff. He got up and started pacing around the living room, looping in and out of the kitchen.

Janelle remained in her recliner. “Your wheels are turning again. Need a walk in the forest?”

“Maybe, but not yet. There’s got to be a solution,” he twirled around and faced Janelle, “don’t you think?”

“I used to, but I don’t know anymore; we’re clutching at straws.”

Jeff folded his hands on top of his head and started pacing again. He disappeared into the kitchen for about the fiftieth time. All of a sudden, he came out, eyes big as silver dollars. “I got it!” Janelle brought her recliner to its full upright position. “We’ll go public!”

“Uh, you mean we’ll commit suicide?”

“No, you don’t get it. I mean *public*.” Jeff threw his arms out in front of him, making a big circle. “Hiding is never going to work, right?”

“I agree.”

“Jim is nowhere to be found and might even be dead. Right?”

“Could be.”

“And our quantum experiment didn’t seem to work, right?”

“It sure looks that way. What’s your point?”

“My point is that going public, and I mean *super* public, is our only option.”

“You mean like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid when they went public, coming out of that building with guns blazing?”

Jeff got quiet as he grappled with reality. “I think so,” he said softly. “But maybe it will work. If we go so hugely public that everyone knows our story. Once everyone knows what we’re up against, maybe Special Ops will decide we’re not worth it and leave us alone.”

“You mean newspapers, radio, and sandwich signs on the street corner?”

“Uh, the first two, yes. If we make a big enough deal of our dark situation, killing us will only prove our story to be true.”

“Great, but then we’ll be *dead right*.”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Jeff walked over to Janelle. “But don’t you see, this is our only chance, and maybe it’s the *solution* we’ve been looking for.”

“I think you’ve done too much meditating and blew a gasket.”

“No, I’m thinking straight now. All this previous thinking, pondering, guessing, and experimenting has brought us to this inevitable conclusion. Can you think of any other options?”

“Janelle paused and let out another big sigh. “No, not really. At this point, I think I’d rather go out in some blaze of glory and get it all over with than to keep living like this waiting for certain death.”

“Sounds so bleak when you put it that way. But I gotta agree.”

“So, it’s settled,” said Janelle, “We’ll pack up tomorrow, move back to the house, and go public, big time.”

“It’s a long shot, but it’s our best shot at success.”

“Ya know, in a strange way, I feel good about this decision,” said Janelle. “A new sense of peace has come over me.”

“Maybe our quantum experiment boomeranged on us, and we changed our own behavior rather than someone else.”

“Yes. It could be, but I doubt we’ll ever know for sure.”

Jeff and Janelle had a quiet Christmas Eve together, reminiscing about all the years gone by with their parents, relatives, and friends. Christmas Eve was always the big gift-exchange time in their upbringing, rather than Christmas morning, as it was for most people. This made the evening all the more difficult. They each retired early, knowing they had a big day ahead of them with plenty of unknowns.

Yip, yip, yip. Tap, tap, tap. Janelle awoke to a sound coming from downstairs. She heard the dog and the tapping again as she

put on her robe and rushed into Jeff's room. "Do you hear that?" she asked as both sounds repeated.

"Yes," answered Jeff. They carefully descended the staircase.

"Maybe the CIA found us," asked Janelle.

"Jeff paused halfway down the winding stairs and looked over his shoulder. "They don't knock," he said as he continued stepping downward, "they bust the door down."

"Oh, okay." Janelle followed close behind.

At the bottom of the stairs, they heard the tapping and the yipping coming from the back door. As Jeff stepped into the kitchen, he saw Jim's face through the lattice of the door's window. "What the heck? It's Jim!" He opened the door. Frisky jumped around as Jeff let him in.

Stepping into the kitchen, Jim said enthusiastically, "I've got great news for you! The Special Ops mission to take you out has been terminated."

"What?" Janelle and Jeff said at the same time.

Jim took off his coat. "That's right. Big changes at the CIA."

Jeff signaled Jim as he began walking back through the kitchen. "Come on into the living room and tell us all about it."

The three of them filed out of the kitchen and sat down on the couches. "Last week, the lady heading up the Special Ops group got a promotion and transferred to the Field Office in France, where she will be the new Station Chief. That alone is a miracle since such jobs are hard to get. But the *real* miracle is that the Assistant Special Ops Director decided to go through all open projects and clean up any loose ends. They never do that."

"And?" asked Janelle, sitting on the edge of the couch.

"And so, your case has been permanently closed."

Janelle sat back on the couch. "You mean we are free? Just like that?"

"Yep. I attended the meeting. The new director called a meeting on Wednesday, and I was invited. He went through each open case file, one by one, and had everyone give input. This is

not how Special Ops has ever worked in the past. It's always been orders coming from the top down, never to be questioned."

Jeff was smiling in his seat, totally free of the fear he had been living with, and free from the burden of trying hard to change minds at the CIA via the quantum experiment. "Oh, wait a minute, Jim, you gotta hear this. Janelle and I decided, just last week, to use quantum weirdness to solve our problem. We figured that since it was quantum stuff that brought all these problems many years ago with Grampa Charlie, maybe quantum could be our solution."

Janelle butted in. "We figured that maybe we could change some behavior at the CIA by praying, meditating, and focusing in the same way that observing the two-slit light experiment changes its behavior."

"That's very insightful of you," replied Jim.

"Do you think it worked?" asked Jeff.

"Well, something sure did, and as I said, it's kind of miraculous. I never expected or even hoped for this to happen."

"But you told us to look for the solution that must be out there somewhere, right?" asked Janelle.

"I sure did, and I knew there had to be something, but I never imagined this. I am amazed."

"We did this experiment diligently all week, never letting up." Jeff's voice turned apologetic. "But then last night we kinda gave up because we didn't think it was working."

Janelle interrupted again. "So we decided to just go public tomorrow morning, make a big deal through newspapers and TV, telling our horror story."

"Ah... I get it," said Jim. "Make such a big public deal that they can't take you out, proving your story to be true."

"You think it could have worked?" asked Jeff.

"I doubt it, but I agree that it was about your only option. Good thing I came with this good news before you went out and made public fools of yourselves with a story no longer true."

“This is so good; I can hardly believe it,” said Janelle, “and on Christmas morning. What a special gift you brought us.” Jim just smiled.

“Hey, look at Frisky,” said Janelle. “He’s so happy he’s taking a nap,”

“We need to celebrate or something, don’t you think?” Jeff had just gotten those words out of his mouth when, “BAM!” the front door flew open and slammed against the wall. The door jam broke and hung over to the side. Janelle screamed, Jeff recoiled into a ball on the couch, and Jim prostrated himself on the floor, consistent with his Army and CIA training. Frisky jumped up and fled into the kitchen. Three armed men in camouflage clothing stood pointing M-16 assault rifles at them.

“What are you waiting for, Captain?” said the man on his right.

The Captain who stood in the middle did not move. His finger was on the trigger, and his face was pressed against the stock of his gun, taking aim. “There are three targets,” he said, moving only his lips, “There’s supposed to be only two.”

“Doesn’t matter, Sir. You know the protocol for dealing with collateral damage. Nothing is to prevent us from completing our mission.” All three men kept their fingers on the triggers and their faces pressed against the gun stocks.

Jim lifted his head slightly. “Wait! I’m a CIA agent.”

“Captain? What are we going to do?”

The man on the left raised his head off the gun's stock. “Hey, wait a minute. I’ve seen this old man at Langley. He eats his lunch by himself in the cafeteria. He is known as the *walking historian* at the CIA because he's been there so long.”

“Your mission has been aborted,” said Jim, lifting his head a little higher above the floor. “Call in and verify what I'm telling you.”

“I can't do that,” said the Captain. “Breaking radio silence would be a violation of protocol on an active mission.”

“Do you want to take the chance of murdering three innocent people?”

“That’s not our worry.” The man on the right warned. “Captain? Am I right?”

Jim looked up at the Captain. Janelle and Jeff were frozen in place. The Captain slowly took his finger off the trigger and placed it on the stock of the rifle. “Do you have a phone, old man?”

“Yes,” said Jim as he fumbled to get it out of his pocket.

“This could end my career if you're wrong,” said the Captain. “I’ve never failed a mission.”

“And this will end our lives if *you* are wrong,” said Jim, boldly.

The Captain paused. “Make the call and put the phone on the coffee table in speaker mode.”

Jim dialed and set the phone down in front of the Captain. “CIA, Langley,” a voice said.

“Connect me to the Special Ops Group.”

“I need your clearance code,” said the voice.

“38112.”

After a short pause, the voice said, “I’m putting you through.”

“Assistant Director Dan Parker,” said a new voice. “How can I help you?”

The Captain maintained his stance, as did his two subordinates. “This is Captain Doug McMasters. I’m presently engaged in mission 38112. I’ve got an old man in front of me who claims to be an agent of the CIA.”

“What's his name?” asked Parker.

The Captain nodded at Jim. “Jim Phillips,” said Jim.

Parker recognized Jim’s voice. “Jim, is that you? What's going on?”

“Please tell Captain McMasters that his current mission has been canceled.”

“That’s true, Captain, and I’m glad you called in. As you well know, there was no way we could contact you once the mission was activated. You need to abort your current mission and report back to Langley, ASAP.”

“Yes, Sir. My team will be back there tomorrow.” The Captain lowered his rifle and said, “You heard the man. This mission has been terminated. Let’s go.” The two men followed the Captain out the front door through which they entered, got into a black SUV-style vehicle, and drove away.

Jim got up off the floor. Jeff and Janelle both took a deep breath, as if they had been holding it for the past ten minutes. “That’s the closest I’ve ever been to death,” said Janelle.

“That’s my second closest encounter,” said Jeff.

“If you hadn’t come, Jim...” Janelle paused, not wanting to say the obvious words, “...Jeff and I would be dead.”

Jim sat down on the edge of the recliner. “Indeed, you would be. Looks like another miracle, and it came none too soon.” Everyone relaxed on the couches and enjoyed a moment of quiet. “So, Jeff. Your job is now secure if you want to continue on at the CIA. Most people at the Agency are unaware of any of this. Perhaps that’s the silver lining in Special Ops being such a covert unit. From what I can tell, you are appreciated and expected to have a long and good career at the CIA. I think you should take another week off and get fully rested. I’ll talk with the few people who know what you’ve been through and arrange for another week. I’m sure they’ll approve. And you, young lady,” Jim said as he turned his attention toward Janelle, “I understand you are exceptionally smart, finishing your Physics degree in just three years. That kind of thing goes over big at the CIA.” Janelle blushed slightly. “If you ever want a job there, I’m sure it could be arranged.”

“No, but thanks. My ambitions are in scientific research and development. And now that I’ve learned how to navigate through the scariest parts of life, I’m ready to leave my previous, safe, student life behind and find my place out there, finding solutions to serve humanity.”

“A noble endeavor, for sure. I wish the best for you, and I know you will do well.” Jim stood up. “Well, it's time for me to go. I planned a quick turnaround on my flights, thinking all I had to do was share some good news with you. I sure didn’t anticipate a near-death experience, but I've still got time to drive to Reno and catch my flight home.”

Jeff stood up. “Hey, let me drive you back up to the corner store; it will save you five minutes of walking back up.” Jeff went and got his keys from the counter.

“Okay, great.”

“Thanks so much for coming, Jim,” said Janelle, almost in tears. “Had you not come, we would have surely died today. Hey, can you come back next weekend and celebrate New Year's Eve with us at the house? We’d love to have you.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything. We will have more time to talk then.”

“Let's go,” said Jeff as he opened the door to the garage and pushed the button to open the big, noisy, outside door.

Janelle and Jeff spent that week moving back to the house, meeting with Gina and other friends, now free to tell them everything that happened. Janelle was granted the week off after she filled her boss in on all the events that had happened since her close call at work two weeks earlier. It was a fast, easy, and best of all, uneventful week for both of them, feeling as if the burden of the world had been lifted off their shoulders.

Epilogue

“Someone's at the door,” Jeff called out from the kitchen.

“It's probably Jim or Gina,” said Janelle as she headed for the door and opened it. “It's Gina,” she called out to Jeff.

“Happy New Year, Janelle.”

“Come on in. Can't wait for you to meet Jim. He's our hero and savior.”

“Yeah, I guess so, after everything you told me at Carla's on Wednesday.”

“Please sit down. Jeff's fixing some New Year's Eve snacks in the kitchen.”

“Hello, Jeff,” she called out to the kitchen.

“Welcome, Gina. I'll be out in a minute.”

“Take your time,” she replied.

Jeff soon emerged from the kitchen with a tray of finger food, chips and dips, beers, and soda pops. “Dig in, everybody. Made all these snacks myself, with a little help from Google.”

“So, what's new with you?” asked Gina.

Jeff grabbed a beer and some munchies from the tray and sat down. “Well...” he thought for a moment, “... nothing! And that's the way I like it.” Everyone chuckled. “I'll get the door. It must be Jim.” As he opened the door, there stood Jim, old but spunky as ever. “So glad you were able to make the trip back here to join us. Come on in.”

As Jeff and Jim approached Janelle and Gina, Jeff said, “Gina, meet Jim. Our hero.”

She got up and walked to meet him. “So glad to meet you. I’m sure glad you were able to save these two. They help fill a big hole in my life that was once filled by Ellie and Jobe.” She looked at Janelle and Jeff. “I so miss them.”

“I do, too,” said Janelle. “But we’re here to celebrate a new and better year.”

They all sat down and indulged in the snacks prepared by Jeff. “Jim, I’m headed back to my CIA job on Monday, which is better than ever. In my absence, they promoted me from entry-level analyst to junior-level.”

Jim replied, “That’s because they wanted to lure him back to work.”

Jeff turned his head slightly. “Did you pull a few strings for me?”

Jim put his hands up. “I didn’t need to. You’ve done a great job for them so far.”

“That’s terrific,” said Gina. She turned to Janelle, “And how about you, girl. What are your plans?”

“I have an interview next week at a scientific lab, down in Sacramento. It would be my dream job, and commutable from Oak Pines, so I can stay living here in the house.”

“When they see that you graduated from Berkeley a year early, you’ll be a shoo-in.”

“I hope so.”

Jeff took a bit of his snacks and a sip of beer. “Hey, Gina.”

“Yes?”

“And you, too, Jim.” Jim perked up his ears.

“I want to ask both of you how you knew there was some kind of *solution* out there for us? You both used almost identical words.”

“Yes,” added Janelle. “Getting that encouragement from *both* of you kept us going.”

Jim and Gina looked at each other as if to say, *who should go first?* Jim nodded at Gina.

“Well, you know how it is with me. I get these premonitions. I always have since I was a kid. But I learned the hard way that they’re not always correct. So, I am always cautious. Still, I let them prevail without pushing them on anyone. I just want to encourage people in difficult times.”

“And that’s what you always do,” said Janelle. “Your caution only adds to your credibility, like when you told me a few weeks ago at the store that you sensed some danger in my life. You now know you were right, but I had to deny it at the time.”

“Yep,” Gina shook her head up and down, “I understand.”

“How about you, Jim?” asked Jeff.

“I have no clue where my optimistic predictions come from. Perhaps it's just having been around the block all these years, and some kind of subconscious mechanism kicks into action. Then, again, I believe there is a spiritual aspect to everything, and maybe even...” he paused and looked over at Janelle, “...a quantum physics aspect, too. Ever since your Grampa Charlie and I worked on this stuff at Los Alamos Labs in our younger years, it has all been fascinating to me. I think there is some kind of mingling of the spiritual and physical realms going on down there that affects everyone.”

“That’s been my lesson in all this, too,” added Janelle.

Jim sat quietly for a moment. His old, tired eyes let everyone know he was about to say something important, so everyone waited. “Let me ask you two young ones a question.”

“Okay,” and “Sure,” were their responses.

“Your Grampa Charley started this whole idea of *Streams of Terrible Beauty*, though it was not unique to him. His contribution to this age-old idea was how he phrased it to showcase the contradictory contrast between bad and good things that we all experience in life. He taught me this when I was a young man working for him, and then he taught it to your Mom, who he and Martha took in as their foster child. Then, your Mom taught it to your Dad when they first met in 1987 and soon married. Your

parents, in turn, instilled in you this amazing truth all your life. My question to both of you is, how do you feel about this *Streams of Terrible Beauty* concept today, after all you have been through?”

Now it was Janelle and Jeff’s turn to look at each other, asking with their eyes, *who should go first?* Jeff deferred to Janelle with a nod.

“Well. I’ve got to admit, over the past two and a half months, the idea of *terrible* things inevitably becoming *beautiful* was severely challenged and diminished.”

“How about you, Jeff?”

“I went through pretty much the same thing Janelle did. All I can add is that I was never able to fully abandon it. Something told me it *must* be true despite all I was going through.”

“Let me ask you just one more question, and this might be the most important one. Had I not come to the cabin when I did, and your inevitable death had occurred, how do you see that scenario today? Does it change what you believe? In other words, would your death change your mind about all things eventually ending up beautiful and good?”

Jeff answered immediately. “That’s an easy one, and the answer is *No!* My belief in God’s ultimately good purpose stands.”

“You seem sure,” said Jim.

“I am. It’s a no-brainer. The fact that it could have been our time to die doesn’t change an eternal and absolute principle like *Streams of Terrible Beauty*. People tragically die every day. We were blessed to be spared, but only to someday die under different circumstances. It’s not about us. It’s about a spiritual reality far beyond who we are, what we do, and what happens to us in this life.”

“Well said, big brother. I could not have said it better myself. What we went through thoroughly challenged us, our faith, and even our sanity in some ways, but it didn’t take away what we believe about life. Quite the contrary, it made what we believe all

the more real to us in ways we could never have gained through any other means. It's the *terrible* that makes the *beauty* beautiful."

"Well said, little sister," Jeff said enthusiastically, clapping his hands together. "And this is exactly what Mom taught Dad when they were viewing the Golden Gate Bridge from Land's End on their first outing together."

"We spelled it out in detail in our book, which got us into so much trouble," added Janelle.

"Yes. That ugly, *terrible*, little bridge on the right side of the Golden Gate is essential and needed in order for the big bridge to function in all its *beauty*."

"Yep, that was Dad's introduction to *Streams of Terrible Beauty*; it eventually changed his life, which changed Mom's, too, and eventually changed us!"

"So amazing," said Jeff. "Does that answer your question, Jim?"

"It does indeed. In spades! You have greatly encouraged this old man," he said with a huge smile.

"Hey, I've got an idea," said Gina. "Maybe the two of you should write a sequel to *Streams of Terrible Beauty*."

Janelle and Jeff, together, shook their heads and said, "No way!"

"Besides, what would we call it?" asked Jeff. Everyone was silent.

"I know," said Janelle, breaking the silence, "We would have to call it, *Streams of Beautiful Terror*."

"Oh, that's perfect," said Jeff. "Kinda makes me want to write it."

"Maybe someday," said Janelle, "but please, not soon."

"Okay, it'll give us lots of time to think."

"Hey, Jim had one more important question, and now so do I," said Gina. "It's for you, Jeff."

He put his hand on his chest. "Me?"

"Yes, you. What about Sara?"

C Clifton Jones

“Oh, Sara, sweet Sara. Oh, how I love her and miss her. Can't wait to get back to DC. Boy, do I have a story to tell her!”

About The Author

C Clifton Jones (Carl) is a retired Sr. Technical Writer living in Grass Valley, California. Prior to this, he was a Hardware/Software Engineer for thirty years. He has been married for fifty years to the only true love of his life. He has two adult children and one beautiful granddaughter, all of whom he loves more than life itself.

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Carl is an Army veteran and served in Vietnam in 1970. He plays music publicly and in about a dozen assisted living centers. He is also the host of *Common Sense Commentary*, and co-host of *Conversations in Christ*, both of which air on radio, local TV, YouTube podcast, and Roku internet TV.